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Development Unlearned: (Un)Reading Development Literature Between-the-Lines

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Abstract

This piece of work focuses on examining how development is defined for what it is not based on selected literature in development studies. It maps out how literature in development studies frame the ideas related to the knowledge construction of development, its mixed meanings and multiple understandings. Analysis is generated in light of Peter Wagner's (2012) investigation of development under the lens of sensitivities to "multiple modernities" approach. This work argues that "multiple modernities" offers a grounded analysis of reading development literature that can continue further deliberations on development through selections of existing literature and situating these accounts to the intersection of changing dynamic in the international arena. Further, this work highlights the role of ambiguity as an underrated characteristic of development. This account is particularly relevant not only because it unpacks the meaning of development, but also because it situates its concerns under the current context of changing international politics. This task is an attempt to reconfigure ways of "societal self-understandings" (*Ibid.*) by taking into account the variety of conceptual transformations of development along intense political activities among institutions and social forces. It is hoped that this work can (re)spark discussions on development, its understandings and muted nuances.

Keywords: development, development studies, multiple modernities, societal self-understandings, social and historical discourse, ambiguity.

1. The necessity to re-read

That development is dying is far from a novel idea. The literature on development studies has been a provocative dominant intellectual affair in the decades after World War II. In the last decades, a large number of political theorists have explored the idea of alternatives to development, such as s Buen Vivir (Latin America), Degrowth (Europe) and Ecological Swaraj or Radical Ecological Democracy (India) (Kothari, Demaria & Acosta, 2014; c.f. Sachs, 1992; Ferguson, 1994; Escobar, 1995; Pieterse, 2001; Rapley, 2002; Latouche, 2007; Rist, 2008; Ziai, 2007, etc.). And development continues to occupy social research by laying down manifold accounts of thoughts, critiques and empirical experiences about development, presenting various blocs of discourses that defined how development is understood. Pressing concerns focus on criticizing developments consequences and seeking for alternative pathways for interpreting and appreciating history. However, in spite of the theoretical developments and richness of empirical accounts of development, these advancements warrant continuous reviews from different standpoints, lest there be another muted discussion overlooked.

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This work argues that there is a need to re-read development literature – but to re-read differently. Much development literature has been written and discussions are constant worldwide. Yet while a lot has been said about development's blemishes, more can still be said about the broader context that gives rise to such an enormous subject that took over the world. This work attempts to untangle on how the literature make sense of development is not as it is "committed to raising original problems in social and historical studies" (Alatas 2006: 82). In an era of questioning development's legitimacy as social goal, this work takes part of examining another side of development before the next spectacle takes over current conversations. Discussing the various opinions on development is only one side of the coin. To analyze a specific subject is one thing, to examine what it is not is another. Taking a closer look at what something is not is just as important as describing what it is. This work locates development literature as part of a transition to modernity and emerging "societal self-understanding" (see Wagner, 2012).

In hopes to contribute to development literature, this piece examines common threads on how development is read by development scholars. It reviews how development is studied under different frames. The accounts taken in this work are diverse and may inevitably be in opposition against each other. However there is a common theme among these materials: that the concept of development urges a rethinking of international aspirations and what it means to have both national and global goals.

2. Not a big D: Discourses and debates on the development project

Given that the exact theoretical origins of development studies are difficult to identify, it suffices to point out that the field needs a plurality of perspectives. And indeed, the idea of the universality of development has not gone uncontested within the ranks of development research. Before the consolidation of what are now known as the "emerging powers" (Foseca et al., 2016), discussions about the concept of development – both in the academe and international affairs – have sparked debates and critiques that transfigured how the term "development" has been understood. One of the most defining moments was the solidarity of Asian and African countries at the Bandung Conference in 1955 that marked the official cooperation among these countries with marginal global power (Kahin, 1956). The leaders of these countries met to identify and address the vital issues they share in common at that time. The developing nations' unity comes with an appeal to recompense the instability and adverse effects of the development projects in their local conditions. These debts of the development project pose a particular problem for poor countries trying to manage their institutions, environment, and people given the importance of natural resources have huge role in their people's daily lives. At the same time, the rising burden of debt servicing and the failure of new capital flows escalate environmental degradation occurring at the expense of long-term development (Ferguson, 1994; Latouche, 2007).

This revolution on the development discourse has been vindicated by various thoughts and ideas from authors – both academic and practitioners – in the field of international relations and global politics. International, regional and multi- and bilateral negotiations were conducted simultaneously, which eventually lead to a plethora of approaches concerning development. The issues discussed by the Asian and Africa countries were related to the different theoretical and political approaches on development – from historical perspectives, critique of the development project, deconstructivist, empirical researches to post-development thoughts and more purely academic stances to applied efforts at problematizing the development initiatives. For instance, Nederveen Pieterse (2001: 79) warns on a theoretical level that "each development theory can be read as a hegemony or challenge to hegemony". On a more pragmatic level, Sachs (1992) in his *Development Dictionary* suggests a demystified view on development and asks about many kind s of development, which he sees as fundamental to the equity issue of development. Some would also scrutinize the goals of development. Questioning the very goals of development such as longer

life expectancy and lower infant mortality, the two core goals, are hardly contested even by the keenest critics (Ziai, 2007). Latouche (2007) for one suggests a change of view(s) which seeks to look at development away from the virtues of unlimited economic growth. Here, Latouche challenges the assumption that economic growth – which is deeply associated to well-being, success, and happiness – is a primordial need to solve social ills.

Yet alongside the critic of development, are the once marginalized or colonized nations, which participate in the market-driven global economy. And now these countries have espoused development with its promises of economic growth and are gradually reaching better standards of living for at least a significant portions of their populations, who only a few years ago were very needy and off-track in an unrelenting underdevelopment. So herein comes the paradox of development, especially to the nations that gathered decades ago in Bandung as colonialism left their nations. Thus authors such as Ziai (2007) remark the importance of criticizing criticisms of development. As in the case of that post-development, it has "a lot of critical and constructive potential" and "needs to be further refined, explored and argued over" (*Ibid.*: 9). Ferguson (1994) on the other hand, argues for an attack from within, taking development not by dismissing it, but working within the already available discourses. As he notes, "[w]hat changes when we move from academic discourse to 'development' is not the library of available thoughts, but the institutional context" (*Ibid.*: 68). Development as an economic agenda has been challenged through refuting any implicitly accepted universal assumption about development. Some criticize how the discourse of development led it to be understood as an apolitical process (Ferguson, 1994), keeping in mind that discourses of development were born in specific contexts and are political. Indeed, while countries label themselves as "developed", the literature provides grounds that development is not an end point that some countries have already achieved.

3. Not a checklist but a kaleidoscope

The literature has engaged with the "normalization" of development as a universal goal, which has crept to various local and international policies (Ziai, 2007). Many authors have examined how development has been viewed as a universal goal with a bucket list of agenda and accomplishments to meet. As Sachs (1992: 4) expressed, "[development] allows any intervention to be sanctified in the name of a higher goal. Therefore even enemies feel united under the same banner". Indeed, along with the period of decolonization of the Third World, the 'universality of economics' (Esteva, 19, in Sachs, 1992) became a dominant 'truth' (*Ibid.*: 18), in which development and independence were often seen as inevitable pairs (Rapley, 2002). The appalling pressure of development as a goal stimulated solidarity among these nations and challenged "development" thinking. As development faced criticisms and disappointment, it began losing its credibility as a societal end-point (Latouche, 2007). The literature focused on the experiences of the developing nations and the costs of development. Indeed, Sachs (1992: 1) notes that the "[d]elusion and disappointment, failures and crimes have been the steady companions of development and they tell a common story: it did not work. Moreover, the historical conditions which catapulted the idea into prominence have vanished: development has become outdated. But above all, the hopes and desires which made the idea fly are now exhausted: development has grown obsolete". The preponderance of the idea that development is facing its demise has lead the international community to discuss if the ills of development can possibly be recompensed by the accountable parties. For instance, Nederveen Pieterse (2001) argue that African nations have suffered the most serious economic and environmental upheavals without sufficient and long-term support than what is currently offered. Latouche (2007) has also shown that participating to the world agenda of development has come with a heavy price – the scraping off the world's resources and the disintegration of the social institutions.

Reading and rethinking development in terms of local or national experiences is not valuable because these experiences are pleasant – rather, they are valuable by virtue of being a contribution on various pragmatic experiences of development. Much of the literature dwelt on various experiences of domination and repression exacerbated the already clumping detestation of the development projects (Ferguson, 1994). The weight of discussions and the remorse that comes with it are indeed enough to consolidate and aim for redirection of national goals, specific demands, and establishment of new priorities. One of the fruits of these reconsiderations is the expansion of discussions of the so-called second world and third worlds is already widespread. The steps towards global restructuring has been initiated that marks rethinking about differences between and among nations, for instance between 'South' and 'North' (Nederveen Pieterse, 2001). Each mishap of development in the developing world piled up and became another reason to refute the notion of any messianic attempt to attack "underdevelopment", and each consequence provided an opportunity to convey suspicion and uncertainty about any astounding claim of the development project.

4. Not an answer but a question with different incomparable logic

A lot has been written about disappointments against a predicted moment when humanity would advance, go off the scale and, in passing, abolish injustice and inequality. Now, with the disillusionment on development and humanity's struggle to sustain a common social goal, development left humanity with more questions with different layers. This is so if development is assumed to be an answer to humanity's ills. However, there is more to development than merely being the "right" or "wrong" direction as it is about questioning how it is understood. Questions on both the intellectual and practical merits of understanding development had been laid down by various authors and each question leads to more questions.

Development faced the world as a question on how to best examine history. The negotiations in the international level take a pernicious form when not only facts are discussed but also how best to form beliefs about those facts. The challenge is about how to assess development's consequences in reasonable ways. Once the structure of praising and criticizing development has been laid bare, it is as if there is no further argument that opposing sides can produce to convince the other because there is no method or procedure for conducting enquiry that could be agreed upon. As consciousness of development and its critique have grown, a new kind of inquiries and metaphors has entered the world. Development faced various points of contention from being a justification to penetrate nations in the name of a higher cause to normalizing the unexamined essentialism of both the development proponents and the "other". The criticisms about the concept, views and consequences of development were shared by the participants of the Bandung conference. And this sprawled an acceleration of account trying to review development (Nederveen Pieterse, 2001). For instance, those who sincerely deny the goals of development also dismiss the relevant methods and evidence used to measure development's practical legacies. Rather, the default is to question the authority of institutions that propose to boost development. Yet those who support the development project would emphasize its tangible results through both quantitative and qualitative data. Each side would insulated themselves from any evidence that would otherwise be rationally compelling for the other group. One can find similar patterns of either selective distrust or appraisal in accomplishment reports, say, on the safety of vaccines or genetically modified crops. As with so many events, development observers have thrown both hope and doubt on development while writing about it. After clever things were said, these competing accounts are suggestive of development as a question rather than an answer, that their frames and stories on development is far beyond asking about its success or failure. What is critical to note here is that however bleak a question is, it is this tantalising history in the concept of development itself that drives these questions onward, like an eternally beckoning light that seems so teasingly near yet is always out of reach.

5. Not a label but stories with multiple conclusions

Development is dramatised from various vantage points. It is not only critiques who have enjoyed retelling the development story. Development does not frustrate everyone. Each development story is not just another story about history: each is a qualitatively different kind of story told in a different frame. For instance, when making a country decision, development goals win out but sometimes these goals are foregone. It's important – even for decisions with implications that go far beyond simply achieving economic growth. But authors show that development is not everything. Often countries knowingly forego the choice that will give them the most economic growth for one that satisfies other ideals or factors that are important to their population.

Telling various stories of what counts and does not count as development also comes with variations in focus. There were stories on how poor countries realized and questioned the technocratic and hierarchical ideas in implementing the development project. For instance, non-Western countries are viewed as naturally inept, being termed as underdeveloped, lacking and deficient (Esteva, 7, in Sachs, 1992). But there are also stories that focus on the associated "backwardness" towards the underdeveloped countries as opposed to the "modern" image of developed countries. Nederveen-Pieterse (2001) argues that this unexamined essentialism and categorization produced a widespread self-criticism within developing nations. With different forms of *essentialisms* come various forms of inequality that became a theme of various discussion beyond the Bandung Conference. Further, the politics on power had been a dominant topic of deliberations. Ziai (2007) observed that whoever decides what "development" is and how it can be achieved were legitimized to have power over other nations. The developing countries had been venues of various development projects, which were not necessarily beneficial, especially in the long run. But since the late 1980s, the concept of development intervention to Africa, Asia, and Latin America has failed in the South (Sachs, 1992). And in spite of the seduction and promises of the development projects, evidence show that it ended up even leaving the poor nations in bigger risks and deeper poverty (Ferguson, 1994). Such contradictions have led many development scholars to argue that "the history of development merges with the history of the progressive destruction of self-reliance" (Rist, 2008: 125).

Furthermore, there are stories that unfold how mainstreaming development justified penetrating nations in the name of a higher cause is criticized by many scholars, noting that the seduction of development as a universal goal to which "underdeveloped" can be possibility ushered towards Truman's idea of "development"—an end goal (which the wealthy nations already achieved) (Rist, 2008). Esteva (1992: 17) shares this view, calling it 'development with colonisation' (quoted in Sachs, 1992). And the consequences of interventions in the name of development are still felt and constantly pile up "like a dead star whose light can still be seen, even though it went out for ever long ago" (Rist, 2008 p. 230). Needless to say, many countries were affected, both directly and indirectly, by the ills produced by the developed world especially when the debt crisis began and got exacerbated by the second oil shock in 1979 (Rapley, 2002). Latouche (2007) specifically focused on the implications on climate change, global warming, overpopulation and ecological destruction as long-term by-products of the choice to expand economically and to engage in development associated with Western nations historically. Rapley (2002) further observed that the pursuit of a steady growth is came with backlash of consequences such as high inflation. The consolidation of the developing nations opened an opportunity to re-imagine the world order. The Bandung conference became a moment when the world was positioned differently in various ways. These nations realized that "[a]lmost all of the nations mentioned have been, in some form or another, under the domination of Western Europe; some had been subjected for decades and others had been ruled for three hundred and fifty years" (Wright, 1956).

The challenge for authors, however, is to tell each story with a sense of common human identity and common human interest—otherwise people will divide on the basis of other identities.

Much has been said and done, the debates are here and there, the development champions and critiques shook hands and went off together for a well-earned supper. They were, after all, different stories with different frames.

6. Unreading and unlearning development: Ambiguity in the crossroads

Accounts on development can be categorized in terms of how well they deal with ambiguity. Some authors accept the limits of one's own blind spot in explaining development by understanding that there will always be things that cannot be cleanly parsed. Others become obsessed with ever-finer levels of categorization such as the binary categories of "developed-developing" and "donor-beneficiary". In dealing with these paradigms, we have to either face the fact that some realities elude categorical concepts, or blind ourselves to the inadequacy of the concepts. But to stay within the rigidities of categories is to miss out some aspects of development that deserve unpacking. To adopt Ezrahi's (2012: 7) thoughts, ambiguity is necessary to spark imagination as "the hidden sharper of politics". Similar to Ezrahi's (2012) view of politics, development became a monolithic practice that perpetuates particular interests or goals. This can be traced back to Enlightenment's influence of rigid distinctions between the knowledge produced through science from religion and arts (Funtowicz & Strand, 2007). While these distinctions have been contributory to the project of modernity, this blurred history's perception of the gift of ambiguity. The hegemonic Enlightenment-influenced way of looking at development tones down voices of resistance against the dominant discourse. However, the clear-cut dichotomies that the Enlightenment strove for was no longer adequate to the task of understanding contemporary development (Wagner, 2015).

Discourse directs thought and can be used as viable means of tracking observable change in mindset. But while there is widespread recognition of the role discourse that plays in the realm of politics, less appreciated is the fact that discourse can also be used to tone down the intensity of a particular notion towards the degree of ambiguity. Development is dominantly packaged in the discourse of economic growth and human life improvement. This reveals hegemonic patterns of thought of what development is more or less about. To use the previous example of HDI, development is directed towards education, standards of living and life expectancy – placing less stress on different aspects of life like mental health and community participation. Regardless of which indicators were included, this method suggests a fixed way of evaluating development, which faces the caveat of a hegemonic and pretentious evaluation.

To maintain the fluidity of the development discourse is not the prerogative of states alone. Rather, the development discourse is consciously or unconsciously defined and constructed by the large international community. The challenge is that the power to push the boundaries of development in the political arena can be restricted to certain groups and individuals. Hence, it is important to have a conscious attention to both nuanced language and diversity of political players to balance each other, for an eventual downplayed version of development. This means to recognize competing rationalities, subjective experiences and varying vantage points. To borrow Rosanvallon's (2008) idea on democracy, it is important to maintain checks and balances between and among nations, states and non-states, individuals and groups, leaders and citizens. A conscious effort to gather a wide range of alternative understandings, and alternative terms of development – especially those who dismiss development – opens up opportunities to reflect for a downplayed version of development. Accommodating multi-players with varied discursive strategies to development facilitates a re-imagined development.

However, to say that development is discursively constructed and ambiguous does not mean that it is a superficial experience. Rather, discourse on development provides the compass by which development can be re-interpreted. The diversity of interpretation about development is a reminder of its distorted and complicated character. Allowing this ambiguous character of

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development provides weaker interpretations to gain traction as they resonate with pragmatic experience. For instance, the "success" narratives of the development project can only go so far if we consider various alternatives to development. When states claim improvement in economic growth marked by objective economic indicators, these can straightforwardly be invalidated by everyday miseries citizens experience, whether it is about preventable causes of infant mortality, or high levels of inequality in education. The disparities of experiences under the development project are demonstrations of how development's tangible character collapses and gives rise to another. An ambiguous development, therefore, is comprised of contested narratives through time.

7. Conclusion: Fragments of change in-between

The literature reflects that development contains liminal confusions, and that such ambiguity can be dismissed as hindrance to understanding. Indeed, anything that does not parse neatly in a given framework can become a source of anxiety to a world that speaks development's language. It is indeed a challenge to ponder over what humanity dismissed as unthinkable and to expand outside the margins of current thoughts about development. The challenge is to outgrow the idea that there is a clear and few legitimate narratives of development. Different narratives took several iterations – some of them were retold from different perspectives, and some are fragmented accounts that can help us reshape development. Either way, considering all these patchwork accounts is where ambiguity takes relevance. The next task then is to open a space for ambiguous range of thoughts that serve as a resource to leverage this energy to a broader public. And this quest continues as there are various ways of interpreting development, and even more ways of considering what else have been not thought of.

Development has become such a storehouse of global power and change that modern man has become intimidated by its multiplicities. Perhaps what we are encountering here is not so much the edge of theory, but the limits of the ways we theorize and interpret development as a lens. Perhaps development cannot explain itself anymore. While the literature on development studies has been engaged in vibrant theoretical debates, these are yet to be translated to sustained discussions on the current context. The silence of "smaller" views on development may be not so much a reflection of neglect but of the limited ways of what counts as development. The framings on development in this work are by no mean complete. Indeed, there are more issues that warrant close investigation. As Wagner (2015: 107) claims, "it is *possible* to understand the present as a plurality of ways of re-interpreting modernity" and hence development. The challenge therefore is to have both a critical take on the existing accounts of development and conscious effort to search for new ways of discussing these themes away from any dogmatic and static traditions. Needless to say, the above text is a derivative of contemporary thoughts, which are also vacuumed in a given space and time. This prose is not designed to be another manual that claims the right path on understanding development. Rather, it locates itself in the richness of many possibilities of looking at development. With this consideration, this text finds its relevance as a contribution to capture the multidimensionality of development along the lines of many more accounts on development studies.

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