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POST-DEVELOPMENT AND OTHER CRITIQUES OF THE ROOTS OF DEVELOPMENT

Eduardo Gudynas

The 1980s not only saw a counter-revolution in development theory and practice – a neoliberal approach that highlighted the virtues of free-market capitalism and rejected the agency of the developmental state – but a wide-ranging search for ‘another development’, an alternative form of development that was human in scale and form, people-centred and participatory, equitable and inclusive (particularly as regards women and the poor), sustainable in terms of the environment and livelihoods, and, above all, initiated ‘from below and within’ rather than ‘from above and the outside’. However, towards the end of the decade, this critique of mainstream development theory and practice was extended to the very notion of development, and in the early 1990s it was consolidated with at least four different emphases.

Some denounced the failure of development in any expression and the need to abandon it (Esteva, 1992). Others argued that development is essentially a Western belief, myth or religion imposed on other cultures (Rist, 1997). Others questioned development, focusing on the role of economic growth as a central problem, and from there postulated the need for a need for degrowth (Latouche, 2009). Finally, another stream, known as post-development, in the formulation of its best-known promoter, Arturo Escobar, argued that development should be considered as a discourse that expressed premises such as the modernization or the appropriation of nature, but clothed them as universal truths, which had the effect of subordinating other cultures (Escobar, 1995).

A more detailed examination of post-development shows that at least two stages must be distinguished in Escobar’s propositions: in the first, post-development was emphasized as a form of critical analysis; in the second, in addition to this criticism, more and more attention was given to different alternatives.

Post-development as critique

The initial formulation of post-development as a critique was inspired by post-structuralism, especially in the analysis of ‘discourses’ promoted by Michel
Foucault. Hence, a more correct term would be a ‘post-structuralist critique’ of development (an introduction to this current is found in Belsey, 2002; see also Gibson Graham, 2000). In this context, development ‘discourse’ includes not only statements of ideas, and how they are thought, expressed and felt, but also concrete actions, the institutions that promote them, and modes of legitimation. In this way, issues such as the basic ideas in a development plan, the state agencies by which they are implemented, the actions they promote, and the ways of legitimation should be analysed.

This type of criticism points to features that are common to many ways of thinking about development and to the idea that development had a universal meaning. The imposition of the idea of development in the image of the industrialized countries simultaneously relegated all others to the status of underdeveloped. Therefore, development is simultaneously both an imposition of specific knowledges and the exclusion of others.

A post-development perspective allows us to highlight concepts that are critical but nevertheless supportive of the development project – the idea that the social condition of people, or a targetted population, can be improved, changed in a progressive direction. This would be a universal, progressive, essentially positive, linear process. The main engine would be economic growth, which is conceived as perpetual, and which in turn generates the material well-being of people, social, cultural and political advances. Development, therefore, defends different versions of modernization.

Development in one way or another understands that society and nature are separate. Environmental and social impacts are denied or minimized, and scientific and technical optimism is defended. The economic emphasis of development generates a growing commodification of the environment and social relations, anchored in a Western lifestyle and consumption. Consumerism is reinforced, and even a Western aesthetic is imitated. Patriarchal positions of various kinds are maintained, subordinating and making women invisible.

In its more formal application, an analysis from the post-development considers the forms of knowledge (for example, the delimitation of disciplines, the conditions of validity, etc.), the subjectivities involved, the forms of representation of these discourses, and the dynamics of power that cross all these spheres, from the role of experts to local demands or resistance to development (Escobar, 1995, 2012). In this way, the criteria of truth and falsity are determined on what is development, the reasons for conceiving it as a positive process, acceptable conceptions of its constitutive ideas (such as welfare, efficiency, growth, etc.), and even forms by which we interpret our relationships with the social and natural environment.

As we can see, the idea of development is not restricted to economic issues, but spills over into social, cultural and political dimensions, and even personal sensibilities and aesthetics. This post-development critique shows that while development is not a unified field and does not have a precise meaning, basic attributes are repeated, and there are processes of organization, legitimation and action that are analogous. Development then appears as a certain type of relationalities, grouping some
ideas and practices but excluding others. In its shadow have emerged concepts of enormous influence, such as human capital or natural capital, or have redefined others, such as efficiency or inequity, all of which can be thought of in a few ways.

Post-development as critique and a space for alternatives

Post-development in its initial stage made it possible to make a key distinction: on the one hand, there would be 'alternative developments' and, on the other, 'alternatives to development' (e.g. Escobar, 1995: 215). The first are debates about instrumental adjustments or different ways of organizing development; its conceptual foundations are not under discussion. Discussions, for example, are one of the best ways to feed economic growth, and the role of the market or the state.

The latter, as alternatives to any of the visions of development, became evident thanks to the criticisms of post-development. In its original formulations, post-development understood that these alternatives aimed, for example, at shaping a discourse of difference or to rescue the trials and resistances that started from the movements of the South. But from the mid-2000s, little by little, a certain confusion spread.

On the one hand, several interpreted that the prefix 'post' referred to a future development that would overcome the limitations of the present ones or would even include anti-development positions (such as those of G. Esteva). In this way, the direct link with post-structuralism was weakened and some alternative developments were mixed with alternatives to development. On the other hand, Escobar himself contributed to this confusion by adding to post-development the task of creating new discourses and representations, diversifying the agents of knowledge production or supporting resistances (Escobar, 2005). More recently, he added questions such as 'discourses of transition' (Escobar, 2012). Undoubtedly, in the initial work of Escobar, there was a certain overlap between the questioning of post-structuralist inspiration and the imagination of alternatives, but all this became more acute in this second stage (see also the essays in Ziai, 2007).

This expansion, still in progress, generated a greater adherence to the post-development label, especially from social militants, but at the cost of losing analytical specificity. In turn, while a post-developmental critique is powerful, it is not enough to generate alternatives, and in fact they need other instruments and reflections of their own (Gudynas, 2014b).

Reactions and constancy in relation to post-development

Post-development in its first stage was the subject of many questions. Among the objections was, for example, the inability to understand heterogeneity in development practices or the romanticization of social movements, and therefore some considered it to be only anti-modern rhetoric (see, for example, Nederveen Pieterse, 2000). According to several analysts the problem was not development itself, but its capitalist applications or the persistence of poverty.
Methodological problems were also pointed out, among them that the initial exercises were actually a partial or impoverished expression of post-structuralism (Ziai, 2004).

However, post-development remained a space of critical analysis and development response, including some new contributions that followed the post-structuralist perspective more rigorously. Simultaneously, from the field of development studies, initial rejection reactions gave way to more rigorous reflections that accepted some of the post-development warnings (see a summary of this situation in Ziai, 2015).

Some limitations and precisions must be pointed out anyway. The critique of post-development, although invoking direct links with certain social movements, was in fact primarily an academic exercise with weak connections with major political transformations.

This was evident in South America, from which emerged one of the most radical development critiques, known as buen vivir. This conception is as much a critic to development as the opening to post-capitalist and post-socialist alternatives. It is a position that emerged outside of academic exercises, and as a result of certain heterodox social and political practices and a remarkable diversity of actors (with a substantial contribution of some indigenous militants) (Gudynas, 2014b). Anyway, it is true that these criticisms show remarkable similarities with the initial post-development.

At the same time, the severe economic and financial crisis of 2007–2008, which for some announced the end of capitalism, did not in fact diminish the prevalence of development ideas, and only changed its components and expressions. Examples are the huge diversity of discussions around the Millennium Development Goals and the most recent Sustainable Development Goals. Post-development played a limited role in those discussions, but the persistence of the basic ideas of development shows that those components are so deeply rooted as to be reproduced again and again.

In the same way, an examination of the most recent development strategies since the beginning of the 21st century shows a remarkable diversity in its instrumental expressions, but a great constancy in the basic components. Regimes, such as the European administrations defending neoliberal adjustments or the development plans formulated by the Communist Party in China, are certainly different, but at the same time they show common basic elements.

A more detailed examination for the case of South America is even more striking, since in a very short period of time very diverse development strategies have been tested there. These range from conservative positions (for example, in Chile, Colombia and Peru) to heterodox trials invoicing a new 21st-century socialism (in Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela), through market economies under some state regulation (in Brazil and Uruguay). The legitimations of these varieties of development in some cases allude to orthodox neoclassical conceptions, but in others Marx or Lenin are mentioned (as are the president of Ecuador, Rafael Correa, or vice president of Bolivia, Alvaro García Linera). These experiences, which are the subject of intense debate, show that they are certainly diverse, with successes in
some areas, but it is shocking to observe that basic elements, such as the attachment to economic growth or the ambition of modernization, are repeated. Therefore, these conceptual bases are prior to the different ideological political currents in any of these countries. In fact, we are dealing with conceptions and sensibilities that are common to different political and philosophical ideologies of modernity. This is just another of the points pointed out by post-development in its original version.

Rethinking critical development studies

Faced with this paradoxical situation, given the diversity of instrumental expressions of development even in contexts of crisis and political change, while maintaining a basic core it is essential to take a critical approach from a post-development perspective.

We should recall that the term ‘criticism’ refers to different questions about the various manifestations of development. For some, this ‘criticism’ is based on normative commitments, such as analysing certain subjects (the effects of development on the poorest or the situation of the Third World) or certain issues (such as social justice or equity). For others, a critique of development is a means of challenging mainstream schools of economic and political thought (some question capitalism, others socialism). In recent years, it has become more commonly understood that critical development studies (CDS) provides a ‘leftist’ perspective on a broad range of issues, including political economy, Marxism, postcoloniality, ecology and feminism. For example, of this critical perspective on development, see the essays collected in Kothari (2005), Schuurman (2009) and Veltmeyer (2011). An appreciable number of CDS advocates are heirs to the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, rejecting positivism and defending socially and historically framed forms of knowledge that are oriented towards practices of transformation.

Another, perhaps more serious, problem is that well-known critical stances focus on capitalism, not development. These currents in many cases are very good at stripping the dark side and contradictions of capitalism, but as they fail to address the roots of development they fail to raise questions at that level or alternatives to overcome it (an example of this is Harvey, 2015). Even more problematic is the attempt to construct buen vivir as a new variety of socialist development (as promoted by actors linked to the governments of Ecuador and Bolivia) – stripping it of its radical criticism.

The key question is that several approaches end up being discussions between different forms or models of development, where some versions are attacked while others are postulated as alternatives that supposedly would be better. There is no doubt that capitalism and development overlap, but since the main issue is how to confront capitalism such studies are self-limiting in the field of development. For example, Munck argues that ‘it is not possible to overcome the challenge of critical development theory by moving away or abandoning development. The challenge is to imagine development differently and put it into practice in a different way’ (Munck, 2011: 76–7). Thus, this understanding of CDS questions the capitalist
background in development and looks for alternatives in a non-capitalist form of development. This perspective, namely that criticism and alternatives must necessarily be within and not outside development, is precisely what post-development questions.

Of course, critical analyses of development with a left-wing sensibility are very useful in dealing with certain families of development issues—but they are insufficient. To complete the field of criticism, to make it as rigorous and comprehensive as possible, it is necessary to go deeper.

**Levels of critical development studies**

It is possible to identify at least four levels on which critical development assessments operate (identified as 3, 2, 1 and 0). Level 3 is the most common, and the most superficial. It corresponds to analyses of specific development actions, such as a rural credit programme or a housing development plan. Level 2 corresponds to sectoral development programmes; the actions indicated in the previous example correspond in turn to understandings about what is ‘rural’ or ‘human’ development. It is obvious that at the second level, from the sectoral programmes, different plans and actions are derived from the third stratum. At these two levels, the aim of analysis is to weigh the appropriateness of the instruments used in bringing about change and development, the differences between expected and obtained results, the degree to which these instruments promote economic growth, serve to generate employment and improve the social condition of a targeted population, or bring about progressive change, for example.

Level 1 corresponds to an evaluation within one of the great families of development, such as capitalist development. A good example of analysis at this first level is to question development as ‘ideology’, where criticism is made from philosophical-political stances (e.g. neoliberals attacking the premise of state planning in development, or socialists claiming control of the market). From this critical perspective, development is not so much about structural analysis of conditions that are objective in their effects on people, classes and nations according to their location in the system as it is about ‘discourse’, i.e. different ways by which people construct their own reality, allowing them to come to a shared understanding and to act collectively on the basis of this understanding. In other words, the issue is different and also common ways of understanding and acting in the world that people themselves have created by their own actions—by taking actions on ideas and their beliefs regardless of the ontological status of these ideas and beliefs (whether they truly ‘represent’ the real world as it is rather than as it is imagined). Also at this level are the well-known critical development studies that are actively engaged with or committed to the popular sectors of society or, as mentioned above, with themes such as social justice or bringing about ‘another world’.

Finally, there is a level 0 that corresponds to the concepts and sensibilities that form the foundations of development thinking and practices, the ‘roots’ common to any of its varieties. This is the deepest stratum where the conceptual
roots of development are located. No doubt there are links between the different levels, since some are embedded in the others. But the critical instruments that are applied at one level are not necessarily the best for another level. For example, critical studies at level 1 may be useful at levels 2 and 3, but they are not best for level 0.

Post-development in its initial understanding as poststructuralist criticism is appropriate for a critical evaluation of the zero level. It is clear that it is not the best tool to study, for example, the effectiveness of a particular development strategy, especially its known limitations in dealing with the heterogeneity of development. In turn, this type of analysis allows for appealing to other instruments that complement the critique on that zero level. Several complementary tools are required, given the intricacies and barriers in deeply rooted prejudices, understandings and sensitivities.

**A toolbox for the critical analysis of the roots of development**

For the zero level of the analysis, which corresponds to what could be called 'roots' in the conceptions and sensibilities of development, it is possible to assemble a Critical Development Root Analysis toolbox. It would include the following instruments: post-development and other poststructuralist analyses of development discourses, deconstruction, certain ethnographies of development, various methodologies in ecological economics, environmental ethics in its treatment of the allocation of values, gender studies, critical epistemology, and some of the essays focused on so-called 'ontological openings'. This composition is the result of our work at CLAES (Latin American Centre for Social Ecology) in recent years. Some attributes of these tools are discussed below.

It is a critical root analysis in the sense that it points to the basis of these ideas, practices and sensibilities of development in all its expressions. It does not refer to a mere enumeration of errors, nor are they necessarily a means to develop alternatives to development, although the belief or need to think other options than the current ones remains one of the engines of these criticisms.

Under this classification, post-development in its strict sense would be an instrument among other possible in this toolbox. In fact, it is difficult to defend the idea that there is a single tool that is the most effective and complete in unravelling the zero level in all its aspects. In addition, each instrument has specificity, where the components that escape its consideration can be approached by other complementary tools. In this complementation, a more complete approach is achieved.

It is possible to mention the highlights of some of these instruments. Deconstruction allows us to identify the hierarchical and binary conditions that impose certain ideas and sensibilities, and that in turn excludes others. Performativity serves to identify repeated practices by means of which discourse produces the effects to which it gives its name (these two instruments appear in Gibson Graham, 2000). The development is full of circumstances where the action generates acts that are defended as development.
The new ethnographies of development address in all their details concrete practices in specific undertakings and sites, unravelling, for example, how local actors process them, the networks of relationships that are created, the resistances or reinterpretations that emerge, etc. (e.g. Mosse, 2005).

Ecological economics, a different perspective from mainstream environmental economics (see the chapter by David Barkin on this), provides essential instruments for addressing, inter alia, the impossibility of perpetual economic growth, the actual metabolisms of the links between society and nature, and the ecological and economic effects of environmental impacts (see, as an example of some contributions, Martínez Alier and Roca Jusmet, 2000). In addition, it helps us to rethink the valuation schemes by questioning the perfect commensurabilities.

Environmental ethics, especially those that address the values of non-humans themselves, whether living species or ecosystems, is fundamental to unravel the anthropocentric value base of modern development. In this field, there are heterodox approaches that incorporate the sensitivities of some indigenous peoples (Gudynas, 2014a), as more formal reflections inspired, among others, in Naess (e.g. Naess, 2016).

Many of the above instruments involve other ways of conceiving the generation of knowledge, and therefore are articulated with certain critical epistemologies. By way of example, Donna Haraway in her non-essentialist and feminist position, extends identities over others that are considered radically different (e.g. Haraway, 2004). Here, too, the contributions of the coloniality of power and of knowledge (inspired by, for example, Quijano, 2000) must be rescued. The foundations of development are a product of modernity, generating knowledge and sensibilities that have been built in a framework of power, subalternizing other knowledge and sensibilities.

Ontological openings allow us to approach other ways of understanding and feeling what is considered as the world in which we live (e.g. De la Cadena, 2014). This perspective permits us to make explicit the dynamics of the society–nature relation, a fundamental component of both conventional ways of thinking about development (which postulate a divide between society and nature) and alternative ways of thinking about development (which are not based on such a divide). Thus, the opening to other ontologies that lack this gap, such as the ones found in some indigenous cosmovisions, is a much-needed critical tool for zero-level analysis. For other understandings of the nature–society nexus, see the recent outstanding contributions from anthropology such as Descola (2012) and Viveiros de Castro (2004).

This toolkit for root analysis opens up enormous potential for a new generation of critical development studies. They are being applied in different places, and in several cases they are used directly from the social movements. All have the potential to promote alternatives that avoid falling back into the chiaroscuro of development.

References


