

‘Development’ as Both Idea and Action Represents a Contemporary Version of Western Economic, Political, Cultural and Ideological Imperialism

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Abstract The discourse surrounding development has for some time created a well circumscribed paradigm for states to work within in order to be seen to progress. Moreover, the increasing demand to keep up with globalization has further given weight to this discourse. However, the notion of development itself is arguably inextricably linked to western ideas of ‘progress’. As a result, the development discourse is deployed as a strategic means of propagating imperialistic endeavors. Thus, to begin to consider if we can think beyond the paradigm of development, this article will deconstruct the contemporary version of imperialism whereby western states are able to grow influence in economic, political and cultural terms.

Keywords Development · Globalization · Imperialism · Rationalization · Modernity · Discourse analysis

Introduction

Development has long been held as imperative for states to engage with, in order for their societies to progress and partake in the ever-increasing globalization of the world. Whilst it has certainly brought about technological and economic enhancements in some aspects, some critics such as Escobar, believe that it is time for us to think beyond the paradigm of development for the well-being of humankind at large. I argue that development as a discourse, has continually been deployed as a means of extending the western empires’ power standing and influence over the

world, particularly over the supposed ‘underdeveloped’ nations. This modern form of imperialism operates with the same intentions as old, but merely evolves the way it manifests itself. Development as a discourse and its consequent deployment will be discussed first, before delving into how this has presented in modern day through a process of exclusion not inclusion in globalization. Lastly, the cultural consequences of development will be briefly assessed.

Development in this essay is taken as the change that increases capital in social, financial and political terms through policy and planning (MacNeill 2017). The concept of development can be argued to stem from modernity, which is primarily associated with a Eurocentric transition from lack of reason to rationality (Escobar 1992; Dussel 2000). Modernity is understood as a project of global emancipation grounded in reason and knowledge. It is within this realm of modernity that development is facilitated in becoming a discourse. As much as this ‘Enlightenment’ period can be thought of as increasing liberties and freedom of knowledge, it indirectly created disciplines to work within. In other words, the universal rationalization of society caused development discourse to be linked to a form of knowledge which ‘modern’ society must work within. To deconstruct what is known, i.e. development in this case, critical thought must be used. Foucault describes this task as ‘to learn to what extent the effort to think one’s own history can free thought from what it silently thinks, and so enable it to think differently’ (Foucault 1990: 9). Consequently, to perceive development as a discourse allows us to understand how the power imbalance of the ‘developed’ and the ‘underdeveloped’ can be created and actually function as a mechanism of contemporary imperialism.

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Although rooted in the eighteenth century, development discourse has been especially dominant since the second world war. The discourse enabled the west to distance themselves from poorer nations as a means of imperializing them. Interestingly, this period between 1948 and 1973 is sometimes referred to as the 'golden age' of the capitalist movement and Sachs considered the late 1940s to be the time when development was 'invented' as a form of imperialism (Sachs 1992; Veltmeyer 2005). Fitting this 'golden age', the United States (US) sustained huge post-war economic success with growth output averaging at 4.1% (Jorgenson 1988). Similarly, the US productive capacity had almost doubled during the war period (Escobar 1988). However, the post-war period also entailed western governments forming international organizations, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, and the United Nations which became universal sources of knowledge (Escobar 1992). Together, the institutions and governments were able to create what Escobar labels as a new 'political economy of truth' and many countries came to be known as 'underdeveloped' as a result. These nations became unified with the shared aims of utilizing policy to quickly become an industrialized society to meet the conforms of western development discourse ideals. This was a time of a great deal of international restructuring, and to the west there was also an increasing threat of communism. Alongside this, the US and other advanced countries, had a need to invest overseas and market their goods due to their increased productive capacity. Development provided a means to establish a system which brought together politics, economics and social aspects of a society to come to a single mode of thinking and practice. This domineering discourse ensured the 'underdeveloped' nations could be imperialized in a different manner to the recently demised colonialism. Biccum goes further to say that the notion of 'poverty' ensures that development is the only remedy and thereby provides both moral and economic justification for imperial policy (Biccum 2005). To summarize, the discursive nature of development provides a distance between the 'developed' and 'underdeveloped' allowing for the development agenda to be instilled into these poorer nations. The external view of these nations as 'underdeveloped' works in unison with the aspirations of those nations to become 'developed', with both factors facilitating the process of imperialism.

In order for this process of imperialism to take place, the discourse of development must be deployed in practical terms. The key to this deployment by western empires is not through conquering of nations like in the past, but instead to impose norms of what development entails such as free-markets or westernized democracy. To ensure this agenda could be enforced, development was effectively

professionalized and institutionalized. On the one hand, sharing knowledge through education institutions and providing opportunities for academics of poorer nations to study abroad can be seen as a good initiative. Additionally, there are examples of World Bank missions, such as that of Colombia in 1949, entailing a range of experts across political, social and economic science fields to advise on development strategies (Escobar 1988). These sorts of missions were commended on their comprehensive and integrative manner to assist 'underdeveloped' nations tackle current issues. However, one could argue that it is the validation of this knowledge and the mechanism in which it is controlled that constitutes professionalization, thereby ensuring a 'politics of truth'. Drawing on the works of Foucault, Escobar proposed that removing the political aspects of problems and instead instigating an 'economization of life', is what causes 'underdeveloped' countries to work within the regime of western development construct (Escobar 1984). The institutional aspect works in parallel, whereby international organizations and local agencies of the 'underdeveloped' countries instil the knowledge of development through conferences, meetings and other such programmes. Escobar summarizes that 'by using certain forms of knowledge and producing specific forms of intervention, these institutions constitute a network that organizes visibilities and makes the exercise of power possible'. Therefore, this implicit form of establishing knowledge about how development should function allows western empires to further their own power and influence within 'underdeveloped' nations.

A key focus of establishing knowledge, was through neoliberal globalization, which centred around marketization of states in efforts to boost the economic productivity. Proponents of neoliberalism suggest detracting from state control to liberalization of the markets increases efficiency and promotes a growing economy (Hanlin and Brown 2013). At the centre of this, countries must engage in the liberalized economic collaboration at the international level which encompasses the neoliberal globalization agenda. Advocates of the globalization agenda assert that it involves a combination of governments, non-government organizations (NGOs) and other international institutions (Halabi 2004). However, the imperialistic nature of this agenda meant that poorer nations had little choice but to accept this form of development or risk being marginalized. Though the liberalization and globalization of trade was seen as a means of boosting 'underdeveloped' economies, it actually became more associated with increased inequality within societies (Huber and Solt 2004). This is well illustrated by the failure of Argentina, going from the strongest economy in Latin America to defaulting on debt payments to external creditors and the IMF (Veltmeyer 2005). Consequently, questions are raised



about the extent to which development was in the interest of poorer nations.

The imperialistic imposition of neoliberal development can be seen on two levels. Firstly, on a domestic level by accessing people through NGOs. Secondly, on an international level through aid and policy change. Some commentators have suggested that many NGOs have acted as the executing agents of western imperialism by disseminating economic and political values of the empires (Petras and Veltmeyer 2001). In this way, they act like the missionaries of historical imperialism, working to spread the good about western democracy and the bad of communism or revolution. On an international scale, neoliberalism became the western economic policy that nations had to adhere to after the global production crisis of the 1970s. A key mechanism of enforcing this was through the Official Development Assistance (ODA), which was the main route North–South aid transfers (Veltmeyer 2005). Official transfers of loans became dependent on policy reform towards the free market and democracy, this came to be known through the World Bank as Structural Adjustment Policies (SAPs). The debt crisis was utilized as a time to exploit poorer nations and enforce western economic development ideals. Veltmeyer states that ‘US and European commercial banks initiated a lending policy that led to an explosion of private capital and debt financing’. Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) illustrates the imperialistic nature of transnational corporations based in the U.S. and Europe. FDI, facilitated by liberalization of markets, became the dominant flow of capital and reaped hundreds of millions of dollars for these corporations. Although one might assume foreign investment would stimulate the local economy, in practice it comes with various issues of western imperialism. This is partly due to the capital raised in profits rarely being returned to the domestic economy and much of the decision-making being based on the parent company’s interests (Mandle 2016). In addition, the local entrepreneurship ability is severely restricted whilst the skill-base and wages of the labour force remain low. In essence, it could be argued that the post-1970s neoliberal development agenda was enforced on weaker nations through both domestic and international means solely for the benefit of western governments and corporations.

Western imperialism and its development agenda, has importantly continued to evolve even through the apparent failures. The agenda of development remains very much the same, however it manifests differently across time periods and it works towards a process of exclusion not inclusion. The process of exclusion relates to those nations who choose not to follow the development agenda at that time. This can be demonstrated with the SAPs and aid being dependent on adoption of western policies. However, economic progress eventually stagnated in areas of SAPs

and FDI, whilst countries in South-East Asia who avoided this model of development were experiencing high levels of growth (Veltmeyer 2005; Berry 2014). This failure of neoliberalism illustrates that inclusion may not all be beneficial either. Advocates of neoliberalism would argue the problem lies with insufficient commitment to reforms and governments would have benefitted from more radical development programmes. Although, this could be debated given that countries with the more liberalized economic policies sometimes equated to more severe inequality and negative consequences of reform (Huber and Solt 2004). Nevertheless, the key point to highlight is that development discourse continued to be deployed imperialistically with a policy of exclusion, and it merely altered itself to survive these setbacks. The 2002 Millennium Challenge Account (MCA) announced by President Bush emphasizes this evolution of development. The MCA was created to replace loans going to the South and help governments ‘who rule justly, invest in their people, and encourage economic freedom’ (Soederberg 2004). This came alongside the American National Security Strategy (NSS) which aimed to make the world safer. Two key elements can be commented upon from these plans, firstly, that the MCA represented a new form of development with the same imperialistic nature; secondly, that together the MCA and NSS continued the theme of exclusion of other states and not inclusion. The MCA seemingly set out to empower individuals and increase social inclusion whilst committing to improving the economics of ‘failed states’ (Murphy 2002). Similarly, the NSS could be seen as a justified response to the 9/11 attacks and in compliance with the newfound ‘war on terror’. Although the MCA appears innovative in its approach, it contains the same agenda to work in the interests of the U.S. but in a form of pre-emptive development. This differs from imposing conditionality which nations had to meet upon receiving the loans from the IMF and World Bank. Instead funds were withheld until donor country demands were met (Soederberg 2004). However, this is still centred around economic freedom and privatization just like the Washington Consensus. Therefore, although the packaging of the plans was different to before, the same western development ideals were to be enforced. Moreover, the policy of exclusion is enacted for those states resisting this enforcement. Exclusion can sometimes entail violent consequences under the pretence of bringing ‘democracy’ and ‘liberalization’ or more generally ‘development’ to a country. The 2003 Iraq war exemplifies this imperial violence, presented as developing, democratizing and freeing a nation, when there is substantial evidence to suggest the war was actually hugely motivated by potential to exploit oil resources. (Jhaveri 2004; Miller 2004; Chomsky et al. 2009). Overall, development has had to continually transform the way it



manifests itself until the present day, but the core imperialistic values remain the same and are enforced by exclusion—both violently and non-violently.

Development also represents contemporary imperialism in the cultural sense. It inevitably affects people at the community level in sociocultural terms due to the wider changes to the political economy that take place during this process. In some ways, the increased democratization aspect of development should allow for a freer society with greater liberation of people to live within their own culture. The 1980s saw a shift in thinking towards 'social capital' as a means of increasing involvement and participation for the poor (Veltmeyer 2005). This was focussed on how people feel about themselves and seen as empowering. Additionally, development anthropology gained prominence during this time, demonstrating a greater importance placed on culture in development (Escobar 1991). Despite these efforts to look at the cultural impact of development, the key issue lies in its rooting in modernity and rationalization of society as mentioned above. 'Traditional' societies or practices can be seen as needing 'modernization' which can only be achieved through the development process. This is shown by the World Bank's 1975 Rural Development Policy Paper, which sought to incorporate rural farming into larger food production methods (Escobar 1991). Furthermore, the characterization of poorer nations as 'underdeveloped' leads to a homogenization of diverse cultures which can be likened to the issues Said associated with 'orientalism' (Said 1978; Escobar 1984). To summarize, development poses issues for culture in its ideals of 'rationalizing' or 'modernizing' society, which is only worsened through the generalizations of poorer nations and lack of individuality.

Conclusion

This essay has set out to deconstruct the paradigm of development to understand its effects since its dominance in world thinking. I have demonstrated that when taken as a discourse, development has been professionalized and institutionalized to create the realms of knowledge in political, economic and cultural terms. By enforcing development on poorer nations, western empires exploit a contemporary version of imperialism under the guise of 'modernizing' and 'rationalizing' society. This enforcement takes place on an internal level through NGOs, as well as an international level through conditional aid and occasionally the threat of violence. Development continues

to evolve to ensure these norms can be imposed, yet the core values of western imperialism remain the same.

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