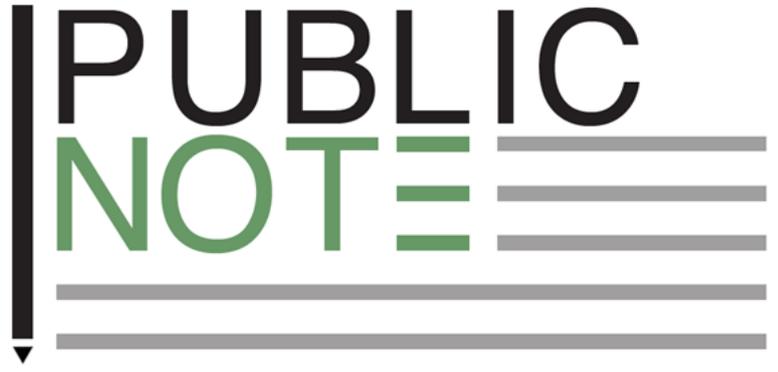


Decolonizing development: bridging the gap between post-development, post-colonialism, and decoloniality

Tiago Viergever



This paper serves as both a critique and an expansion on the central tenets of post-development by engaging the ongoing debate about its heterogeneous nature. To do so it relies on relevant literature in post-development, mainstream development, decoloniality, and post-coloniality, as well as prominent critiques related to these. By doing this it becomes possible to create an ideation of non-imperialist development theory. This is also done to provide a definitive answer around the overall positionality of post-development, as well as provide it with a normative framework with which to tackle issues of globalization and integration within a decolonizing prerogative. In doing so it became possible to redefine development away from its mainstream economic roots and theorize a democratized response to its major issues.

Evidence for practice:

- The aim of this research paper is to make practitioners and academics think critically about the conceptual framework of development, in doing so, it proposes a new ideation of development as agency.
- Practitioners and academics, employing this notion of development should avail to support local and grassroots initiative, without interfering in their agendas.
- Post-colonial notions of development should critically assess the position of the practitioner vis-à-vis their subjects.

Key words: post-development, decoloniality, postcolonialism, modernity, grassroots movements, coloniality

Introduction

The term development as is used today arose from the widespread devastation of the Second World War. During his inaugural address on January 20th, 1949, the incumbent president of the United States, Harry S. Truman, proposed what came to be known as his Four Point Program (Rist, 2008, p.70). Among its chief concerns was the reconstruction of a war-ravaged Europe through a comprehensive aid project, the Marshall Plan. Similarly, the fourth point underlined by the program was the provision of assistance, technology, and experience to what were termed “the underdeveloped areas of the world”. From then on, the discipline of development has been under constant evolution. From the original ideas proposed by Truman to the liberal theories of Modernization, and the Marxist-leaning concepts of Dependency, the evolution of academic writing on development has occurred at a spectacular pace. In this brief retelling, post-development can be regarded as one of the youngest theories of the field, or by some accounts, its obituary.

Post-development was established, first and foremost, as an antithesis to the mainstream narratives of development (Pieterse, 2000, p.176). Its insistence on the rejection of the western model of modernity has framed the theoretical strand as a form of reactionary neo-traditionalism (Pieterse, 1998: 2). That said, post-development is still draped in confusion. Its outright rejection of modernity poses a myriad of considerations regarding its essence (Ziai, 2004, p.1045). At times phrased as a radically democratic approach to development, populist neoliberalism, or a romanticized daydream, the perspective suffers from its own heterogeneity (Ziai, 2004, p.1055-1056). Despite that, the central tenets of post-development still hold, especially in a highly globalized

world like the one which we inhabit, a poignant sense of economic, political, and identitarian independence, which seems to echo the agendas of the social-science theories of decoloniality and post-colonialism (McEwan, 2019, p.129). Namely, these tenets were framed by Arturo Escobar as (1995, p.215):

- A rejection of the paradigm of development;
- An avid interest in indigenous cultures and knowledge;
- Critical outlooks on mainstream scientific discourse;
- And the defense and promotion of local and plural grassroots movements.

The insistence of post-development, post-colonialism, and decoloniality on denouncing the established paradigms of development as nothing more than a project of western neocolonialism and imperialism is a common, and linking thread emerging from postmodernist critiques (McEwan, 2019, p.129). Albeit linked, these concepts are still separated by a gap in the existing literature, which contributes to the heterogeneous nature of post-development theory (Simon, 2006, p.14). As such, establishing a concise, yet comprehensive dialogue between these theoretical currents can help clarify the conceptualizations of post-development, and bring into it a centralizing framework. By conducting research into relevant concepts that bring these perspectives into dialogue, such as “development from below” or “community-led development”, novel considerations on the nature of these currents can be drawn. For this purpose, relevant literature on all theoretical currents mentioned above, as well as prominent critiques of these require careful examination. In doing so a new ideation of development as a concept, and possibly as a practice, should be achieved. To do so this paper will be structured in

The discipline of development has been under constant evolution

two main sections. The first will consist of a brief retelling of the concept of development and the theories of post-development, post-colonialism, and decoloniality. The second section will consist of a critical appraisal, and synthesis of these theories. Finally, the merits of the democratization of development will be discussed before yielding the concluding remarks.

Theoretical framework

2.1 Development

When producing content within the field of development studies it proves indispensable to conceptualize what one means by the word development. On account of this, prospective authors go through the process of positioning themselves on what is seemingly an interminable debate. Hence, it should be noted that development is a contested concept, by which it is meant that it can have numerous, and often disparaging iterations (van der Eijk, 2018, p.22). Indeed, the definitions of development inform the nature of the field itself, and by doing so establishes the main currents of development thinking, such as modernization theory, dependency theory, the capabilities approach, and post-development (Rostow, 1971; Prebisch, 1962; Sen, 2000; Escobar, 1995). Each of these theories, with the exception of post-development, which established itself inversely to what it regarded as the mainstream narrative of development (Sachs, 1992a, p.1; Escobar, 1995, p. 215) holds, therefore, its own conceptualization of the term. In this sense, several ideations of development must be expanded upon.

Firstly, it is important to clarify what is meant by, within post-developmental literature, mainstream development. This is important because, albeit positioning themselves as opposed to the established paradigms of development, in so doing post-developmentalists accepted that there

existed some unequivocal metanarrative of the concept (Crush, 1995, p.2). To post-development, the term “development” derives from a metaphoric use of the biological homonym (Esteva, 1992, p.8). Within this cluster, development was taken to mean the adaptation of an organism to its most appropriate form. When reframed from the realm of biology to that of the social sciences, the word development was imbued with what Gustavo Esteva called a “colonizing power” which, “gave global hegemony to a purely Western genealogy of history” (Esteva, 1992 p.9). Essentially, what was taken as development, and in fact, modernity, by the post-development rhetoric was, therefore, westernization (Watts, 1995 p.66). This ideation of the concept is built upon the historic progression of the neo-liberal currents of development thinking and inextricably connected to the concept of modernity as established by modernization theorists (Watts, 1995 p.49; Frangie, 2011, p.1186). From this, it can be said that other than producing its own conceptions of development, post-development was content with critiquing the concept as held by modernization theorists. Thus, the definitions of modernization theory for development and modernity are synonymous, and perhaps most clearly defined in W. W. Rostow’s *Stages of Economic Growth* (1960, p. 4-11). Rostow conceptualizes the process of development by underlining five particular stages of growth that eventually lead to economic development, namely: (a) traditional society; (b) preconditions for takeoff; (c) the take-off stage; (d) the drive to maturity; and finally (e) the age of high mass consumption. The age of high mass consumption is therefore equated to the ends of development or, its goals, and consists of a shift of production priorities toward durable consumer goods and services, a stage to which, Rostow argued “Americans are beginning to emerge”. Essentially this characterization is earmarked by the same sense of western

self-aggrandizement criticized by the post-development literature.

In accepting the concept of development as laid down by modernization theorists, post-development falls prey to a form of theoretical shortsightedness. Consequently, the anti-development agenda disregards a plethora of alternative definitions of the term, not least of which is the capabilities approach as laid down by Amartya Sen (1999). Unlike Rostow's overwhelming reliance on economic growth, Sen's approach focuses on the expansion of freedoms for people, into which economics would play but a part (Sen, 1999 p.295), this meant that the focus of this approach would lie, not in the economic production and supremacy of one country over the other but would instead equate to the capacity that people would have to pursue "more worthwhile and more free lives" (ibid.). Whilst the translation of this concept into practical terms, (i.e., the creation of the Human Development Index) seems to reinforce the mainstream westernization-as-development narrative by consistently ranking economically consolidated countries similarly to countries regarded as developed by the index (UNDP, 2020), the concept can be expanded upon critically by virtue of the tenets of post-development, post-colonialism, and decoloniality.

2.2. Post-colonialism vs decoloniality

The second conceptualization which requires clarification is based on the dichotomous relationship between post-colonialism and decoloniality. Admittedly these theoretical positions borrow from many of the same proposals: both are entwined in a larger context of the politics of knowledge production, and both contest the established colonial world order and the inequalities which stem from it (McEwan, 2019, p.94). What distinguishes them is precisely how they deal with the

issues of modernity and coloniality. Post-coloniality is based around the condition and evolution of peoples emancipated from a *de jure* if not *de facto* colonialist regime, whilst decoloniality is an interpretation and an active stance that seeks to provide agency by assuming a political, ethical, and epistemic positionality (Tlostanova & Mignolo, 2019, p.165). In essence, the position held by decoloniality, as opposed to that of post-colonialism, holds that there remain institutions of knowledge that uphold a eurocentric and colonial grasp on the global south (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p.135). These structures contribute to solidifying the eurocentric grasp on world power, permeating a global rationality, and instituting a regime based on the subjugation of non-western forms of knowledge (Quijano, 2014, p.777). Coloniality is therefore omnipresent. Its hold on the structures of knowledge is perceivable in anything ranging from linguistic patterns to personal ontological positions, and even the names by which we refer to certain elements of day-to-day life (Quijano, 2000 p.216). Decoloniality is, therefore, an option, or a different language with which to unlearn and unmake the hold coloniality maintains in global, as well as interpersonal relationships. Essentially, decoloniality is a perspective that denounces the inequalities produced by the westernized eurocentric claim on the structures of knowledge (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p.239).

2.3. Post-development:

Several snippets of the complex theoretical framework of post-development have already been offered throughout this paper. These, in no way, illustrate the full extent of what post-development entails. As previously mentioned, post-development as a theoretical perspective suffers from widespread heterogeneity and confusion (Ziai, 2004; Litonjua, 2012, p.42). Due to this, there remains little in

the form of consensus when it comes to how it should be formulated as both theory and practice. Critiques of this theoretical perspective range from classifying it as quasi-anarchist neo-traditionalistic postulations to far-right nationalistic populism (Ziai, 2004). This is due, in part, to its identitarian and anti-globalist views (Rapley, 2004 p.351). As such, independently from how it is classified externally, post-development does hold several common factors. First, it perceives development, its ends, and goals as western impositions in favor of a eurocentric project of modernity (Esteva, 1992; Escobar, 2000). This first tenet has been discussed somewhat at length throughout this paper already, but the outright rejection of the mainstream paradigms of development is perhaps the most expressive claim of post-development theory. To this strand, development is a western imposition, and an imperialist pursuit (Sachs, 1992a, p.4; Esteva, 1992, p.9). In this sense, development is seen as an ideology, rather than a scientific discipline (Frangie, 2011, p.1183). This is by no means a baseless claim. As can be seen, mainstream development institutions such as the Washington Consensus have skewed the history of western economic development to effect widespread policy prescriptivism, which is not necessarily to the benefit of the countries it seeks to “develop” (Chang, 2008, p.13-19).

Second, post-development upholds traditions and cultural practices as its main projects (Escobar, 1995 p.13). By projects, it is meant, not that it has any particular designs on these, but relate them as its ends, consistently threatened by the mainstream development agenda (Sachs, 1992a p.4). Post-development extols an ideal of agency for communities and their practices above the impositions of western modernity (Gronemeyer, 1992, p.66). Thereby denouncing the inequalities produced by mainstream development as part of the project of global coloniality, without directly referring to it (McEwan,

2019 p.252). This is done by upholding and arguing in favor of the relative capabilities of traditional communities and their practices (Escobar, 1995, p.13).

Third, post-development emphasizes the role of local and plural grassroots movements over mainstream development and globalized development efforts (Escobar, 1995 p.215). As such, it echoes its commitment to traditional approaches in detriment over western modernity, citing the subjective identities of the community post-development upholds, romanticizes, and seeks to preserve in the face of globalization (Sachs, 1992b, p.113). As such, social movements are established as the main drivers of post-development, particularly those with anti-globalization agendas (McEwan, 2019, p.328). Thus, it enacts a novel logic of the social based on self-organization by which stable social patterns emerge through spontaneous and independent, self-reinforcing dynamics at a local level (Rahnema, 1997, p.382).

Finally, post-development takes a critical view of mainstream scientific discourse by employing Foucaultian rhetoric in its argumentation (Escobar, 1995, p.215). The critique enacted by post-development theorists focuses largely on the language employed by mainstream development (Esteva, 1992, p.19). Thus, post-development points out that the creation of underdevelopment coincides with the creation of development as policy, and utilizes a self-aggrandizing western perspective, whilst often downplaying the importance of the global south. In this sense, the entire production of knowledge in the field of development is partial to its mainstream advocates. These assertions run congruent to the power-knowledge relationship theorized by Michel Foucault (Brigg, 2002, p.430). Furthermore, this is also similarly addressed by decolonialist critiques wherein the production of knowledge, and the language employed in its name are earmarked by eurocentrism (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013, p.178).

Analysis

3.1. Development as westernization?

The claims made by post-development as a critical stance are designed to question the validity of the field of development studies. As Wolfgang Sachs held, post-development signified an “obituary” to the discipline (Sachs, 1992a, p.1). This declaration might, though, have been greatly precocious. As can be seen, development studies did not halt at its own declaration of death and is instead continuously expanded upon (Rist, 2008, p.257). In view of this, to understand how the definitions and conceptualizations of development as a practice have evolved beyond post-development, it proves useful to understand the criticism extended to the theoretical current.

Some of the critique extended to post-development has already been discussed throughout the body of this paper, namely the issue of theoretic heterogeneity, but there are other critiques which require further elaboration. Specifically, those of epistemic extremism and patronizing traditionalism (Pieterse, 2000, p.175; Matthews, 2017, p.4). Firstly, by epistemic extremism it is meant that its outright rejection of development as a practice and a study fails to supplant the established paradigms of development while offering little in return (Pieterse, 2000, p.175). In this sense, while it enacts a new body of critique to the episteme of development by criticizing the power-knowledge relationships tied to it, it fails to suggest a viable alternative, something which was executed by other alternative-to-development currents as outlined by Jan Nederveen Pieterse (1998).

Secondly, post-development critiques largely center around the laudation of tradition as opposed to mainstream modernity. This, in itself, does

not represent an issue. However, by criticizing the existing knowledge-power relationships created in the name of development it falls prey to its own patronizing prescriptivism (Matthews, 2017, p.4). Often post-development critiques ignore the claims of local populations and communities when they oppose its general framework. Consequently, post-development theorists often cite colonization of knowledge as being responsible for the assertions of the people. By doing so it can be argued, however, that post-developmentalists are just as guilty of prescriptivism as those whom they criticize for it, and other than ensuring it, veritably remove any form of agency from the communities and individuals for whom it advocates (Matthews, 2017, p.5).

Both criticisms cited above conflate regarding their belief that the classification made by post-development, that development as a concept amounts to

Often post-development critiques ignore the claims of local populations and communities when they oppose its general framework

westernization, is extreme or simply erroneous. That might well be true. The conceptual unclarity of development, as was

shown above, has led to a plethora of divergent positions on its application, but an unstable semi-consensus over its definition (Frangie, 2011, p.1188). Post-development, for all its denouncement over the mainstream development paradigms, has focused on criticizing the application and definitions provided by it rather than attempting to redefine it, accepting instead the infeasibility of the task as given (Esteva, 1992, p.7). Development thus is, as post-developmentalists would argue, westernization. But it does not have to be. As with Amartya Sen’s capabilities approach, development can take numerous other definitions (Sen, 1999, p.295). If development is, as Sen argues, the expansion of human capability to lead freer and more worthwhile lives then the

protection of traditional practices, and the freedom of a people to engage in this should be included. In effect the inequalities faced by peoples in the peripheries, should be seen as an impediment to their freedoms. By assessing it as such “development” can be reconceptualized as the means and degree by which people are free to engage in, practice, or repurpose their traditions, cultures, and technologies, rather than simply focusing on mainstream economic success. This definition incorporates the main criticism of “development as westernization” rhetoric, with a concern with traditionality and its role in expanding the capabilities of communities.

In effect the inequalities faced by peoples in the peripheries, should be seen as an impediment to their freedoms

3.2. Democratizing development

Post-development is thus, only framed as an antithesis to development due to its insistence on the mainstream conceptualizations of the construct. When this conceptualization comes to be challenged post-development ceases to simply enact a critique to the conventions of development, but instead becomes a new narrative of development. As a result of this, the issue of heterogeneity can be streamlined to a narrative of democratizing development. As such, the focus of post-development on grassroots movements and local realities can be re-signified as community-led development or as development from below. Meaning development efforts and goals would be defined at local and community levels (Wahid et al., 2016, p.1-2). This would essentially mean local communities and traditional populations would be given agency to enact their own visions of development catered to each specific reality (Newman & Dale, 2005, p.481). By allowing communities to employ a modicum of agency, the post-development goal of self-organization suddenly becomes increasingly feasible. In this sense,

theorists in the school of post-development should see the appropriation of western technologies not necessarily as veiled coloniality, but rather, as a Fanonian step to self-determination: subversion of western coloniality by virtue of its technologies (Fanon, 1968, p.57).

Concluding remarks

Post-development has suffered, since its induction into development studies from theoretical unclarity and conceptual heterogeneity, thereby creating for itself a confusing academic framework (Ziai, 2004, p.1049). In doing so it was classified into different extremes of a complicated debate around the nature of the field of development studies itself. In spite of this, many of the tenets of post-development, as established by writers such as Arturo Escobar, Gustavo Esteva or William Sachs, have found ample footing in the annals of decolonialist literature (Escobar, 1998; Escobar, 2000; Esteva, 1992; Sachs, 1992; McEwan, 2019: 129). Post-development’s rejection of western modernity and the language employed in mainstream development literature are tantamount to the ideas of coloniality of knowledge and anti-imperialism. In employing the ideas of decoloniality, along with sources from other currents of development thinking, post-development can be likened to a position of extreme democratization of development efforts rather than their rejection.

Development as such is, unlike what is claimed by its more conventional theoretical currents, not necessarily a mirror for westernization, but the expansion of the capabilities of communities in their capacity as local vectors of social cohesion and expression. Communities are thereby also free to define, and set their own development goals, while moving away from globalized

development efforts. By doing so they are also free to employ western technologies and expertise in pursuit of their own goals. But rather than proselytizing in the name of radical traditionalism it should be regarded as the use of western means to subvert its colonial grasp on the global south.

References

- Brigg, M. (2002). Post-Development, Foucault and the Colonisation Metaphor. *Third World Quarterly*, 23(3), 421-436.
- Chang, H. (2008). *Kicking away the ladder: Development strategy in historical perspective*. London: Anthem Press.
- Crush, J. (1995). *Power of development*. London: Routledge.
- Escobar, A. (1995). *Encountering development: The making and unmaking of the Third World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Escobar, A. (1998). Whose Knowledge, Whose nature? Biodiversity, Conservation, and the Political Ecology of Social Movements. *Journal of Political Ecology*, 5, 1st ser., 53-82.
- Escobar, A. (2000). Beyond the Search for a Paradigm? Post-Development and beyond. *Development*, 43(4), 11-14.
- Esteva, G. (n.d.). Development. In 1159474708 870799002 W. Sachs (Ed.), *Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power* (pp. 6-26). London, 1992: Zed Books.
- Fanon, F. (1968). *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press.
- Frangie, S. (2011). Post-Development, Developmental State and Genealogy: Condemned to develop? *Third World Quarterly*, 32(7), 1183-1198. doi:10.1080/01436597.2011.596745
- Groenemeyer, M. (1992). Helping. In 1159475622 870799518 W. Sachs (Ed.), *Helping* (pp. 53-70). London: Zed Books.
- Matthews, S. (2017). Colonised minds? Post-development theory and the desirability of development in Africa. *Third World Quarterly*, 38(12), 2650-2663. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2017.1279540>
- Mignolo, W. D., & Walsh, C. E. (2018). *On decoloniality: Concepts, analytics, praxis*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- McEwan, C. (2019). *Postcolonialism, decoloniality, and development* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
- Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S. J. (2013). *Empire, global coloniality and African subjectivity*. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Newman, L., & Dale, A. (2005). The Role of Agency in Sustainable Local Community Development. *Local Environment*, 10(5), 477-486. doi: 10.1080/13549830500203121
- Pieterse, J. N. (1998). My Paradigm or Yours? Alternative Development, Post-Development, Reflexive Development. *Development and Change*, 29(2), 343-373. doi: 10.1111/1467-7660.00081
- Pieterse, J. N. (2000). After post-development. *Third World Quarterly*, 21(2), 175-191. doi: 10.1080/01436590050004300
- Prebisch, R. (1962). *The Economic development of Latin America and its principal problems*. New York: United Nations.
- Rahnema, M. (1997). Towards Post-Development: Searching for Signposts, A New Language and New Paradigms. In 1160887602 871712821 M. Rahnema & 1160887603 871712821 V. Bawtree (Authors), *The post-development reader* (pp. 377-402). London: Zed.

- Rist, G. (2008). *The History of Development* (3rd ed.). London: Zed Books.
- Simon, D. (2006). Separated by common ground? Bringing (post)development and (post)colonialism together. *Geographical Journal*, 172(1), 10-21. doi:10.1111/j.1475-4959.2006.00179.x.
- Quijano, A. (2000). Coloniality of Power and Eurocentrism in Latin America. *International Sociology Association*, 15(2), 215-232. doi:10.1177/0268580900015002005
- Quijano, A. (2014). *Cuestiones y horizontes: De la dependencia histórico-estructural a la colonialidad/descolonialidad del poder*. Buenos Aires: CLACSO.
- Rostow, W. W. (1971). *The stages of economic growth; a noncommunist manifesto* W.W. Rostow. Cambridge University Press.
- Sachs, W. (1992). One Word. In 1159477208 870800396 W. Sachs (Ed.), *Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power* (pp. 102-116). London: Zed Books.
- Sachs, W. (2019). *The development dictionary: A guide to knowledge as power*. London: Zed.
- Sen, A. (2000). *Development as Freedom*. Anchor Books.
- Tlostanova, M., & Mignolo, W. (2012). *Learning to Unlearn: Decolonial Reflection from Eurasia and the Americas*. Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press.
- UNDP. (2020). Human Development Reports. Retrieved 2021, from <http://www.hdr.undp.org>.
- Wahid, A. (2017). Barriers to empowerment: Assessment of community-led local development organizations in Pakistan. *Renewable and Sustainable Energy Reviews*, 74(1), 1361-1370.
- Ziai, A. (2004). The ambivalence of post-development: Between reactionary populism and radical democracy. *Third World Quarterly*, 25(6), 1045-1060. doi: 10.1080/0143659042000256887.