



Book Review: Escobar, A. 1995. *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

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“... one could criticize a given approach and propose modifications or improvements accordingly, but the fact of development itself, and the need for it, could not be doubted. Development had achieved the status of a certainty in the social imaginary... Reality, in sum, had been colonized by the development discourse, and those who were dissatisfied with this state of affairs had to struggle for bits and pieces of freedom within it, in the hope that in the process a different reality could be constructed.”

“To sum up, I propose to speak of development as a historically singular experience, the creation of a domain of thought and action, by analyzing the characteristics and interrelations of the three axes that define it: the forms of knowledge that refer to it and through which it comes into being and is elaborated into objects, concepts, theories, and the like; the system of power that regulates its practice; and the forms of subjectivity fostered by this discourse, those through which people come to recognize themselves as developed or underdeveloped. The ensemble of forms found along these axes constitutes development as a discursive formation, giving rise to an efficient apparatus that systematically relates forms of knowledge and techniques of power.”

Nearly 30 years since Arturo Escobar’s (1995) *Encountering Development* was introduced to the literary world, the book continues to provide insights to readers on the critique of development, the possibilities of a pluriversal world, and the fight for alternative epistemologies and ways of life. Essentially a critique on modern (Western, that is) development, for which he sees as discourse, Escobar does a detailed exploration of how ‘development’ processes are created and re-produced across multiple sections of life, and are weaved together to form what is a cosmic web of a particular way of knowing, living, and progressing.

Throughout the book, Escobar has one intent in mind: to rip apart the social imaginary that is ‘development’ – to analyse the triumvirate of knowledge, subjectivity, and power. He pinpoints the emergence of development in the South to the dominance of global institutions such as the United Nations and the World Bank, in their influence over the Third World. Particularly, he is very much focused on the institutional structuring of development processes; Escobar’s analyses demonstrate how institutions, first global then local, play a major part in dictating the guidelines and operating definitions, as well as the mechanisms of what ‘development’ is and



is meant to do. That is, how institutions co-create, consolidate, and reproduce the Third World's understanding of reality, the system of knowledge for comprehending this new reality, and the societies' values towards this reality. And such a way, he argues, is how an abstract word called 'development' is provided with shape, material, and value.

The emphasis, of course, is on how the fundamental bases of developmental programmes such as poverty eradication, food and nutrition, environmental protection, and public health improvement are conceptualisations of the development paradigm, and not given facts. Terms like poverty, malnutrition and hunger, and public health came to be associated with what development encompassed and what the developed world was not. They became the parameters of the development of a state, and their eradication was justification for state development and modern progress. To be developed was to not be poor, to be food- and nutrition-sufficient, and to be disease-free. Of course, everyone deserves better – to have the capacity to lead a good and fulfilling life, and what Escobar opposed was rather the singularity of the pathway available towards it.

He highlights three key inter-linked aspects applied in the modern era that allows for the uptake of the singular Western model of development: economics/capital, science/technology and knowledge. These aspects can be understood as follows: particular forms of knowledge crafted specifically to the needs of development and the science behind it, science and technology as the mechanism that objectifies the person and makes her impersonal as well as measurable, and money for circulation to keep everything running and glued together – and immersed within these three aspects is the influence of institutions and their structures. As Foucault (1990) succinctly puts it, power is everywhere. Escobar takes Foucault's idea of the pervasiveness and invisibility of power that comes with the authority of institutions, and demonstrates how it steers a society into accepting (by force, or willingly) the development model. Consequently, old worlds are displaced or completely replaced.

In some sense, development is a cultural space; 'to develop' is to usher in a new way of seeing reality, of knowing this reality, and to act and live within it. Doing so, then, edges out previous modes of living and knowing – making them obsolete and incompatible with the more modern scientific era. It is precisely the denigration of local or indigenous cultures that forms the other side of Escobar's critique on modern development.

If the development discourse "... has been the central and most ubiquitous operator of the politics of representation and identity", then it has surpassed and taken over local cultures, systems of beliefs, and alternative modes of knowing, experiencing, and connecting with the world. Because development brings with it a specific way of knowing and talking about certain things, it is also a reflection of what is not known and what is not allowed to be spoken of. Knowledge for development is constructed for development experts, rather than for the people that truly matter. As facts become external to the knower and exist independently of her, the reality in which she is a part of is reduced to a feature or trait that can be examined, measured, and written in reports. In Escobar's words, knowledge is bureaucratized and the real-life experiences of the people do not matter much anymore; what is happening in the field and continuously experienced by them do not reach the eyes and ears of the experts for a version of it has been carefully crafted, catalogued and archived in labels, numbers, graphs and written analyses.



Thus, violence is engendered – it is the silencing of the voices of the people via a regime of representation that is generated by the development discourse. There is an irony at play here: the development project is intended to help the people most in need, but it is the very instance of making sense of the experiences of the people through objectification by the development experts that obscure the former. Where terms such as poverty and hunger are used to describe a people, the associated measures, labels, and numbers that are formed from observations and data collection transform and mute what is known and experienced by them. As a result, papers are published and policies are written, but what is known about the people through these means does not correspond to their actual experiences. And in the end, much is known about the people, but much is also not known about them. This is not to say that what is obtained and learned is not the truth nor wrong on its own, but rather a different version of truth and reality is being proffered and provided for by the specific tools used within the discourse of development.

Of note here is not merely the ignorance of the shared experiences as well as the knowledge that comes with them, but also of the effacing of a way of living, a mode of practice, and perhaps to a certain extent, a purpose in life. To Escobar, the development of capitalist regimes in communities of the Third World is no different from the struggle over representation and cultural affirmation. Capitalist regimes “*undermine the reproduction of socially valued forms of identity; by destroying existing cultural practices, development projects destroy elements necessary for cultural affirmation*”. Development projects warped perceptions of the intended ‘target’ communities, rendering them ahistorical, objective and material, and devoid of meanings to which the communities can relate. As it is, there is little space for cultural tradition nor a sense of continuity of identity within development, for new representations of identity are created – ones that speak not of the living experiences of the people, but rather that of a clear-cut labelled social category.

Of course, Escobar is not all grey and pessimistic: not all ‘traditional cultures’ are drowned by the wave of development, and many do find ways to resist, co-exist and engage with modernity. Cultures do not simply leap from backwardness to become modern societies – despite this being the intention of development itself. There was never an either-or situation; hybrid situations are formed through the engagements between the development paradigm and local cultures. Modernity is not to be accepted as it is; rather, its intrusion into the lifeworlds of the people is to be read as a complex multiplicity of clashes and resistance where there are possibilities and hope for a different vision of the world. Indeed, simple binary terms that describe the ‘traditional’ and the ‘modern’, the ‘rural’ and the ‘developed’ no longer suffice. Meanings, then, “*have to be read with new senses, tools, and theories*”, and alternatives are to be generated.

“*Hybridity entails a cultural (re)creation that may or may not be (re)inscribed into hegemonic constellations*”. In this moment of uncertainty and change, there is space for new forms of seeing, apprehending, and becoming – a space for new narratives, ones which are not encumbered by existing paradigms and concepts. It is thus time to reconsider our usage of the present terminologies, theories and models, and more importantly, our dependence on the singular notion of development. Knowledge systems would not necessarily be centralised and of single origin but would rather be dispersed across networks of relations whereby encounters of various knowledge systems are not only common but encouraged. Along with knowledge, so too are differential modes of living as well as practices of being and becoming challenging



one another to create new hybridities and alternatives. Change is the new constant – of continuous formation and becoming – which implies that knowledge, experience, and practices of knowing and living are never singular in essence, nor immutable over time.

Justice, then, is to be fought and sought after precisely through these cracks within modern development; the fight for epistemological justice is necessarily linked to the fight to practice and live one's cultural traditions, to learn and dispense 'cultural' knowledge (for lack of a better word), alongside with other knowledge forms and practices, including that of modern knowledge. Put in another way, the fight for justice is a fight for freedom – in this context, freedom to development. If, invoking Sen (1999), freedom is the end and also a means to development, can we then turn it around and ask whether we can have the freedom to choose the kind of development that we want? Where development cannot be separated from the living experiences of the people, to have the freedom to develop and to develop to increase a growing number of freedoms require not just passive acceptance of a particular development mechanism, but also the capacity to exercise choice in determining and selecting such mechanism. It involves for one, the availability of development interventions that do not negate the values of the people nor endanger their exercise of freedoms, and for another, conscious effort from the people to recognise and stand for their own ways and practices.

To Escobar, the persistence of cultural difference is the basis for resistance in which cultural clashes create a conducive environment for "*possibilities for transforming the politics of representation, that is, for transforming social life itself*". He regards the very action of continuing cultural and local traditions in the face of hegemonic devices of modern development a proof of the non-singularity of development despite its hegemony, and a vision of hope for the articulation of new radical identities – transient and transcendental – beyond existing frameworks and models. There is thus hope for a restructuring of the "*political economies of truth*" – a strategic move away from existing Western thoughts and ideas, towards a heterogeneity of meaning-making and the production of differential subjectivities. These differential subjectivities are legitimate and could easily be further explained were Escobar to frame his problematisation using the epistemology-ontology-methodology trilogy. His approach is obviously epistemological in that he has been attempting to formulate a theory of knowledge about development, cutting across various fields of knowledge when he mentions "political economies" while simultaneously articulating it with ontology when he adds the term "truth". In this case, the 'truth' is that development is ontologically an economics construct. This teleological construct is attained through a paved process measured by specific econometrics (GDP per capita, rate of industrialisation, rate of progress in education, etc.) – which, in actual fact, constitute the methodology. What connects methodology and ontology is the concept of power that Escobar, quoting Foucault, locates everywhere – referring, in turn, to the funding agencies that finance development and measure its progress using indicators that have been set by Western elites. Escobar's treatise might have gained greater conceptual clarification, would he have posited the status of the knowledge he had been discoursing about.

In effect, Escobar has already reached his conclusions – open as they may be – on the problem of modern development when he calls for visions for an alternative world (or even alternative worlds). He posits that what is needed beyond modernity and Western development is the perseverance and evolution of local practices and traditions to meet and engage with the former. Such encounters offer insights into possibilities for a different outcome in how societies can progress, without having to fully follow the course of Western development – however, this is



not so much explored in the book itself, but is subsequently developed in his later writings. Thus said, *Encountering Development*, while clear in its articulation of its main theme as a critique of development, is perhaps best read along with his work on the “pluriverse” – a notion which Escobar employs to refer to a world of pluralities in which multiple modes of existence, reality and living exist, of which plural ways of knowing, being and becoming prevail over modern mechanisms. *Encountering Development*, then, is less of an end but rather a beginning of an exploration, a journey into the plurality of worlds in this modern age. And while one cannot disagree with Escobar’s view on a cultural project that acknowledges and incorporates peoples’ living experience, accumulated knowledge and cultural heritage in the construction of an alternative concept of development, his proposition remains anchored in the realm of philosophical epistemology, without venturing across the boundaries of ontology and methodology: therefore, not yet a manifesto.

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