

Development discourse and the third world

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Abstract

This article presents a critique on the development discourse within the context of post colonial relations between the West and the 'Third World'. The author views the concept of development and the notion of 'Third World' as constructs rather than objective realities. Because the language of 'development' and the 'Third World' came to the common usage in a specific period of the western colonialism faced challenges in continuing its domination over the subject countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. The explicit meaning of the two concepts cannot be grasped fully without understanding their closer linkage. In reality, 'development' is not a set of actions but a deployment of knowledge which is associated with a powerful ideology. It is through this ideology the 'Third World' is constructed as a reality for 'development'. The power of this ideology can be understood when look at the way in which the thoughts and action of people of the 'Third World' have guided to the direction of western modernity over past five decades. In the language of 'development', western modernity is the ideal and thus the West insisted others to follow this model disregarding their historical, cultural and economic differences. The article attempts to explain the falsity of this 'same path for all' approach in development and it argues that the notion of 'development' is a post-colonial construction of the West to continue its domination over the rest of the world, particularly the 'Third World'.

Keywords: Third World, Western Modernity, Development discourse

Concept of development

Some intellectual circles argue that the concept of development is dead (Gardner and Lewis, 1996:1). Their argument is based on visible realities in both social and epistemological orders of the modern era. The knowledge generated by the theories of development has not only failed to make lasting improvements of social, political, economic and environmental conditions of the 'Third World', but it does not offer satisfactory answers or explanations for these failures. The dominant paradigm of knowledge associated with theories of development and modernization is unable to provide satisfactory answers to problems such as poverty, unemployment and environmental degradation of the 'Third World' countries. Until recently, development was treated as a linear progression. Therefore, 'Third World' countries, the knowledge paradigm indicated, can only be transformed into modern developed country by the application of modern technology and capitalist relations in production. Now, it is common knowledge that these theories are at best oversimplification of the reality. The story of development during the past five decades indicates that the populations in the 'Third World' have not benefited from economic growth, technological change and scientific-rationality advocated by these theories. In fact, poverty in some of the 'Third World' countries has even worsened compared to the situation in the 1950s¹ Therefore, it has been suggested that the concept of development is embedded in the neo-colonial construction of the world and is a key ideological tool in global power relations (Escobar, 1988: 498). In this view, 'development' is a 'construct' rather than an 'objective state', but one which many people assert has justified a starkly political project of continued Northern dominance over the South (Gardner and Lewis, 1996: 3).

The concept of development is always defined in terms of modern standard of living, urbanization, industrialization, adoption of the values and principles of modernity, including particular forms of

order, rationality and individual orientation. These characteristics represent the conditions of western modernity. Thus 'development' is not simply a 'practice', but more importantly, involves an ideology, which is instrumental in connecting local societies with transnational culture. It is possible to understand this dual character of development when looking at its orientation in actual practice. The practice of development is essentially local, but its vision is international and universalizing (Pigg, 1992). Hence development should be understood as one which fuses the local and the global, transforming social relations in line with modern orientation, and producing culture by introducing alien systems of values. Godelier (1986) said that this way of reordering local societies is part of the 'westernization' of the rest of the world. In this process, Godelier noticed that the forms of social relations of non-Western societies are replaced by three kinds of new social relations which have appeared at various moments in Western history: private ownership of the means of production and of money; capitalist forms of production and market exchange; the transformation of most of labour into paid work. In other words, it is the replacement of capitalist relations of production and exchange in the place of what Marx called the pre-capitalist forms of production² relations. One of its forms is the continued expansion of the market which led to monetization of the economy and other social exchanges. Generally, many non-economic aspects of social life have begun to require money in order to function and to perpetuate themselves.

Arturo Escobar (1988) argued that as a set of ideas and a practice, 'development' has historically functioned in the twentieth century as a mechanism for the colonial and neo-colonial domination of the South by the North (cited in Gardner and Lewis, 1996). Its emergence was contingent upon particular historical conjunctions. Some of the most important of these are shifting global relations after the Second World War, the decline of colonialism, the Cold War, the need for capitalism to find new markets, and the Northern nations' faith in science and technology. Two more points could be added to this list: the fierce anti-communism of capitalist countries, and the perceived threat to the capitalist system from liberation movements in Asia, Africa and Latin America since the 1940s. The sensitivity of capitalist countries towards this tendency of liberation movements in the Third World was expressed in US President Kennedy's Inaugural Address of 1961 dealing with US relations with the 'Third World':

"To those people in the huts and villages of half the globe struggling to break the bonds of mass misery, we pledge our best efforts to help them help themselves, for whatever period is required-not because the communists may be doing it, not because we seek their votes, but because it is right. If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich" (quoted in Peet, 1997: 81).

This speech indicates the USA's emphasis on development, using the rhetoric of equality and social justice. It is 'helping the many who are poor' in the interest of 'saving the few who are rich'. Thus, those who advocate empowerment of the poor or redistribution of the world's riches indirectly support the reproduction of neo-colonial power relations.

Development discourse and the Third World

Apthorpe (cited in Frerks and Bart, 2004: 6) argues that discursive practices can be taken as an example of the capture and exercise of power by some sorts of people, arguments and organizations in particular arenas [of activity], over various periods of time. In this connection, he pointed out that particular forms of labeling that stigmatise people as 'poor', 'resource less' and 'dependent' and turn them into 'clients' of 'legitimate' interventions.

In a retrospective look at the construction of 'Third World', it is not difficult to understand how the language of 'development' has been used by the West for legitimizing its interventions over the 'Third World'. Countries that are now designated as the 'Third World' have been referred to in a variety of forms. Before they gained independence, they were called 'backward' countries and upon the gaining of independence, they became 'emergent' or 'new states'. Afterwards they became 'developing countries' in order to fit into the Western notion of universal development or alternatively as 'underdeveloped' countries in the terminology of dependency critiques. The terminology of the 'Third World' and the 'First World' came to common usage during the 1950s. The term 'Third World' was in fact coined in 1952 by Alfred Sauvy, a demographer, in the context of the "tiers etat" (third estate) of the French Revolution, as those who are everything, are treated as nothing and are demanding something. This expression was later co-opted by the West within the capitalist-socialist dichotomy. Later, the term was used by the West to designate former colonial territories in the third rank and the rich capitalist countries in the first rank. The countries of the Eastern block – the former Soviet Union and its East European allies – were placed in the second rank, but its validity was sealed by the historic resignation speech of Gorbachev on Christmas day, 1991. Until the invention of this paradoxical terminology of 'First', 'Second' and 'Third' World countries their people were identified in accordance with geographical boundaries. But the significance of those natural boundaries has now been lost. Instead, both the countries and the people are identified by material terms defined by the level of economic development. The meanings of the terms 'poor countries', 'developing' or 'underdeveloped' countries do not make a sense other than the West itself, the rich, industrialized, capitalist countries in Europe and North America.

Accordingly, the concepts 'Third World' and 'development' are inventions of the economically rich nations of the West. In the same manner that 'the 'Orient' was created during the colonial era³, a different terminology was used in the post-colonial period to designate the non-Western world using the language of development. Therefore, as Escobar (1995) argued 'development' has become a discourse; a particular mode of thinking and a source of practice designed to instill in 'underdeveloped' countries the desire to strive towards industrial and economic growth.

'Post-structuralism' is particularly concerned with the role of language and discourse in the construction of social reality. Language and discourse are seen not as a reflection of social reality, but as constitutive of it. A discourse analysis, according to post-structuralism, enables theorists to transcend the persistent binarisms inherent in social theory, those between the ideal and the real, the symbolic and the material, and production and signification as discourse embraces them all. 'Development' has been considered to exist in reality, solid and material. Even though the broad meaning of development is the promotion of the creativity of humans, economic growth is the primary criterion by which development is determined. In measuring development in economic terms, it is assumed implicitly in development theory that growth could proceed without limits in terms of time, ecology, availability of resources and socio-political structure. The nature is considered as secondary to the technological capability of man. Therefore, 'development' is viewed by Carmen (1996) as the "surrogate religion of the second half of the twentieth century". He emphasized the fact that this modern 'religion' boasts about its own deities, its own creed, its own values, ethos, rites and rules. The supreme rule is an unswerving allegiance and obedience to the invisible hand of the forces of the market, as if they were laws laid down by a new universal god, a religion without atheists (Carmen, 1996:11).

Nearly four decades after its official declaration in 1949, 'development', as we are taught, is economic growth. Economics has become the master discipline of theory-building and policy formulation. In his retrospective look at development anthropology at the World Bank, Michael Cernea referred to

the econocentric and technocentric conceptual biases of development strategies as 'profoundly damaging' (cited in Escobar, 1998). These paradigmatic biases largely neglect civilizational history and the associated values. The latter were the essential elements of social harmony, and the balance between man and nature. Econocentrism does not tolerate the equivalence of nature with man, and therefore, it attempts to surrender nature by means of destruction and over-exploitation. Regarding this econocentric and technocentric approach to development, Ikeda and Toynbee (1987) state: "When western man had won the upper hand over nature through the systematic application of science and technology, his belief is that he was licensed to exploit nature. . . . His greed was not inhibited by the pantheistic belief that non-human nature is sacred and that it likes man himself; has a dignity that ought to be respected. Material accumulation has been the primary goal of the econocentric and technocentric development approaches. As the West sees it, the accumulation of material goods is the way to achieving modernity. The advocates of modernity have failed to see the dark side of it. Modernity, by its virtue, separates people rather than uniting them and isolates rather than combines. It replaces harmony with conquest, holism with hierarchy, recognition with alienation, quality and values with tangible and measurable. India demonstrates the differences between the Western and the Eastern development models. It insists on non-violence, on renunciation, on inner life and on the 'female' as pillars of society (Nakamura, 1971). But these values were threatened over the period from colonialism to now by the forces of Western modernity penetrating through development projects. The doctrine of non-violence has been militarized, feminine thought is replaced with patriarchy and the idea of simple life has turned to conspicuous consumption. Similar examples like that of pre-colonial India can be found in other non-western civilizations such as the civilizations of the ancient America (*Maya*), those of Mesopotamia (now Iraq), of ancient Egypt and other ancient empires and civilizations of Africa and China. In the Chinese civilization, wisdom about the elemental balance—between *Yin* and *Yang*, water and fire, sun and moon, female and male, darkness and light, white and black—was clearly demonstrated. These ancient values permeated all aspects of Chinese life through the ages, including during the upheavals of the 1949 Communist Revolution and the crushing of the democracy movement on Tiananmen Square in 1989 (Carmen, 1996: 14). Economic development and democracy are in fact not destructive forces; but the problem lies in their application. Democracy, according to the New World Order means the freedom to intervene in the matters of powerless people.

In the 1950s and 1960s, development emphasized the level of economic growth, measured from economic indices such as real per capita GNP, i.e., how much real goods and services are available for consumption and investment for an average citizen. Economic development was also perceived in terms of the planned alteration of the structure of production and employment so that agriculture's share of both declines, while that of the manufacturing and services industries increases. Development strategies, therefore, have usually focused on rapid industrialization, often at the expense of agriculture and rural development. These principal economic measures of development were supplemented by casual reference to non-economic social indicators; gains in literacy, schooling, health conditions and services, and provisions of housing.

It was assumed that the growth of the economy would 'trickle down' to the masses in the form of jobs and other economic opportunities. The absurdity lies in the fact that the 'Third World' poor have been waiting for the past fifty years till the economic development trickles down to their level. As revealed by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in 1997 the number of people having no access to drinkable water is about 1.75 billion, while those deprived of primary health care stand at 1.5 billion after four decades of development. These statistics together with increasing poverty, inequality in income distribution, rising unemployment, environmental degradation, desertification of land, large numbers of human displacement due to civil wars, environmental hazards and development projects indicate that the declared economic growth is a myth. Many 'Third World' countries had achieved the overall UN growth target in the 1960s, but their relative status remained the same or even worsened. This situation compelled economists to shift their emphasis

from the economic growth model to the provision of Basic Needs⁴ in the 1970s. The primary objectives of this modified version of 'growth' theory were the reduction or elimination of poverty, inequality and unemployment within the context of a growing economy. When looked at within the context of colonial and post-colonial relations, the provision of 'Basic Needs' means a subordinated position to the 'Third World'. As pointed out by Rahman (1993) the real basic need "is not any of these; it is to do things for themselves, i.e. to create, for being human is being creative, and this is what distinguishes the human from the animal in itself. The animal, indeed, needs to be fed and clothed and sheltered and medically cared for and taught how to find all these; but the human needs must be fulfilled by creative acts" (1993: 133).

This strategy of the provision of basic needs, however, shifted in the 1980s to 'sustainable development' with 'bottom-up' planning. But the emphasis on economic growth remained as the principal objective of 'development'. The 'structural adjustment' policies introduced by IMF in the 1980s insisted that the governments of the 'Third World' should cut down their expenditure on social welfare programs. The successful implementation of the structural adjustment policies (e.g. privatization of government owned enterprises, services and reducing public expenditure and cutting state subsidies) was one of the conditions for granting IMF loans for the development programs of these countries. The issue here is not very much with the conditions of loans but with the silence of economically rich countries when imposing such conditions for granting loans. It is needless to reiterate that their silence is because they are the agents of those development aid agencies.

Conclusion

What these criticisms imply about the theories of modernization and development is that they have become obsolete and hence have no value in explaining the real causes of underdevelopment of the 'Third World'. Therefore, it is worth mentioning about the suggestion made by Escobar (1997) with regard to current 'development' practice. He suggests that rather than searching for development alternatives, we must search for alternatives to development, which respect local autonomy, culture and knowledge. In doing so, it is important to shift from a generalized and deterministic theory towards a localized situation with an emphasis on specific groups and issues. The generalized and deterministic theory means here that even though the emphasis on development discourse has changed throughout the decades from its emphasis on economic growth and industrialization in the 1950s to sustainable development in the 1990s, the basic orientation has remained unchanged and whatever the modifications attached to it, the fact of 'development' itself was not placed under radical questioning.

As discussed in the text, the discourse of development made it possible for the European powers to continue the colonial domination by using the language of 'development'. To achieve the goals of development, the Western countries provided bilateral and multilateral aid programs to the governments of the 'Third World'. At the same time institutional apparatus was established (e.g. World Bank, IMF) in order to channel material aid and the ideology associated with 'development' to these countries. This ideology repeats the basic 'truth' of Enlightenment that 'progress' is the achievement of characteristic features of the already rich societies in the West. Consequently, in the post-colonial era these institutional apparatus became the centers of power-knowledge production and also the source of channeling them to the societies outside the West.

⁵ See for example, *The State of World Rural Poverty*, by Idriss Jazairy et al, IT Publications: London, 1992.

⁶ Karl Marx, *Pre-Capitalist Socio-Economic Formations*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1979.

⁷ See, Edward Said, *Orientalism*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978.

⁸ Inaugurated by Robert McNamara before the Board of Governors of the World Bank and IMF meeting in Nairobi in 1973. It is very common to look upon Basic Needs Approach as an alternative strategy.

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