Postcolonialism, Power, and 'the Poor': What Will Eliminate Global Poverty?

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Until recently, dominant global states blindly pushed neoliberalism: a belief that market deregulation reduces global poverty understood as economic 'inequality'. By the 1990s, general disappointment led international institutions to compliment top-down, universal beliefs in deregulation with bottom-up participation. In 1999, the World Bank and International Monetary Fund introduced Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) that focused development funding on organisations that operationalise local participation and ownership. Yet, minimal success with both top-down and bottom-up approaches leaves experts searching for missing ingredients. Emerging views, like 'inclusive liberalism' (Craig and Porter, 2006) and 'postneoliberalism' (Bebbington and Bebbington, 2010), combine the best and avoid the worst of both general approaches.

Part of the solution requires adopting a postcolonial lens. Fundamentally, broad development remains elusive because it fails to challenge the rules of the global 'game'. Rules enforced by neoliberal interests cannot accommodate more adequate forms of poverty definition and reduction.

In societies divided by antagonistic principles of legitimacy, democracy cannot cordon off its own values and institutions from contestation without opening itself up to claims of arbitrariness and violence. In these situations, politics will need to be played out at two levels: first, within the confines of the democratic game and secondly, at the level of the constitutional principles of the game itself. (Muldoon, 2008: 117).

Though Muldoon studies state-level politics, the idea that politics is carried out at two levels applies, *mutandis mutandis*, globally. Even 'inclusive liberalism' and its cousins operate within existing rules. They "maintain the asymmetries in the international economic order and, therefore, the hegemony of the Northern states who underwrite the rules of multilateral engagement" (Tan, 2011: 1045).

More fruitful approaches focus more on politics' second level: (1) *constitutional change*. That the game's rules must also change becomes the foundational of three additional concepts used to consider postcolonialism's strengths and limits in tackling global poverty. The others show that (2) international development can be seen through (at least) two difficult-to-reconcile epistemes (or paradigms) that (3) have unequal power, which (4) creates tension between ideas and action for those requiring assistance. This lends itself to the postcolonial critique of international development discussed in the first part. The second considers the case of poverty, focusing on how it is defined and by whom. The conclusion suggests that, while postcolonialism struggles to put ideas into practice, it provides the clearest way of tackling poverty once and for all. The ongoing battle against poverty, in other words, reflects *a lack* of postcolonial thought in the world.

Postcolonialism, Power, and Ideas

Postcolonialism seeks to emancipate those living under colonial oppression, give them voice, and challenge discourses and structures that maintain its power (Larsen, 2000). It does not suggest a clear break from a colonial

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past, but "names and examines the issues that emerge from the exploitative relations of colonialist practices and colonial relations" (Tesoriero and Ife, 2006). Self-critical and *anti*-colonial, it challenges dichotomies of us/them, then/now, and here/there. The past exists within the present, the colonizer within the colonized, and so on (Hall, 1996). Colonisation's impacts cannot simply be reversed. The section begins with three themes common to the postcolonial critique of development (discourse and representation, context, and structure) followed by common criticisms. It concludes with the final three concepts mentioned at the outset — concepts that explain why postcolonialism is a necessary approach to development despite challenges.

Discourse/Representation. Postcolonialism deconstructs development discourses because they are "unconsciously ethnocentric, rooted in European cultures and reflective of a dominant western world-view" (McEwan, 2001: 94). Powerful international actors define and evaluate development, impacting actions taken and conclusions reached. "The choice of social theory … will determine what practical actions may be taken. In turn, the sorts of actions selected determine who is authorized to act, who shall wield power, and, consequently, who shall not" (Yapa, 1996: 719). The powerful use various strategies to fix meanings as 'truths'. Wale and Foster (2007) discuss mutually reinforcing strategies that ground power imbalance: *legitimisation* uses normative justification, *dissimulation* hides or masks it, and *reification* claims that it is natural. Even popular academics like Rawls blames the poor for their poverty, glossing over the power imbalance (St. Clair, 2006). Objecting, Wood (2003: 456) states that they are "unable to control future events because others have control over them." Other examples include the idea that colonisation is over (Wale and Foster 2007) or that the developed are progressive, rational, caring, and good while the developing are needy, backward, and helpless (Yapa, 1996). Such discourses steal the ability to self-represent away from the 'subjects' of development, homogenising their needs. They reject the idea that there are many paths to development informed by different local experiences (McEwan, 2001).

Context raises the importance of bringing context back into discussions of development. Reification, for instance, ignores historical context, presenting neoliberal development as universal. The past nevertheless informs the present and therefore also inform development in part because "there is no just way in which the oppressive past … can be quarantined from its present, and then transformed to build a progressive future" (Shrestha, 1997: 711). Context also combines with (mis)representation whereby discourses punish and reward certain players based on their status in a given area. For instance, global environmental regimes shed light on problems that disproportionately shame developing countries for lack of pollution controls (Tan 2011). It is not difficult to imagine other areas where the existing context becomes a weapon against developing states.

Structure challenges the presumed neutrality of global constitutional rules. Postcolonialists argue that developing countries must regain an ethical space to promote alternative conceptions of equality that value other choices concerning the organization of material life (Da Costa and McMichael, 2007). Existing financial and trade regulations place some into a poverty trap. As McEwan (2003: 95) states, "the 'Third World' is integral to what the west refers to as 'modernity' and 'progress'. It contributes directly to the economic wealth of western countries through its labour and through its exploitation." This understanding leads Matthews (2008: 1045) to say that "if we are to change the relations between the more and less privileged, we need to change the privileged too: we need to change the way in which the more privileged regard their own privilege and the poverty of others." Avoiding a development *relationship* of dependency means respecting everyone's right to decide free from domination. Thus, a lack of development cannot be pinned solely on states themselves because redistributive justice primarily at the national level and not the international level. Yet, poverty is more closely tied to the international structure. Playing within the existing rules of the game does not yield any real results as long as these structure endure.

Postcolonialism faces several challenges, some of which it struggles to recover from. Some claim that elites drive the process detached from the people it aims to emancipate. Westerners again claim to solve the "perpetual exclusion of the colonized and oppressed" (McEwan, 2001: 102). This perception leads to a criticism of the academic content, which many feel lacks a implementable alternative to the existing rules. Postcolonialsm amounts to "focusing on concepts and representation … fiddling with words while the Third World burns" (Matthews, 2008: 1043). Basically, postcolonialism is an intellectual enterprise, removed from the people it seeks to help, distracting from the immediate needs of the developing world. In response, even postcolonialists need to acknowledge colonialism's effect on them and respond accordingly. The power constraint, introduced shortly, makes this problem

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an almost unavoidable fact.

The stronger challenge suggests that postcolonialism irretrievably descends into cultural relativism whereby development is not about reducing inequality but maintaining difference. Eagleton (1998: 25) criticizes those who see everything as postcolonial: "not all differences are positive, not all exclusions are pathological (excluding racists or neo-Nazis?)." McEwan (2001) takes it one step further to suggest that even difference itself preserves colonial power. Yet, this need not entail support for those who dismiss postcolonialism on the grounds that it lacks metaphysical foundation. Only those trapped within metaphysical debates see this as a problem. For those sensitive to postcolonialism's own power, we should avoid extremes of arrogant paternalism or blind-faith in difference. Hall (1996: 249) warns: "it is only too tempting to fall into the trap of assuming that, because essentialism has been deconstructed theoretically, therefore it has been displaces politically." Postcolonialism embraces the tension by looking all relations between those who can give help and those who want help through the lens of power, knowledge, and discourse.

Most postcolonialists embrace the tension that comes with achieving fairer structures. Building on the initial concept of constitutional change, there are alternative paradigms based on *difficult to reconcile epistemes* that relate to the two extremes. Postcolonialism is not about blindly promoting difference, but empowering the marginalized by transforming economic and political structures (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Structural change does not demand the developed world to change its own structures beyond what is necessary to emancipate the developing world. Thus, post-colonialists should not, *prima facie*, place one episteme above another, demanding instead that they respect one another. The next two concepts form the basis for the practical discussion in the paper's second half. The power imbalance between epistemes leads to there being a *power constraint*. The power constraint draws on the earlier discussion of discourse whereby the powerless have to speak and behave in the languages of the powerful to be heard. It imposes a dilemma, where remaining silent maintains the status quo and finding practical voice requires conforming to behaviours set by oppressive others. Those with the least resources have to make the most effort. The power constraint imposes, disproportionately on the losers within the existing global structure, a *tension between ideas and actions*. As shown in the next section, the tension all too often lures would-be postcolonial leaders into legitimizing existing rules and silencing themselves and others who have alternative views on development. It is thus important to ask the question: what*, if anything*, will eliminate global poverty?

Postcolonial Development and 'The Poor'

According to Saul (2004: 230) "the very essence of development studies is a normative preoccupation with the poor, marginalized and exploited people in the South." This section begins by a brief discussion of poverty followed by a practical discussion of how postcolonialism clarifies and complicates the issue. In doing so, the four concepts and three main areas of postcolonial critique are brought to bear on the question of poverty.

Defining poverty and its remedy is no easy feat. Even without complications introduced by postcolonial theory, scholars find it difficult to find a singular definition and pathway forward. Postcolonial and non-postcolonial theorists alike agree that it simply come down to politics and who dominates the global agenda (Bond, 2006). Postcolonialism is comfortable with such a conclusion and drawn to probe the matter further. Conceptualizing the nature of each approach highlights how they support or challenge the dominant neoliberal definition of poverty. This make is possible to speak of two analytical categories divided by the power constraint: dominant neoliberalism and challenging alternatives. Sadly, most mainstream definitions of poverty on both sides fall short of embracing a comprehensive postcolonial understanding of development. This sets the stage for considering whether postcolonialism can help 'the poor'.

Neoliberalism is at poverty reduction's heart. Neoliberals believe that "economic globalization is the sole source of increased living standards and that we simply need to widen its scope so it benefits those so far left behind" (St. Clair, 2006: 142). It propagates "the myth of the past half century: the image of development as securing affluence and fulfilling lives for all, an image driven by rationality and technological advance" (ibid.). Top-down and without much sensitivity to the broader social context, neoliberalism looks to the World *Bank* to promote poverty reduction strategies through quantifiable measures. At its zenith, when McNamara headed the World Bank in the 1970s,

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neoliberalism promoted the idea that poverty depended solely on inability to develop economically (Green, 2006). Such views lead to some common, yet surprising conclusions. Neoliberalism believes that "the empowerment of the powerless could be achieved within the existing social order without any significant negative effects on the power of the powerful" (Mayo and Craig, 1995: 5). Some even feel that greater economic inequality helps reduce poverty (Bracking, 2004).

Consequently, neoliberalism faces serious challenges. First, even scientific rationalism is not politically neutral. Inconclusive debates exist on what approach to use, what evidence should count, and reliability of data. If this is not enough, others suggest these approaches remain morally flat more generally (Bracking, 2004; St. Clair, 2006). The only way out of poverty becomes adopting Western ways of life to compete as consumers on global markets that likely will never truly become fair or consider local histories and contexts (Green, 2006). The result is the entrenchment instead of displacement of exploitative relations. As Sanyal (1998: 5) notes, "the primary purpose of development policies was to help the capitalist system survive the periodic crises it created for itself. This required social control and co-optation of the poor, which were achieved by development projects."

Alternative approaches to poverty have gained momentum in recent decades. Sen's famous *capabilities approach* challenges the ethical link between economic growth and development. "Poverty must be seen as the deprivation of basic capabilities rather than as merely lowness of incomes" (Sen 1993: 87). Income becomes instrumental to attaining freedoms "to choose a life one has reason to value" (Sen, 2002: 74). Intentionally vague, freedoms or capabilities might include areas like quality of life, health, bodily integrity, and even play among others (see Nussbaum, 2000). Several ways of measuring development under this approach exist. The most popular is the Human Development Index (HDI). According to some, it does not depart enough from neoliberalism, still being reductionist in its measurement, Western in its orientation, and overly quantitative (Laderchi et al., 2003). It also fails glosses over *context* and the *global power imbalance* (Koggel, 2003).

The *social exclusion* approach is quite narrow and only worth quickly mentioning. It draws attention to *the power constraint* as the cause of poverty, both historically and presently in areas like political marginalization or access to resources like land. In this way, it holds the rich accountable for their role perpetuating poverty, making them responsible for addressing the plight of the poor (Laderchi et al., 2003). Beyond this, it lacks clear definition and measurement as contexts vary.

Participation addresses the claim that neoliberalism excludes the poor as subjects of development and misrepresents them through dominant discourses. Developed by Chambers (1994: 953) as "a growing family of approaches and methods to enable local people to share, enhance and analyse their knowledge of life and conditions, to plan and to act", in practice it all too often becomes instrumentally used by the World Bank to legitimate its views rather than change the approach (Laderchi et al., 2003). The World Bank may justify tokenism by stating that locals lack the skills or knowledge necessary to participate meaningfully. They may even point to the fact that local opinions differ radically and make consensus impossible. They never seem to ask themselves such questions or examine the global power structure itself as the cause for limited or even failed efforts at meaningful local participation.

The strength of alternative approaches modified neoliberalism somewhat. Nevertheless, global efforts to eradicate poverty continue to fail, and neoliberalism is still to blame. Though the World Bank acknowledges its past failures, adopting more inclusive and contextual approaches, obsession with measurement and market rule still overshadows contextual, bottom-up efforts (Stokke 1998; Da Costa and McMichael, 2007). "An underlying political problem that is obscured is who defines the poverty line: it is never in the power of poor people to do so" (Fernandez, 2010: 418). Dominant global institutions only pay lip service to the post-colonial critique of development and never change the fundamental rules of the game.

Though postcolonialism remains comfortable with ambiguity of defining poverty, it loses out in practice to universal definitions. What are postcolonial supporters left to do? Are their ideas idealistic? Do they distract and draw resources away from action? Postcolonialism has many challenges in redefining discourses so that the poor are not blamed for the structures that keep them there or that deny the richness they enjoy outside of their ability to be global

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consumers. But acute problems exist surrounding the two final concepts. The power constraint allows the powerful to dismiss even good deas if they do not serve their interests. This makes it almost impossible for 'the poor' to know whether to refine its ideas or act within the rules of the game. These postcolonial ideas need greater focus in the decades to come if they are to give the poor power to define themselves and take action. Prominent scholars on poverty like Pogge (2001, 2007) need to stop acting like eliminating poverty requires little from the privileged. It requires a lot not only from the national level, but from the international level (Jordaan 2010). Postcolonialists tend to place most of the blame on the international. Pogge is, however, right to suggest that the international community simply needs to stop exploiting developing nations.

Conclusion

Sadly, the power constraint and the resulting idea-action dilemma continues to plague those seeking a better life. Yet, they are not reasons to give up on postcolonialism despite the fact that it admittedly does a better job explaining the problem than outlining realistic solutions. Acknowledging and explaining these tensions becomes a form of empowerment in itself, making everyday decisions easier for those who understand the postcolonial critique. Arguing that the ideas cannot work in practice is simply not enough when the rules of the game can change. It should nevertheless not surprise us that postcolonial thinkers might be pessimistic about eliminating poverty. It is not easy to escape the power constraint. "Public action challenging the exclusion and subordination of [the poor] faces obstacles. … [It] depends on conceding to the classifications, categories or discourses of political systems and the risks of manipulation and compromise" (Mosse 2010: 1172). I would add to that blaming the poor for poverty is like blaming two people who are starving for fighting to share one sufficient meal. Only in an unjust world do the powerful fill their bellies while they watch who lives or dies. Leaders of developing nations are asked to make decisions those in developed nations never face, and then get blamed for acting unjust for not playing the rules well enough. Only postcolonialism, even with its challenges, adequately explains why global poverty still exists. This is an unavoidable step in its eradication.

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