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ARTICLE

Rethinking Development from a Postcolonial Perspective

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Abstract

The article aims to proffer some thoughts on development practice and discourse from the standpoint of postcolonial studies. Based on an understanding of development as an intervention or a series of sustained interventions in certain social realities, with the explicit aim of improving the latter qualitatively, the article will examine development as a set of historically contextualised discourses that inform certain practices that are meant to produce perceptible effects in economic, social and cultural spheres. It is against this backdrop that critical insights derived from postcolonial studies will be drawn on to question the underlying assumptions of these discourses in order to reveal the interests that inhabit their production as a form of knowledge. It is therefore hoped that rethinking from a postcolonial perspective will contribute to enriching the on-going critical engagement with development and its associated practices and discourses.
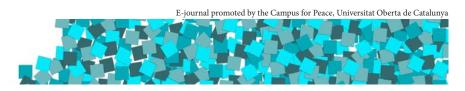
Keywords

INTRODUCTION

Development has been the organising and guiding principle of economic, social and even political policies of most underdeveloped and developing nations in the post-war era. Throughout this period, a host of financial and political supporting institutions, professionals, scholarships and doctrines were mobilised to assist parts of the world population as they embark on an ineluctable march towards the achievement of the universally desirable goal of economic growth. The attainment of this goal was predicated on a predominant, persistent idea consisting in the desirability and need for developing underdeveloped areas and in the associated assumption that this development would be possible only with some assistance from or intervention by the developed world. Indeed, this is the major idea that continues to underpin the different discourses that collectively comprise the development 'grand narrative'.

However, over the past three decades, the entire development enterprise has increasingly been the object of much criticism and rebuttals. Indeed, the very notion of development has been recurrently challenged and put into question. Arturo Escobar (2000, p. 11) points out that, despite the initial and clear agreement on the need for some sort of development, the consensus around it gradually began to erode due to a number of factors. A social dimension of the backlash against development consisted in the increasing inability of the enterprise itself to fulfil its promises, coupled with the rise of movements that questioned its rationality. This social aspect went hand in hand with a renewed intellectual criticism due to the availability of new analytical tools, chiefly post-structuralism. In particular, during the 1990s, post-structuralist critiques succeeded in casting serious doubt not only on the feasibility but also on the desirability of development. Going beyond most previous critiques, development was shown to be a pervasive cultural discourse with profound consequences for the production of social reality in the Third World.

Based on its continuous engagement with the legacies and effects of colonialism in (post) colonial societies, postcolonial studies has also contributed significantly to this on-going critique and rethinking of development by foregrounding the concerns and views of those most affected by its practices and discourses. In this context the article will seek to proffer some reflections on the development debate using tools of analysis and insights derived from postcolonial theory and critique. Due to the complexity of the issues in question, it does not intend to present an exhaustive analysis, but rather some reflections that may contribute to enriching the on-going critical engagement with the development problem and its associated practices and discourses.

DEVELOPMENT AND POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES: SOME PRELIMINARY REMARKS

To frame the present discussion, I shall begin by briefly delimiting the main concepts, which will be employed throughout this article, namely development and postcolonial studies.

A cursory glance at the terminology of development shows that the word, in its current use, is enmeshed in a semantic web of meanings referring to growth, evolution, progress, maturation, and so forth. In its generic meaning, however, as Gustavo Esteva (1992, p.10) points out, the term development

> "always implies a favourable change, a step from the simple to the complex, from the inferior to the superior, from worse to better. [It] indicates that one is doing well because one is advancing in the sense of a necessary, ineluctable, universal law and toward a desirable goal."

Yet, as a historically contextualised discourse, *development* has witnessed terminological shifts in line with social changes and transformations. In his discussion of the evolution of development, Jan Nederveen Pieterse (2010, p.7) surveys the meanings that *development* had acquired over time. He highlights, for instance, the shift from a development discourse emphasising economic growth and industrialisation in 1940, to a discourse focusing on structural reform and liberalisation in 1980 and then the renewed emphasis on structural reforms, starting in 2000, as reflected in the Millennium Development Goals.

Despite innovative approaches, such as Amartya Sen's (1999, p. xii) proposal that expansion of freedom should be the primary end and the principal means of development, development discourses nevertheless continue to suffer conceptual inflation and imprecision with obviously adverse consequences on its practices. As Gustavo Esteva (1992, p.10) points out, for two-thirds of the people on earth, the positive meaning of the word development, profoundly rooted after two centuries of its social construction, "is a reminder of *what they are not* [emphasis in original]. It is a reminder of an undesirable, undignified condition".

Against the backdrop of this brief discussion of the meanings of the word, development will be construed here to refer generically to an intervention or a series of sustained interventions in certain social situations or realities with the explicit aim of improving these situations qualitatively. Obviously, such interventions take place in a specific historical and institutional framework within specific discursive formations and in the context of certain relations of power. The aim, therefore, is not to focus on mapping out the terminological and genealogical analyses of development, but rather on conceptualising it as a historically contextualised discourse, or set of discourses, that inform certain practices that produce perceptible effects in economic, social and cultural spheres.

For its part, postcolonial studies here refers to that important subfield of literary and cultural studies which crystallised in the 1980s, and focuses particularly on investigating the intimate relationship between culture and politics, highlighting the interrelations between certain cultural forms and particular political and historical practices (Omar, 2008, p. 228). It directs its critique against the cultural hegemony of European knowledge in an attempt to reassert the epistemological value of the non-European world (Gandhi, 1998, p. 44) as well as its knowledge, which has been denigrated and silenced by colonial canonical systems. A more extensive discussion of postcolonial studies will be presented later.

THE DISCURSIVE RE-INVENTION OF DEVELOPMENT AND UNDERDEVELOPMENT

To better understand the context in which the modern discourse of development emerged, there is a need to conduct a genealogical analysis and go back about three hundred years in history, to the era known in Europe as the Enlightenment. This analysis reveals that development was one of the founding ideals of Western modernity in the 17th and 18th century and its belief in a rationality capable of improving the world. In other words, development emerged as an enlightened concept that attributed the modern and scientific reason with a fundamental role in the improvement of human existence in almost all its dimensions.

In his book, *Outlines of a Historical View of the Progress of the Human Mind*, the enlightened philosopher Antoine-Nicolas de Condorcet (1796, pp. 251-256) pointed out:

"Our hopes for the future condition of the human race can be subsumed under three important heads: the abolition of inequality between nations, the progress of equality within each nation, and the true perfection of mankind. Will all nations one day attain that state of civilization which the most enlightened, the freest and the least burdened by prejudices, such as the French and the Anglo-American […] have attained already? Will the vast gulf that separates these peoples from the slavery of nations under the rule of monarchs, from the barbarism of African tribes, from the ignorance of savages, little by little disappear? These immense countries […] to arrive at civilization, appear only to wait till we shall furnish them with the means; and, who, treated as brothers by Europeans, would instantly become their friends and disciples."

I have chosen to cite these paragraphs in full because they encapsulate the major ideas that would constitute the ideological bedrock of the civilising mission of the European colonial enterprise and subsequently, the modern development discourse, as is discussed below.

It is no wonder, therefore, that the most conventional theories and practices of development are still framed within the ambit of the same logic of the civilising mission that synthesises the idea of the supremacy of the West and its dominating relation with the 'rest'. In this context one can appreciate the emergence of modern discourse on development during the period following the Second World War, the time of the Cold War rivalry between West and East. To confront its rivals and obtain global domination, the US-lead West set out to re-invent a modern discourse of development.

The emblematic moment of this discursive and institutional re-invention of development was represented by the inaugural speech delivered before the Congress, on 20 January 1949, by Harry S. Truman, as the 33rd President of the United States of America. Among the key proposals in his speech, Truman mentioned the following:

"We must embark on a bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas. More than half the people of the world are living in conditions approaching misery. Their food is inadequate. They are victims of disease. Their economic life is primitive and stagnant. Their poverty is a handicap and a threat both to them and to more prosperous areas. Our aim should be to help the free peoples of the world, through their own efforts, to produce more food, more clothing, more materials for housing, and more mechanical power to lighten their burdens." (Truman, 1999, pp. 591)

Three key conclusions may be drawn from Truman's speech. First, more than half of humanity was living in "underdeveloped areas"; second, their poverty was an impediment and threat not only to them but also to prosperous and developed areas; and third, the self-ascribed mission of the US and its allies was to help those areas grow economically and industrially (following the US model) to achieve prosperity.

In his discussion of the invention of development Gilbert Rist (2008, pp. 72) points out that Truman's inaugural speech synthesised a number of ideas that were obviously in line with the Zeitgeist, and put forward a new way of conceiving international relations. Furthermore, the introduction of the term *underdeveloped* areas, as a synonym for *economically backward* areas, altered the meaning of development by relating it in a new way to underdevelopment.

Truman delivered his speech more than six decades ago, at a time when a growing number of institutions, resources and bureaucracies were mobilised to bring the developing mission to a successful conclusion. However, if we look briefly at the situation of the so-called underdeveloped areas, we are confronted by compelling facts that question the development enterprise and its lofty ideals and promises. Let us look, for instance, at the following data compiled by *End Poverty by 2015 Millennium Campaign*:

- One third of deaths – some 18 million people a year or 50,000 per day – are due to poverty-related causes; that is 270 million people since 1990, the majority are women and children, roughly equal to the population of the US (Reality of Aid, 2004);
- Every year more than 10 million children die of hunger and preventable diseases – that is over 30,000 per day and one every 3 seconds (80 Million Lives, 2003/ Bread for the World / UNICEF / World Health Organization);
- More than half a million women die in pregnancy and childbirth every year – that is one death every minute. Of these deaths, 99 per cent are in developing countries. The lifetime risk of dying in pregnancy and childbirth in Africa is 1 in 22, while it is 1 in 120 in Asia and 1 in 7,300 in developed countries (UNFPA);
- In our world today, nearly 11 million children under the age of five die every year – well over 1,200 every hour most from easily preventable or treatable causes (*Why do the Millennium Development Goals matter?* Brochure);
- One in four adults in the developing world – 872 million people – is illiterate (Oxfam UK – Education Now Campaign);
- More than 100 million children remain out of school (UNFPA);

- Forty six per cent of girls in the world's poorest countries have no access to primary education (ActionAid);
- In our world today, around 2.5 billion people do not have access to improved sanitation and some 1.2 billion people do not have access to a clean source of water (*Why do the Millennium Development Goals matter?* Brochure);
- In 1970, 22 of the world's richest countries pledged to spend 0.7% of their national income on aid. Thirty-four years later, only five countries have kept that promise (Save the Children);

These are simply some data that show what can be described as a gloomy picture of the world today. If we add to these facts other serious problems that confront the world such as the environment that has become vulnerable due to climate change, deforestation, extinction of species and global water crises, among others, the image of the world becomes even gloomier.

In the face of this situation, we cannot but ask the following questions: what has gone wrong? What happened with the promises of development and the improvement of the lives of people in underdeveloped areas? Why have development policies and programmes failed to improve the situation of the largest part of humanity? These are crucial questions that no policymaker, development-aid donor or practitioner can afford to ignore because they are at the heart of the development enterprise itself. More precisely, they indicate the urgent need to embark on a critical and informed rethinking of development to reveal the defects inherent in its discourse and practice and to present viable alternatives.

To answer the above questions, Wolfgang Sachs (1992, p. 1), states in *The Development Dictionary* that:

> "The idea of development stands like a ruin in the intellectual landscape. Delusion and disappointment, failures and crimes have been the steady companions of development and they tell a common story: it did not work. Moreover, the historical conditions which catapulted the idea into prominence have vanished: development has become out-dated. But above all, the hopes and desires which made the idea fly are now exhausted: development has grown obsolete."

In Sachs' view, the development project has failed, and the proof of this failure is that, instead of improving the lives of people, it has condemned them to subhuman conditions. For his part, Arturo Escobar (1995, p. 44) has also shown that this new doctrine of development has come with a heavy price — the scrapping of ancient philosophies and the disintegration of the social institutions of two-thirds of the world's people. In other words, as he further maintains: "Development was — and continues to be for the most part — a top-down, ethnocentric, and technocrat-
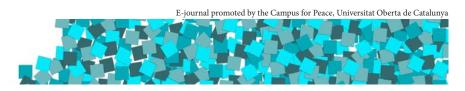
ic approach, which treated people and cultures as abstract concepts, statistical figures to be moved up and down in the charts of progress" (Escobar 1995, p. 44). In short, these critical positions demonstrate that largely, notwithstanding its publicly professed noble objectives, development was not an enterprise aiming at satisfying the needs and desires of its 'objects', namely the underdeveloped populations, but an instrument for serving the hidden agendas of some hegemonic powers vying for global domination.

In this context, two agencies were established in 1944 to advance the new development project. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) was designed to help countries tackle balance of payment problems and stabilise their economies by providing them with short-term credits. The World Bank (or International Bank for Reconstruction and Development) offered credits for long-term investment in productive activities. The two agencies formed the axis of the international financial institutions that were tasked with bringing the development project to a successful conclusion.

Sachs' comments, cited above, also demonstrate that development is a polemical issue that continues to be the subject of unending debates, with some critical approaches defending the complete abolition of development in its current form and practice. Post-development thinking, for instance, clearly puts forth an anti-development position (Pieterse 2010, p. 7) which repudiates economic growth as the ultimate goal of development, as well as its results, that have proven disastrous for the majority of the population. However, I do not think that throwing the proverbial baby out with the bath water is a practical option. What is needed, instead, is a critical rethinking of development as both a discourse and a practice in a way that may help us reflect collectively and proffer viable and remedial alternatives.

POSTCOLONIAL REFLECTIONS ON DEVELOPMENT

A key defining characteristic of postcolonial studies is its emphasis on revealing the interests behind the production of knowledge and introducing an oppositional criticism that draws attention to, and thereby attempts to retrieve, the wide range of illegitimate, disqualified or 'subjugated knowledges' (Foucault 1980, p. 82) of the decolonised peoples. In doing so, it seeks to investigate the structural relations of domination and discrimination that are expressed, manifested, constituted, and legitimised in and by discourses. In its discursive analysis of ideological domination, postcolonial studies focus particularly on hegemony, which is achieved not only by physical force but also through consensual submission (consent) of the dominated (Gramsci, 1971, p. 268) and perpetuated by the active implication of the

plurality of the "Ideological State Apparatuses" (Althusser, 1971, p. 144) including education, religion, law, media, etc.

A prime example of this kind of postcolonial critique is Edward Said's *Orientalism* of 1978, which is commonly regarded as the principal catalyst and reference point for *Postcolonial Theory* (Gandhi, 1998, p. 23). Employing the insights of French post-structuralism, in particular those of Foucault, Said set out to analyse a range of nineteenth-century European representations of oriental cultures — the works of geographers, historians, travellers, and early anthropologists as well as literary works and memoirs — and to highlight the forms of language and knowledge that were intimately connected to, and colluded with, the history of European colonialism. In conclusion, for Said, Orientalism was not only an academic study of the Orient, but a discourse which, through the complicity of knowledge systems with political power, not only constructed but was also instrumental in administering and subjugating the Orient. In other words, Orientalism was a form of epistemic or cultural violence in line with peace research terminology. As may be recalled, Johan Galtung (1990, p. 291) defines cultural violence as "those aspects of culture, the symbolic sphere of our existence […] that can be used to justify or legitimise direct or structural violence".

Within the context of this critique of the epistemological hegemony of European systems of knowledge, many postcolonial critics centred their analyses on the Western modern project and its link to the history and practice of colonialism. As outlined above, development, as a discourse and practice, was the offspring of this project with European colonialism being an instrumental tool in propagating its ideals. Aníbal Quijano (2007, p. 171) has argued that, during the same period as European colonial domination was consolidating itself, the cultural complex known as European modernity/rationality was being constituted. Moreover, since there is no modernity without colonialism (Escobar, 2007, p.184), there is a need to recognise that Europe's acquisition of the adjective *modern* for itself is a piece of global history of which an integral part is the story of European imperialism (Chakrabarty, 1992, p.352).
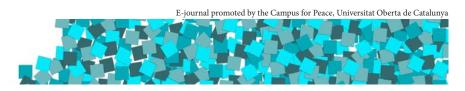
The fundamental question now is the following: is it possible to engage in a critique of this kind from a space outside the discursive space delimited by the Western modern project of which development discourse is an integral part? Many seem to agree that it is difficult to do this, given that there are neither privileged terrains nor original or uncolonised spaces from which to present the discourse, including postcolonial theory itself (Venn, 2002, p. 51). Moreover, as Ashis Nandy (1983, p. xi) argues, colonialism has particularly helped to transform the concept of the modern West from a geographical and temporal entity into a psychological category. In his view, "the West is now everywhere, within the West and outside, in structures and in minds" (1983, p. xi).

In the context of this overlapping of histories, geographies and systems of knowledge, I contend that any critique of modernity, or development for that matter, should in no way mean a regression to cultural particularism or ethnocentrism. Nor can it avoid dealing with the historical legacy and epistemological dominance of Western systems of knowledge, and the forms of epistemic and cultural violence that they may generate. As Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000, p. 16) argues, "European thought is at once both indispensable and inadequate in helping us to think through the experiences of political modernity in non-Western nations." Recognising that this thought is now a common heritage that affects us all, Chakrabarty maintains that the task of the postcolonial critic lies in investigating how this thought could be transformed and renewed from and for the margins. This position echoes the call made by Quijano (2007, p. 177) who called for "an epistemological decolonisation" to clear the way for new intercultural communication, for an interchange of experiences and meanings, as the basis of another rationality which may legitimately aspire to some universality.

In summary, as a project of cultural analysis, the postcolonial critique seeks to investigate the role of cultural forms and systems of knowledge in legitimising and sustaining asymmetrical power relations and the associated processes of exclusion and domination. The foregoing reflections are thus aimed at problematising and calling into question the established concepts and interpretations of development, and critically reviewing our habits and ways of thinking and acting with regard to its discourses and practices, in light of the many forms of violence that development has generated in the lives of its putative targeted societies. However, one has to recognise that the simple production of a critical and counter-discourse of development is necessary but not sufficient. That is why this deconstructive enterprise should always be coupled with a commitment to opening new possibilities for remedial alternatives and innovative ways of thinking and transforming the social world.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the postcolonial perspective on development, which is informed by various critical methodologies, one may conclude that the concept of development is essentially a social construction that is contextualised historically and discursively. Historically, development, as we now understand it, emerged as a discursive product within a geopolitical climate characterised by the confrontation between two camps vying for global domination. More precisely, the modern discourse of development arose at a time when the US was emerging as a hegemonic power. The above-mentioned inaugural speech of President

Truman was the initiator of a new era in the management of international relations in which the Western dream of progress was transformed into a hegemonic imagination on a global scale.

With its origin in the state institutions, bureaucracies and academia, the discourse of development represents a set of ideas that inform and sustain certain forms of conduct and social and economic practices. Compared with the concept of Edward Said's Orientalism (1978, p. 2), referred to above, development may hence be construed as "a mode of discourse with supporting institutions, vocabularies, scholarships, imaginaries and doctrines" through which the developed West constructed the underdeveloped Other, in the post-Enlightenment period. The dichotomy of development and underdevelopment has determined almost all interactions between the West and other regions, in which the West defined itself as the contrasting image of the underdeveloped world in the same way in which the Orient was constructed as Europe's spatial and cultural Other.

Operating in the service of hegemonic powers, the apparatuses of knowledge production (development agencies, professionals, scholarships and so forth) established a totalising discourse that delimited the conditions under which the objects, concepts and strategies were incorporated in its discursive dominion. Similar to the orientalist discourse, development was another style of Western knowledge designed for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the underdeveloped world. In this context it becomes imperative to rethink the development project in its entirety and to proffer fresh insights into its issues from as many perspectives and critical methodologies as possible. However, any approach to this question should take into account the overlapping of histories and geographies of the developed and underdeveloped areas.

Development practice, in this sense, should be conceptualised not as a one-way exercise, but as a mutually negotiated and collectively implemented process of social, political and economic reform, guided by certain ethical guidelines defined on the basis of social justice. The principle of the satisfaction of urgent and basic human needs should be at the heart of any development intervention adaptable and responsive to the needs and concerns of all agents involved. Amartya Sen's book, *Development as Freedom* (1999), is a good example in this context as it puts special emphasis on the need for individuals and groups to restore their capacity to create their own systems of subsistence, manage their own affairs and participate in their autonomy.

From the perspective of peace and conflict studies, the wide range of peace building endeavours could contribute to overcoming some of the problems raised by development and relief aid activities in post-conflict situations. For peace-building activities to yield sustainable solutions that effectively address the underlying causes of social conflicts, they should be predicated on clear operational definitions and comprehensive, transformative social and institutional programmes in which local and external stakeholders should be actively involved. In other words, peace-building should be conceptualised as long-term, multi-track and dynamic processes which, whilst recognising the specifics of each post-conflict situation, seek to elicit and tap into local peace resources to transform conflictive social relationship (Lederach 1995) and foster local capacities in a way that may lead to constructive processes of social and institutional change. In conclusion, it is a question of empowering individuals and groups to expand their freedoms and enhance their local capacities to be able to manage and name the world in their own words, as Paulo Freire (2000, p. 88) has succinctly put it.

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