

A Post-Structuralist Agenda for Development?

Written by Trevor Parfitt

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TREVOR PARFITT, APR 10 2012

When I accepted the request to write a piece on the implications of post-structuralism for development I accepted with some temerity because post-structuralism represents a huge and diverse body of theory as does development. Rather than attempting to provide a comprehensive account of this issue I shall briefly survey the aspects of post-structuralism that have influenced development analysis and then identify how various theoretical trends have emerged from this cross-fertilisation.

Whilst there are significant differences between post-modernism and post-structuralism, the terms are often used interchangeably given that they hold many ideas in common[i]. The term post-structuralism will normally be used in this paper given that 'post-modernism' seems to be falling out of use. However, one of the first definitions of this body of thought was given by Jean-Francois Lyotard when he referred to the "postmodern" as "incredulity towards meta-narratives"[ii]. By meta-narratives he meant grand theory which attempts to provide a total explanation of human history and development. Examples of developmental grand theory might include Rostow's stages of growth theory, which explains development as an inevitable progress towards capitalism in the American style, and Marxian development theories that depict development as an inevitable progress towards communism. Lyotard's objection to meta-theory was that it made universal claims to truth that repressed the claims of other accounts. It can be seen how Rostovian stage theory excludes the claims of Marxism and vice versa.

Foucault and Discourse Theory

The post-structuralist interest in discourse theory is related to this critique of meta-theories. Discourse theory is mainly associated with the work of Michel Foucault and focuses on the role of power in the creation of knowledge. Foucault contended that power and knowledge are inextricably interlinked, arguing that:

Power and knowledge directly imply one another...there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations.[iii]

The field, or body of knowledge constituted by a power relation is termed a discourse. To the extent that discourse, or theory (including meta-theories), is a function of power, this implies that any discourse is likely to reflect the interests of those that hold power within the terms of that discourse (e.g. the bourgeoisie are the power holders within capitalist discourse) and to exclude the interests of those who explicitly or implicitly oppose them. Foucault used to develop genealogies or histories of how particular discourses arose[iv]. His work has influenced a number of analysts who examine development discourse as a meta-narrative, sometimes outlining genealogies of how development has emerged as an imposition of power by Western agencies over the peoples of the South.

Foucault also propounded such influential concepts as governmentality and bio-politics. His analysis of bio-politics suggests that scientific and technological progress have transformed sovereign power so that it has new capabilities to regulate and organise its subjects in such a way as to maximise their efficiency. This involves 'the emergence in the field of political practices and economic observation, of the problems of birth rate, longevity, public health, housing, and migration'[v]. Supervision of the population 'was effected through an entire series of interventions and regulatory controls: a bio-politics of the population'[vi]. For Foucault the growth of state institutions of power tasked with regulation and organisation of the general populace and with disciplining of the individual marks the emergence

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of bio-politics. Governmentality invokes the power of discourse which induces subjects to internalise the principles of the discourse in question and act in accordance with them. It might be argued that Western development interventions such as those designed to integrate Southern producers into global capitalist markets are exercises in bio-political governance that endeavour to inculcate market discourse into farmers and subject them to market institutions in order to optimise their productivity.

Development as Orientalism and Meta-Discourse

Whilst the above themes by no means exhaust the content of post-structuralism it would probably be fair to say that they are the themes that have had most influence on development analysis and on setting any potential development agenda. We shall briefly survey how they have influenced various strands of development thinking. Firstly, we may note that Foucauldian discourse theory was a major influence on Edward Said's analysis of how Western imperial discourses classified the colonised peoples of the South (and the area termed the Orient in particular) as other and inferior – 'they' were irrational, sensual, superstitious and lazy compared with scientific, logical and industrious European colonisers[vii]. This racially inflected discourse infantilises the Southern other and provides legitimation for European rulership and for continued intervention in the post-colonial era to set right the discursively perceived political and economic errors of incompetent Southern regimes. Said's book, *Orientalism*, has been very influential in Post-Colonial Studies, itself a wide body of analysis characterised by a view that much (if not all) Western intervention in the South is coloured by a discursive imposition of power.

Many analysts have examined development as a meta-discourse through which Western power is enforced over the South. Amongst the first such analysts were Wolfgang Sachs and Arturo Escobar. Escobar explicitly uses discourse theory to argue that development should be viewed 'not [as] a natural process of knowledge that gradually uncovered problems and dealt with them', but rather 'as a historical construct that provides a space in which poor countries are known, specified, and intervened upon'[viii]. Thus, development discourse constitutes the problems (such as poverty) that it purports to analyse and solve. Indeed, rather than solving problems it makes things worse through subjecting Southern peoples to Western power. Escobar asserts that 'instead of the kingdom of abundance promised by theorists and politicians in the 1950s, the discourse and strategy of development produced its opposite: massive underdevelopment and impoverishment, untold exploitation and oppression'[ix]. Sachs is just as condemnatory arguing that:

Delusion and disappointment, failures and crimes have been the steady companions of development and they tell a common story: it did not work.[x]

Cowen and Shenton developed a genealogy of development that traced its discursive origins to the nineteenth century, arguing that a central characteristic of development discourse is its attribution of a position of trusteeship to the developer. They define trusteeship as 'the intent which is expressed by one source of agency, to develop the capacities of another'[xi]. Cowen and Shenton object to trusteeship as it constitutes a claim to the power to define development without acknowledging any accountability for ill effects attributable to resulting development interventions.

It is hardly surprising that such critiques of development discourse tend to lead to an agenda based on the abandonment of development. A group of analysts emerged who advocated a post-development agenda. Analysts such as Esteva and Prakash and Rahnema and Bawtree argue that the meta-narrative of development imposed by Western dominated agencies (e.g. the World Bank and IMF) and governments should be abandoned. Instead Southern progress should be based on the variegated agendas emerging from movements based at the grass roots in the South, examples of which might include the Zapatistas of the Chiapas region of Mexico, the Self-Employed Women's Association in India and Slum/Shack Dwellers International amongst many more. This post-development approach would be suggestive of an agenda that does not take the form of a master theory advocated by the West. Rather it would be based on a variety of different projects promulgated by various communities and groups from the Southern grass roots with the objective of enhancing their own well-being however they might define it[xii]. A problem for this strategy is that its advocates wish to exclude certain Southern projects, such as Peru's Shining Path movement and radical Islamist groups, but they do not offer any clear explanation for such exclusions[xiii].

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Development as Governmentality

Yet another strand of post-structurally influenced development analysis focuses on development as an imposition of governmentality. The level of analysis can vary, with some focusing on the role of governmentality in reinforcing state power over local communities, others on its role in extending the power of development agencies, yet others on its role in enhancing Western dominance over the South, or on some combination of the foregoing. James Ferguson examines the governmental effects of development projects, focusing on the Thaba-Tseka Development Project in Lesotho. His analysis clearly shows how the project succeeded in enhancing state presence and control in the Thaba-Tseka Region despite the fact that it failed in achieving its planned targets[xiv]. More recently, Mark Duffield has mobilised bio-politics to examine the securitisation of development, characterising Western development strategies as a bio-political enterprise designed to reduce Southern poverty, which is seen as a threat to Western state security due to its tendency to induce the poor to move (often to the West) and to render them vulnerable to radicalisation[xv].

The work of David Mosse throws interesting light on the use of discourse and governmentality in development projects. Mosse worked as an anthropological consultant on a flagship UK sponsored participatory project in India and later published a book on his experiences. Amongst his findings were that project commitments to participatory targets were compromised in the face of political and other exigencies in the field and that an official technically oriented discourse was used to obfuscate such apparent failures. His book evoked a particularly strong reaction from several of the agencies involved in the project, which attempted to enforce revisions and threatened Mosse with legal action[xvi]. Although they failed to change Mosse's book these events might be taken as indicating the unreceptiveness of development agencies to critique and the lengths they will resort to in order to stifle it.

Another interesting outcome of this episode was that it prompted Mosse to the realisation that his account of the project represented discourse (in his case an anthropological discourse) just as much as that of the agencies. This is an insight that seems to have escaped many post-development analysts, although it follows from Foucault's account of discourse that all knowledge implies the influence of power relations. Consequently the criticisms of post-development analysts have no greater claim to veracity than the theories that they critique – they merely represent a different configuration of power relations rather than the unvarnished truth.

A Deconstructive Approach

The present author has tried to solve this problem by reference to the deconstructive theory of Jacques Derrida. Deconstructive philosophy has strong associations with linguistic theory but can be taken as having general analytical relevance. The following is a greatly simplified account, but it conveys some of the essential insights of deconstruction. Derrida proposes that in formulating a body of knowledge (what Foucault terms a discourse) analysts invariably leave out some relevant factors that could have led to different conclusions had they been taken into account. These founding omissions may be due to the ideological or value predispositions of the analyst, or due to simple oversight. However, their relevance means that the body of knowledge that has been based on their exclusion is necessarily imperfect. A close reading of the texts based on such knowledge can reveal what Derrida terms the trace of the omitted material. For example, Derrida points out that law is generally presented as an unimpeachable arbiter of what is legally right and wrong in society. However, what is usually concealed is that many systems of law are founded on an initial act of illegal violence, as in the American Revolution, when British colonial law was overthrown by rebellion in order to establish American government and law. This concealment is the trace that reveals the founding exclusion in the formation of the discourse under analysis.

Such omissions represent a form of discursive violence. Derrida goes on to argue that such violence is maximised when an imperfect body of knowledge is taken as absolute truth, thus permanently excluding its founding omissions. For example, the US claim to be democratic was imperfect as long as slavery existed and denial of this omission by certain groups (e.g. slave-owners) helped create the conditions for civil war. This indicates that the best way to minimise such violence is to resist the closure of a field of knowledge in the sense of declaring it absolute or perfect and to remain open to its revision to include previous omissions. Such a stance has a direct political relevance in that it would imply resistance of those powers that wish to resist such inclusions, for example those who wished not to

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revise the American Constitution to abolish slavery.[xvii]

What implications does this have for development? Firstly, it helps solve the problem that was raised by reference to Mosse's work, that of which account to trust. No discourse can be accepted as perfect truth and so the most trustworthy account is that which remains open to revision so that its exclusions can be incorporated. This would indicate that we should be mistrustful of positivistic approaches to development, which claim to be unimpeachable because they are scientific. A prime example of such a discourse would be the market fundamentalism associated with such organisations as the World Bank and the World Trade Organisation.

Secondly, a position in favour of minimising discursive violence is suggestive of an agenda in which development should not take the form of imposition of a meta-theory, whether of Euro-American or other origins. There are many different groups and communities at the Southern grass roots, as indeed there are at the Northern grass roots. A development strategy that minimises violence should enable such groups to develop their own strategies for progress with the proviso that they should not themselves engage in projects that inflict violence on others. In other words, this deconstructive approach is similar to the agenda propounded by post-development analysts, but if anything it is more inclusive. It allows for the recognition that there may be a role for development in what is traditionally thought of as the developed Northern states. For example, it would support the Oxfam initiative of the 1990s to start projects in the United Kingdom in recognition of the fact that there are deprived groups in Britain that can be seen as needing development[xviii]. The deconstructive approach is also better able than the post-development theorists to explain why it is necessary to omit some groups. Organisations such as The Shining Path and Al Qaeda should not be regarded as developmental due to their extreme discursive and actual violence.

Thirdly, the deconstructive approach is also indicative that there is no single perfect end state of development as is suggested by meta-theories such as that of Rostow. All developmental discourses entail their founding omissions and are therefore subject to revision. This implies that development should be considered as a continual process of improvement rather than as a final goal.[xix]

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[i] For example, both post-modernism and post-structuralism entail a suspicion of empiricist accounts of the world, which hold that truthful, reliable knowledge can be directly attained through observation and empirical measurement. They would hold that our observations of the world are mediated to us through our perceptions and cultural, ideological and value predispositions. This can result in different people/groups giving different accounts of the same phenomena. Where post-modernism and post-structuralism tend to differ is that post-modernists would be more likely to take a relativist view, arguing that each account is equally valid or invalid, whereas post-structuralists are more likely to argue that some sort of discrimination as to the validity of such accounts is possible on the basis of critical analysis.

[ii] Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Post-Modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, p.xxiv.

[iii] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan, New York: Vintage, 1979, p.27.

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[iv] See for example, Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*, trans. Alan Sheridan, New York: Vintage, 1973 as well as *Discipline and Punish*.

[v] Michel Foucault, 'Right of Death and Power over Life' in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow, New York: Pantheon, 1984, p.262.

[vi] *Ibid*, p.262, italics in original.

[vii] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Vintage, 1979.

[viii] Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995, pp.44-5.

[ix] *Ibid*, p.4.

[x] Wolfgang Sachs, *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power*, London: Zed Press, 1992, p.1.

[xi] M.P.Cowen and R.W. Shenton, *Doctrines of Development*, London: Routledge, 1996, pp.ix-x. For a more recent treatment of the genealogy of development that takes account of radical tendencies see Uma Kothari (ed) *A Radical History of Development Studies: Individuals, Institutions, Ideologies*, London: Zed Books, 2005.

[xii] For this line of thought see Gustavo Esteva and Madhu Suri Prakash, *Grassroots Post-Modernism: Remaking the Soil of Cultures*, London: Zed Books, 1998 and the authors represented in Majid Rahnema and Victoria Bawtree (eds) *The Post Development Reader*, London: Zed Books, 1997, as well as Sachs, *The Development Dictionary*.

[xiii] See Esteva and Prakash, 1998, p.3 and p.186.

[xiv] James Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine: 'Development', Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994.

[xv] Mark Duffield, *Development, Security and Unending War: Governing the World of Peoples*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007.

[xvi] David Mosse, *Cultivating development: an ethnography of aid policy and practice*, London: Pluto Press, 2005 and D. Mosse, 'Anti-social anthropology? Objectivity, objection, and the ethnography of public policy and professional communities', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (N.S.)* 12, 935-956, 2006.

[xvii] For a fuller understanding of deconstruction see the following books all by Jacques Derrida: *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976; *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978;

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Dissemination, trans. Barbara Johnson, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981; *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, London: Routledge, 1984; *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins, London: Verso, 1997. One of the clearest explications of deconstruction is in Richard Beardsworth, *Derrida and the Political*, London: Routledge, 1996.

[xviii] I am grateful to my friend and colleague Susannah Pickering-Saqqa for sharing her research on Oxfam's United Kingdom Poverty Programme with me.

[xix] For a fuller explanation of a deconstructive approach to development see Trevor Parfitt, *The End of Development? Modernity, Post-Modernity, and Development*, London: Pluto Press, 2002.