



What Is ‘Development’ and Can We ‘Decolonise’ It? Some Ontological and Epistemological Reflections

Lata Narayanaswamy

INTRODUCTION

How might decolonising development discourse and practice support a move beyond the ‘dead-ends’ of critical research—so good in identifying problems but not solutions—and actually deliver ‘global social justice’, as the Editors challenge us to do with justifiable urgency? In writing this I take inspiration from Telleria’s critical reflections in this volume on the ontological assumptions that underpin ‘development thinking’. In setting out the philosophical debates inspired variously by Kant, Foucault and Heidegger, Telleria explains: ‘While epistemology asks what is knowledge, ontology asks what is being: why do we say that an object *is*? What are the conditions we put to accept that it *is*?’. His analysis of the

L. Narayanaswamy (✉)
School of Politics and International Studies (POLIS), University of Leeds,
Leeds, UK
e-mail: L.Narayanaswamy@leeds.ac.uk

© The Author(s) 2024
H. Melber et al. (eds.), *Challenging Global Development*,
EADI Global Development Series,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-30308-1_13

constitutive elements of ‘development’ thinking in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) leads us to a wider ontological and epistemological reckoning: What is the ‘development’ that we seek to ‘decolonise’?

Let us begin by considering the words of Josep Borrell, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, in a speech he delivered at the European Diplomatic Academy in Bruges, Belgium on 17 October 2022:

Europe is a garden. We have built a garden. Everything works. It is the best combination of political freedom, economic prosperity, and social cohesion that the humankind [sic] has been able to build – the three things together (...) The rest of the world (...) is not exactly a garden (...) Most of the rest of the world is a jungle, and the jungle could invade the garden.¹

For our present purposes, this quotation provides a rich illustration of the persistence of colonial ways of ‘knowing’ the world that are overtly racialised: a ‘civilised’ European ‘garden’ (read: White) that places itself at the top of a hierarchy that is distinct from, and looks down upon, the untamed, unruly ‘jungle’ (read: Black/darker-skinned). Echoing the voices of many others,² we as development studies scholars may balk at the perceived audacity of setting out a worldview that seems to draw so overtly from racist, colonial tropes, his words only strengthening the case for ‘decolonisation’. Yet, even as we might rightly reject characterisations of the world that draw on colonially rooted ‘civilisational’ narratives, the broader thrust of his words represents an essential element of our own disciplinary focus, namely the deliberate bifurcation of the world into ‘developed’ and ‘developing’. Where are we ‘developing’? It would appear to be a place called the ‘Global South’. It is both a geographical and discursive place (see Narayanaswamy, 2017) in which the ontological frame of ‘development’ is heavily invested. How did we arrive at this framing? Put another way, as set out plainly by Jones (2000, p. 237): ‘Why do we talk mainly about ‘doing development’ ‘over there’ in the ‘Third World’ and not in the inner cities of the West’?

¹ Retrieved on February 4, 2023, from: www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/european-diplomatic-academy-opening-remarks-high-representative-josep-borrell-inauguration_en

² See www.euronews.com/my-europe/2022/10/19/josep-borrell-apologises-for-controversial-garden-vs-jungle-metaphor-but-stands-his-ground; www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2022/10/17/josep-borrell-eu-racist-gardener; www.nytimes.com/2022/10/17/world/europe/eu-ukraine-josep-borrell-fontelles.html

In the remainder of this reflection, I will briefly consider some of the epistemological challenges of how we 'know' development in Higher Education (HE), using these critiques to highlight the ontological tensions of 'development' in its discourse and practice. I ask: Do we as 'development' researchers need to reflect on our role in the persistent historicity, and the resultant artificial North-South binaries, of our discipline? Even as we seek to 'decolonise', do we need to understand how we might be part of the problem before we can be part of any proposed solution?

WHAT IS 'DEVELOPMENT'? COLONIALITY, DEVELOPMENT STUDIES AND HIGHER EDUCATION

'Development' is a terminology that reinforces global rich/poor dichotomies; these are not only reductive but also lack any reflection on how and why the world came to be understood as divided in this way in the first place. Irrespective of ideological tendencies the term 'development' itself is used to connote 'a favourable change, a step from the simple to the complex, from the inferior to the superior, from worse to better' (Esteva, 2010, p. 6). This link with 'favourability' is key. Regardless of what precisely is being discussed, 'the assumption is ubiquitous', as Ziai (2016, p. 58; emphasis in original) notes, that '*development* is a good thing'. Its most recent 'favourable' iteration is the Sustainable Development Goals, commitments to act on 'global challenges' or 'leave no one behind' that are intended to address both the temporal and material dimensions of inextricable and persistent global crises. But where change is proffered by wielders of these tools, it is in ways that are essentially constrained. They must not fundamentally undermine the (neo)colonial extractivism on which the current system depends, itself the legacy of a 'coloniality ... [that] is constitutive of modernity' (Dunford, 2017, p. 383). In short, we have a system continually reinventing itself by claiming that it is the only and best source for solutions to the problems it caused.

Critiques of 'development' (see for example Escobar, 1995; Esteva, 2010; Kothari et al., 2019; Kothari, 2005; Ziai, 2017) draw our attention to this dominant assertion that there is something natural about a movement from a state of backward, under-developed rural subsistence (read: Global South) to diversified and self-regulating, developed market-based knowledge economies (read: Global North). It has led some post/

decolonial scholars to suggest that perhaps we might do away with the language and associated scholarly investment in ‘development’ altogether (Schöneberg, 2019; Ziai, 2016). We may agree that this is the most logical conclusion to this debate.

But this is easier said than done. As researchers and interlocutors we are still tied to the existence of ‘development’ as an ontological object. It is very hard to undo what Vergès (2021) calls the historical and temporal colonial ‘entanglements’ of our fractured modernity. This ‘entanglement’ establishes ‘development’ as a ‘something’ that we promote, measure, observe, critique or reject. It is a central referent in our global discourse, even where we might, as many post-development scholars do, be proposing to re-imagine ‘it’ altogether. Development ‘rationalities’ are so entrenched (Olwig, 2013) that some critics have argued that for many individuals, communities and groups it would be ‘almost impossible (...) to envisage futures that are not bound up in some form of development imaginary’ (Laurie et al., 2005, p. 470, citing Escobar, 1995). In short, it is reasonable to argue that everyone has a relationship to the idea of ‘development’.

Nor is the bifurcation of the world on which ‘development studies’ depends merely some arbitrary outcome of increasing disciplinary specialisation. Higher Education was in fact central to the function of Empire, with universities at the heart of producing knowledge that legitimised Imperial world views premised on reinforcing race, gender and class divides:

In many cases universities and intellectuals were responsible for upholding the legitimacy of racist hierarchies and the necessity of colonialism in the West *against the grain* of anti-colonial and anti-racist social movements and intellectuals in the colonies, and subsequent grassroots movements for the abolition of colonialism and racism in the West. (Gani & Marshall, 2022, p. 9)

The various European Empires offered laboratories to test ideas around modernity that took as their core the establishment of the ‘native, other’ to justify the colonial enterprise and its main mechanisms of land expropriation and universalising, for instance, enlightenment principles against a perceived ‘barbarism’ (see Dunford, 2017): ‘Those within the walls [of universities] became knowers; those outside the walls became non-knowers’ (Hall & Tandon, 2017, p. 7). Thus HE ‘walls’ have helped

to cement developed/developing binaries in both our discourse and practice and now shape contemporary inequalities in knowledge production (Melber, 2015).

SHIFTING OUR ONTOLOGICAL AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL LENSES TOWARDS MORE GLOBAL, PLURIVERSAL APPROACHES TO UNDERSTANDING GLOBAL SOCIAL JUSTICE

With these thoughts in mind, we need to ask ourselves what effects has coloniality produced, and what would happen to our understanding of the world, and ourselves as 'development' researchers/scholars, if we widened our lenses to understand the inclusion/exclusion effects produced by (neo)colonial extractivism in the (global) round?

If decolonising development is about recognising the ways in which diverse European colonial encounters continue to underpin but also shape the manifestation and experience of inequality and exclusion in a range of contexts, it is imperative to ensure that we undertake some joined up thinking. This must take account of how coloniality, and the extractive capitalism it embedded, continues to drive exclusionary dynamics, and not just in the so-called global South. In the ontological sphere of development, for instance, there is no disciplinary space given to discussion of indigenous marginalisation and displacement in the settler colonial states of the Global North. These challenges are not considered to be in the domain of 'development' studies, even if the persistent and severe exclusions that are produced by (neo)coloniality mirror those of severely marginalised groups whose lived realities are geographically and discursively understood to be in the Global South. Moreover, by not thinking about coloniality in the round we also risk invisibilising British imperialism in Ireland, Danish imperialism across the Nordic countries and the extreme and persistent marginality of nomadic communities including gypsy, Roma and traveller groups across Europe. The historical and contemporary colonial dynamics that reproduce these marginalities in the global North means that for many of these groups, the challenges they face due to legacies of imperial violence or the threat to livelihoods and culture because of the climate crisis are not substantially different to those effects that we understand as global development challenges being faced in and by marginalised groups in the Global South.

Nor is this only about invisibilising (neo-colonial) marginality in the Global North. The homogenising tendencies of the language of development and its reliance on the idea of an undifferentiated global South are no less problematic. Recent scholarship, such as that by Sud and Sánchez-Ancochea (2022), argues in favour of retaining the terminology of ‘the South’ for its value in highlighting the colonial nature of power dynamics in the modern world. Its reductiveness, however, further masks the ways in which the same settler colonial strategies, echoing its ‘race’, class/caste and gender dynamics, persist and/or are being repurposed in many places WITHIN the global South to marginalise and/or displace groups labelled with colonially inspired monikers including tribal, nomadic or indigenous. These diverse ways of life are deemed ‘backward’ and thus antithetical to the interests of settled, aspirational, modern majorities keen to pursue ‘development’. The idea that the North-South divide represents primarily an oppressor-oppressed/white-Black distinction invisibilises (neo)colonial dynamics producing these inequalities within the Global South. Indeed, there are economists stressing the ways in which ‘the persistence of imperialism’ is leading to ‘greater material insecurity and popular alienation from the state and the elites, as well as the rise of divisive socio-political tendencies *in both developed and developing worlds*’ (Ghosh, 2019, p. 392, my emphasis).

Given that ‘development’ as an idea is hard to reject in practice, what if instead we decolonised ‘development’ by challenging its epistemological and ontological underpinnings? In short, what if ‘development’ was instead about everyone? Whilst we might draw attention to the situatedness of particular material realities that are a result of being a former colonial possession as much of the ‘Global South’ might be understood to be, we can take inspiration from a growing scholarship, including that of Shilliam (2018), Bhambra (2020, 2022) and Karam (2022), engaging with shared colonial pasts as a way of re-imagining historical and contemporary conceptualisations of modernity. These scholars are drawing attention to how this affects our understanding of current political, social and economic settlements, with a focus on the UK. They are working through what might happen to our understanding of the UK’s changing social, political and economic landscapes and attendant inequalities when understood through the lens of Empire, heretofore invisibilised as part of our collective story in the Global North. In his own UK education, for instance, Karam (2022, p. 2) shares that he was presented with a story where ‘Britain, as the birthplace of industrialised

capitalism and parliamentary democracy, had organically created the ideal political, economic and legal systems for wealth and stability'. In echoes of Borrell's speech cited above, this 'had made the country rich while others were poor, civilised where others were barbarous' (ibid.). What happens to our understanding of contemporary events, including Brexit, a fractured and diminishing welfare state, or industrial decline and growing inequality, if we understood Empire not as a historical artefact but as part of a continuum entangled with our present in ways that have and continue to (re)shape contemporary social, political and economic fissures?

Shilliam (2018) is similarly concerned with elucidating the (neo)colonial dynamics that shape conceptions of the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor in the UK. Whilst there is no room to do justice to the sweeping and in-depth nature of his scholarship on the shifting historical and contemporary racialisation of inequality, he is clear that coloniality sits at the heart of how marginality is (re)produced:

(...) elite actors have racialized and re-racialized the historical distinction between the deserving and the undeserving poor through ever more expansive terms that have incorporated working classes, colonial "natives" and nationalities. Elite actors have always been driven in this endeavour by concerns for the integrity of Britain's imperial – then postcolonial – order. (ibid., p. 6)

Whilst Shilliam's focus is on Britain, his point may be extrapolated to the wider (neo)colonial metropole, echoing that of Ghosh's above i.e., efforts designed to maintain the 'integrity' of 'postcolonial orders' is resulting in similar patterns of exclusion and marginalisation the world over. Karam (2022, p. 3) also draws out the fallacy of development as a 'one-way road', where 'crises were [presented as] part of the maturing process that these developing countries would have to pass through', whereas, '[d]evelopment's promise to flatten the world has failed to materialise'. Drawing on Césaire's contention that 'colonial relations are subject to the 'boomerang effect'—the notion that ideas and practices that are tested in the colonies are then applied in the colonial metropole³—he asks us to contemplate:

³ Verso books has hosted an entire series on the 'boomerang effect', available here: www.versobooks.com/blogs/4383-the-imperial-boomerang-how-colonial-methods-of-repression-migrate-back-to-the-metropolis

... what if empire's aftermath isn't just something we need to debate when thinking about the place of a particular cultural artefact or whether or not a particular building's name is offensive? What if it stretches to our legal and economic systems, which produce vast wealth disparities, both at home and abroad? (ibid.)

Karam (2022, p. 12) further highlights the silence on the relationship between 'the aftermath of empire' and 'the unemployed former industrial worker or the single mother stuck on a zero-hours contract that doesn't pay enough to cover childcare', as if these are 'wholly disconnected'.

These observations would suggest that (neo)coloniality actually creates very similar types of divisions and outcomes in terms of 'haves' and 'have-nots' the world over. So how do we decide who or what is, or needs, developing? Is 'development' ever about food-bank users in the UK, or social security claimants who work at Amazon warehouses or Walmart stores in the US, or the people forced to go straight back to work after giving birth or adopting children because no economic value is placed on 'care', and unpaid work is not an option? These forms of social, political and economic exclusion are not considered 'development' questions. Instead the starting point is, as Borrell notes above, that 'everything works'. Homelessness, hunger/malnutrition or social exclusion in the Global North are not 'development' challenges, but rather exceptional and/or unfortunate side-effects of capitalism that simply need to be managed or tweaked, historically through charity but eventually in the twentieth century through the establishment and expansion of more comprehensive 'welfare states'. These, as Esping-Anderson (1990) reminds us, are heterogenous but designed to manage these exigencies of capitalism. Perhaps ironically, these same mechanisms by which 'developed' subjects are kept from the perceived penury and even barbarism of being understood as 'developing' are historically tools for which colonial subjects paid and now, as development subjects, are unable to access beyond grand notions of 'aid' and 'charity' underpinned by white saviourism (Bhambra, 2022).

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE AS 'DEVELOPMENT' SCHOLARS?

Where then does that leave our deliberations about 'decolonising' development? If we are unable to devise a new ontological frame, then we must establish new solidarities, moving away from binaries and building an epistemological understanding of 'development' that is relevant to everyone. Here I am inspired by Cornwall's (2020, p. 39) personal reflections on her first trip to Zimbabwe, where young people whom she met would describe 'a new purchase like a pair of shoes, a cap, a bicycle' as 'development'. She goes on to suggest that for her the language of 'development' is 'reparative: trying to make good something that was broken or damaged' (ibid). Well, it does not seem unreasonable to assert that (neo)colonial extractivism has broken everything, creating and extending continuous and overlapping crises—climate change, pandemics, extreme inequality—whilst simultaneously crippling our capacity to collectively address these challenges. 'Decolonising development' must start by dissolving North–South binaries, where 'development' is not just about black and brown bodies in distant places, or darker-skinned bodies in the Global North, but instead recognises how coloniality continues to shape the lives of *everyone*. 'Development' could then be the expression of the pursuit of social justice and re-imagined as a genuinely global, pluriversal endeavour.

REFERENCES

- Bhambra, G. K. (2020). Colonial Global Economy: Towards a Theoretical Reorientation of Political Economy. *Review of International Political Economy*, 28(2), 307–322.
- Bhambra, G. K. (2022). Relations of Extraction, Relations of Redistribution: Empire, Nation, and the Construction of the British Welfare State. *British Journal of Sociology*, 73(1), 4–15.
- Cornwall, A. (2020). Decolonising Development Studies: Pedagogic Reflections. *Radical Teacher*, 116, 37–46.
- Dunford, R. (2017). Toward a Decolonial Global Ethics. *Journal of Global Ethics*, 13(3), 380–397.
- Escobar, A. (1995). *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*. Princeton University Press.
- Esping-Anderson, G. (1990). *The Three World of Welfare Capitalism*. Polity Press.

- Esteva, G. (2010). Development. In W. Sachs (Ed.), *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power* (pp. 1–23). Zed Books.
- Gani, J. K., & Marshall, J. (2022). The Impact of Colonialism on Policy and Knowledge Production in International Relations. *International Affairs*, 98(1), 5–22. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iab226>
- Ghosh, J. (2019). A Brave New World, or the Same Old Story with New Characters? *Development and Change*, 50(2), 379–393. <https://doi.org/10.1111/dech.12485>
- Hall, B. L., & Tandon, R. (2017). Decolonization of Knowledge, Epistemicide, Participatory Research and Higher Education. *Research for All*, 1(1), 6–19. <https://doi.org/10.18546/RFA.01.1.02>
- Jones, P. S. (2000). Why Is It Alright to Do Development “Over There” but Not “Here”? Changing Vocabularies and Common Strategies of Inclusion across the “First” and “Third” Worlds’. *Area*, 32(2), 237–241.
- Karam, K. (2022). *Uncommon Wealth: Britain and the Aftermath of Empire*. John Murray.
- Kothari, A., et al. (Eds.). (2019). *Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary*. Tulika Books.
- Kothari, U. (2005). From Colonial Administration to Development Studies: A Post-Colonial Critique of the History of Development Studies. In U. Kothari (Ed.), *A Radical History of Development Studies: Individuals, Institutions and Ideologies* (pp. 47–66). Zed Books.
- Laurie, N., et al. (2005). Ethnodevelopment: Social Movements, Creating Experts and Professionalising Indigenous Knowledge in Ecuador. *Antipode*, 37(3), 470–496.
- Melber, H. (2015). Knowledge Is Power—And Power Affects Knowledge: Challenges for Research Collaboration in and with Africa. *Africa Development*, XL(4), 21–42.
- Narayanawamy, L. (2017). *Gender, Power and Knowledge for Development*. Routledge.
- Olwig, M. F. (2013). Beyond Translation: Reconceptualising the Role of Local Practitioners and the Development ‘Interface.’ *European Journal of Development Research*, 25, 428–444.
- Schöneberg, J. (2019). Imagining Postcolonial-Development Studies: Reflections on Positionalities and Research Practices. In I. Baud (Ed.), *Building Development Studies for the New Millennium* (pp. 97–116). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Shilliam, R. (2018). *Race and the Undeserving Poor: From Abolition to Brexit*. Agenda Publishing.
- Sud, N., Sánchez-Ancochea, D., & D. (2022). Southern Discomfort: Interrogating the Category of the Global South. *Development and Change*, 53, 1123–1150. <https://doi.org/10.1111/dech.12742>
- Vergès, F. (2021). *A Decolonial Feminism*. Pluto Press.

- Ziai, A. (2016). *Development Discourse and Global History: From Colonialism to the Sustainable Development Goals*. Routledge.
- Ziai, A. (2017). Post-development 25 years after. *The Development Dictionary's Third World Quarterly*, 38(12), 2547–2558. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2017.1383853>

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

