Postcolonialism and Development

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Postcolonial scholarship is a comparatively recent branch of study in academia, yet the extent to which it is infiltrating various social theories across numerous academic disciplines necessitates its inclusion in the mainstream of analysis of social phenomena (Goss 1996). Introducing original perspectives from which international relations scholars can observe the international system, specifically that of the non-western, postcolonialism has allowed for a new level of analysis to be added to the discipline. Due to its ontological backbone, postcolonial scholars have become particularly critical of development theories, arguing that they often overlook the importance of indigenous knowledge in formulating development strategies. On the other hand, development theorists argue that postcolonialism is too theoretically based and disregarding of real world problems and dynamics. This essay will explore the key debates surrounding a postcolonial analysis of development theories, arguing that the inclusion of postcolonial theory is necessary in order to deliver effective development.

Introduction

Building on development studies’ Eurocentric foundations, this article argues that the addition of a postcolonial understanding would foster more applicable development strategies put forward by development professionals, especially in areas where traditional Eurocentric development theories have been proven inadequate. First, this article begins with an explanation of postcolonial theory as a diverse conglomeration of approaches with contested levels of understanding, yet providing a unified critique of global development. Second, this article examines the postcolonial critique of development studies. Rooted in development’s reliance on Eurocentric teleology, postcolonial theory argues that development studies ignore indigenous knowledge and construct the misconception of the ‘third world’, leading to the implementation of inadequate development strategies. Third, this article will consider development’s critique of postcolonialism. Development theorists point to the subjectivity of postcolonialist responses and the need for a universal global development strategy. Finally, this article will argue that development theorists’ critique of postcolonialism should not be

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enough to omit postcolonial theory from development strategy. Ultimately, the inclusion of postcolonial understanding is vital to delivering successful global development.

**Explanation of postcolonial theory**
Advancement of postcolonial theory has aided academics across various disciplines in their ability to study phenomena from outside of the traditional Eurocentric viewpoint. More specifically, the traditional Eurocentric viewpoint references the neocolonialist discourse surrounding modern development, subjugating the knowledge and experience of the Global South in favour of western scientific teleology (Sharp and Briggs 2006). Taking into account occurrences and experiences from the knowledge of ‘colonised’ peoples, postcolonial theory has attempted to add a new level of understanding and analysis to Eurocentric scientific teleology. Instead of a singularity of project, postcolonial writings produce an array of productive and provocative debates, with proponents often advocating competing paths of understanding, but all following a similar approach: that of advancing traditional understanding beyond Eurocentrism (Biccum 2002). Indeed, the lack of coherence and agreement between postcolonial scholars is a key point of contention among critics of postcolonial study (a point that will be revisited later). However, taking into account this lack of coherence between postcolonial scholars, it is important to note the overwhelming consensus in postcolonial discipline in its universal critique of theories of global development (Sharp and Briggs 2006; Biccum 2002; Pender 2001; Escobar 1995).

Despite being inextricably linked by their subject matter and objectives, development studies and postcolonial theory have seen very little collaboration or cross referencing between their two disciplines. Often, difficulty in fostering collaboration stems from development professionals viewing postcolonialist study as offering overly complex theories that have little real world application, demonstrating an ignorance of real world problems in the Global South. Likewise many postcolonial theorists view development studies as simply a continuation of a Eurocentric neo-colonialist mind-set that has dominated contemporary development (Sharp and Briggs 2006). It must be acknowledged that there have been attempts to merge these two disciplines, notably Jonathan Crush’s book *Power of Development* (2006). However, the theoretical gap persists. As Christine Sylvester contends, “development studies does not tend to listen to subalterns and postcolonial studies does not tend to concern itself with whether the subaltern is eating” (Sylvester 1999: 703). Nonetheless, it is noted that the gap between these competing disciplines is the reason that a
dialogue is important for offering an alternative conceptualisation of development (Sharp and Briggs 2006).

In short, although postcolonial scholarship cannot be characterised by a singularity of project, often fostering differing intra-disciplinary paths of understanding, the overwhelming consensus amongst postcolonial scholars is a universal critique of development studies. Accounting for development theories inability to understand development in the context of the Global South, postcolonial theorists argue that development professionals are ill equipped to deliver viable development strategies. The remainder of this article will examine the epistemological divide between postcolonialism and development, presenting the case for the inclusion of postcolonial understanding into global development.

Postcolonial critique of development

Having presented an overview of some of the key themes concerning postcolonial scholarship, this article will turn its attention to the main arguments surrounding the postcolonial critique of development studies. Postcolonial critique of global development can be deconstructed into two main areas: postcolonial critique of development discourse and postcolonial critique of development practices. Although both are arguably inseparable, development practices are often a result of development discourse or vice versa; this article will therefore study these independently, due to each area’s unique points of contention.

The overriding criticism from postcolonial scholars concerning discourse associated with development studies deals with the characterisation of ‘development’ as simply spreading a ‘culturally superior’ Eurocentric understanding of enlightenment. After World War II post-war institutions speculated on development as being universal and inevitable, naturally springing from enlightenment principles. On the other hand, development of ‘poor’ countries was seen as something that must be actively sought after. This paradox, that development should naturally occur yet must be sought after in ‘poor’ countries, both emphasises the perceived disposition in western understanding of a Eurocentric supremacy over the Global South and a privileged position of the European/West as the centre of human progress (Biccum 2002). Thus, such a speculation would tacitly characterise outsiders of the Eurocentric centre as intrinsically less intellectually, culturally and technologically capable of producing wealth and thus would naturally require assistance from the ‘superior’ West. This dynamic has been materialised in the role of the World Bank in its relationship with the ‘third
world’ as managerial, providing a ‘knowledge bank’. This means that, according to development discourse, the World Bank is a preeminent source of knowledge regarding ‘third world’ development even though it is a western institution. It holds a role in defining models of development, managing overseas education of policy makers and advocating policy change (Pender 2001). All of these factors have important societal implications, yet originate from a western institutional perspective. Postcolonial scholars would fundamentally disagree with this speculation that Eurocentric policies and strategies are superior to those in the Global South. Instead, they argue that it is due to traditional Eurocentric discourse that non-western peoples are perceived as less developed.

Arturo Escobar’s *Encountering Development: the Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (1995) takes the argument of development discourse even further. He argues that the discourse of development is a discursive construct that produces the very concept of the ‘third world.’ He argues that development makes the presumption that natives of these ‘poor’ countries will inevitably eventually be reformed, yet it continues to reiterate the separation between reformers and reformed by reconstituting the concept of the ‘third world’ as different and inferior (Escobar 1995: 53). Development is constantly defending its legitimacy as a discipline by creating and strengthening these Eurocentric beliefs. Furthermore, Escobar points to the practice of development theory reinforcing the idea of the ‘third world’ as essentially subjugating the individual intricacies of ‘third world’ countries under one blanket term, necessitating one universal response (Escobar 1995: 56). Much like Edward Said’s thesis in his work *Orientalism* (1978), Escobar realises that a Eurocentric stereotype has come to categorise that which is not western, resulting in a much too simplified account of the Global South. Such a practice negates the complexities of individual regions and thus makes assumptions on universal strategies for development. Postcolonial theorists would argue that a universal strategy of development simply couldn’t exist, due to key fundamental differences between ‘developing’ nations.

Another important criticism concerning development theory is in fact brought to light by a prominent development theorist. In his *Five Stages of Growth* (1998) W. W. Rostow noted that any account of the West’s historical development overlooked details concerning any favourable contribution from the trans-Atlantic slave trade or colonial conquests. The introduction of these factors to western growth helps to delegitimise the traditional development theorist’s argument that western development sprang naturally from
enlightenment principles. As these dynamics are obviously not replicable, postcolonial theorists would argue that this proves that development from an empirical western model is not just unethical, but also impossible in the present international environment. Just as the discourse surrounding development is most often aimed at subjugating native populations to the perceived superiority of western institutional culture, postcolonialists would argue that development practices are likewise extremely western/Eurocentric with indigenous knowledge failing to be utilised. Local people and their valuable technical and environmental knowledge can be overlooked and excluded from set development agenda-setting processes. Postcolonial theorists argue that this frequently leads to inappropriate or even irrelevant development efforts (Sharp and Briggs 2004).

One reason, postcolonial theorists argue, for the subjugation of indigenous knowledge in development practice is the nature of communication in western scientific knowledge and the concept of the ‘expert’. Spivak (1988) argues that subalterns are unable to communicate development strategies that do not coincide with the traditional Eurocentric viewpoint. Due to a disparity between the language used by subalterns (indigenous and non-scientific) and the language of development theory (that of western science or philosophy) attempts by indigenous people to transfer knowledge must first be translated into a form that is compatible with development theory. Spivak claims that this translation process leads to indigenous knowledge being situated in a language dominated by western concepts, leading to an ‘epistemic violence’ towards indigenous knowledge and its trivialisation in western development (Spivak 1988). Pretty (1994: 38) observed that the problem with normal science is that it awards credibility only when opinion is defined in scientific language. Indeed, scientific language may be inadequate when describing intricate factors such as dealing with farmers in rural development. Richards (1985) demonstrated that West African farmers used local knowledge as the basis for their rural development agenda, even though it may not have been fully utilised, due to the western scientific worldview.

Indigenous knowledge is not however perpetually disregarded, occasionally it is in fact used to help set development agendas. Postcolonial theorists would nonetheless take issue with not only if indigenous knowledge is being used in western development, but also with how it is being used. Postcolonialists would argue that there has been a tendency to view indigenous knowledge as complementary to established western knowledge, as opposed to an ontological challenger. Sharp and Briggs (2004) argue that this dynamic can have two important and
damaging consequences. First, shaping indigenous knowledge to fit with an already established western view of development will only serve to dilute indigenous knowledge and practices and weaken the potential for it to deliver sustainable and relevant development. Second, the incorporation of indigenous knowledge to traditional western science could be at the cost of theorising about the processes and systems through which countries of the ‘third world’ came to be vulnerable to poverty. Such discourse has materialised in institutions like the World Bank, where the idea that indigenous knowledge should complement rather than compete with global knowledge systems has been endorsed (World Bank 1998). Postcolonialists would argue that disregarding indigenous knowledge in the manner that western development not only alienates native populations, but also undermines development strategies. A greater emphasis on allowing indigenous knowledge to challenge traditional western development would not only allow for a re-conceptualisation of development theory, but would allow for indigenous populations to take ownership of the development process (Sharp and Briggs 2004).

So far this article has presented the argument that, due to its Eurocentric teleology, development scholarship is an inadequate model on which to base global development strategies. As has been discussed, development discourse promotes an intellectually and culturally superior Eurocentric understanding of enlightenment, disregarding the knowledge and experiences of the Global South and fabricating the very construct of the ‘third world’ (Biccum 2002; Escobar 1995). Furthermore, development professionals rarely take into account indigenous knowledge, due to development practice being situated in the language of western science; indeed, any attempt to convert indigenous knowledge into the realm of western scientific language is often in an attempt to complement development practices instead of posing a challenge to them. (Sharp and Briggs 2004; Spivak 1988; Richards 1985). With reference to the aforementioned evidence, this article argues that the implementation of postcolonial understanding into the realm of global development would break down the Eurocentric monopoly on development and thus deliver more successful development strategies.

**Development’s critique of postcolonial theory**

Development theorists have been at best hesitant and at worst unwilling to incorporate postcolonial ideas into the realm of western development. Perhaps one of the most important reasons for this intrinsic hesitation by development theorists is to do with the epistemological
foundations of postcolonialism. Development advocates would argue that postcolonial criticisms are emotional, subjective and irrational responses which undermine the attainment of universal knowledge that can be gained only through empirical inquiry based on western scientific methods (Grovogui 2013; Hopkins 1997; Todorov 1993). To development scholars, postcolonial theories offer a subjective interpretation of events which can lead to a mixing of idiosyncratic and illogical responses that lack knowledge gained only through scientific empirical examination. With such subjectivity, postcolonialism can lead to ambitious theories and advocacies of unrealistic practices that may have limited values in real world situations. Development scholars argue that development theory offers a solution to this postcolonial subjectivity (Goss 1996).

Grovogui (2013) has also pointed to the possible duplicity of postcolonialism as a further point of contention from its opponents. As there remains a postcolonial criticism that western development blankets the ‘third world’ as a single autonomous actor (Escobar 1995: 56), the very fact that postcolonialism generalises the west in such terms leads to postcolonialism fulfilling the very practice that it is criticising (Hopkins 1997). Development theorists would argue that it is too simplistic to incite a stereotype of a European master narrative. Furthermore, as Biccum (2002) points out, another important critique of postcolonial studies is in the usage of the term ‘post’ colonial. Sprinker cites that the term has no clarity of usage and could include so many time periods and locations that it is difficult to find a universal consensus in order to properly foster scientific enquiry (Sprinker 1995). For example, India gained independence from colonial rule in 1947, but only abandoned the military and economic structures of imperialism in 1989 (Ahmad 1995). A development theorist might ask here, when did India formally become postcolonial? Indeed, when does postcolonial development actually begin? Finally, development critique of postcolonialism also points to postcolonial focus on particular constraints of power and knowledge, asking if these are at the expense of a universal global vision. Development theorists argue that while unique situations may readily occur, in order to create an attainable global development strategy, it is important to recognise key structures that link them together (Spivak 1998: 290).

Although important to take into consideration in order to foster a dialogue between the competing disciplines, this article rejects much of development’s postcolonial critique as a rationale to omit postcolonial theory from development strategy. As has been stated, development’s biggest critique of postcolonial scholarship is its inclination to base its
criticisms on subjective and intuitive responses, instead of the traditional development response based on empirical Eurocentric scientific knowledge (Grovogui 2013; Hopkins 1997; Todorov 1993). This is most likely due to development theorists’ aspiration for a universal global development strategy - in their view a much more attainable goal (Spivak, 1998). However, although a universal strategy may indeed be easier to implement, it does not mean that a universal strategy will deliver sustainable or effective development. This article is convinced by the postcolonial argument that it is a mistake to conceptualise development as a ‘one size fits all’ strategy that can be implemented throughout the ‘third world’, negating the importance of indigenous knowledge when implementing development strategies (Escobar 1995).

Conclusion
The debate between postcolonial theory and development strategy incorporates numerous intricate disputes and dissimilarities that, on the surface, may present an incompatibility and lack of cohesiveness. However, it is due to these disagreements that a dialogue between the competing disciplines must take place, as it offers great potential for an alternative conceptualisation for development (Sylvester 1999: 703). This article has set out to open a dialogue for the inclusion of postcolonial theory in the discipline of development studies, arguing that such a dynamic is vital for furthering the validity and effectiveness of future development strategies. As has been discussed, the tendency of development discourse to disregard indigenous knowledge as inadequate in comparison to Eurocentric scientific teleology, leads to the fallacy of the ‘third world’ as a single entity that can be solved with a universal development strategy. As postcolonial scholars would argue, and as has been suggested in this article, this approach can lead to inadequate development. Without taking into account indigenous knowledge and allowing traditional Eurocentric scientific teleology to be challenged, global development will be unable to evolve. The inclusion of postcolonial theory, into the realm of global development, would allow development theorists to challenge their traditional Eurocentric understanding thus delivering more applicable and improved development strategies.
Bibliography


