The Case of the Awkward Statistics: A Critique of Postdevelopment

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Opinion Paper

Abstract: *Nearly a decade after its publication, Arturo Escobar's* **Encountering Development** *remains a classic work of Postdevelopment and Critical Development Studies, continuing to provide a relevant and devastating critique of development as a discursive tool for ordering and managing the Global South. What remains unanswered in Escobar's work, however, is whether there is a material reality beyond mere representation that still needs attending to. I find that within Escobar's work, the thorny problem of underdevelopment--as a persistent and abhorrent material condition--finds its way through Escobar's poststructuralist epistemology. As this essay argues, though Escobar asks us to deconstruct development statistics in a way that upsets the West's discursive hegemony, at the very least it is premature to call for an end to development, as well as the statistics and technical solutions development agencies provide.*

1. Introduction: Towards a World without Development?

In the final chapter of his book, *Encountering Development*, Arturo Escobar (1995) recounts the litany of statistics that are often used to underscore the severity of poverty in the Global South. These statistics range from disparities in poverty between the rich and poor world, the differences in wages, the number of people who died of hunger in the Sahel region, to the ecological destruction occurring in the Global South. Escobar argues that at this point in his argument the reader should be able to interpret these statistics in a far different way--i.e. in a way that does not reify dominant discourses of poverty, the Third World, and the need for Western development interventions. Instead, the reader should be able to read these statistics in terms of "the

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crafting of subjectivities, the shaping of culture, and the construction of social power" (Escobar, 1995, p. 213). In this important respect, I believe, Escobar succeeds. The author is able to effectively establish the methods by which the World Bank and other development organizations attempt to create and recreate the Global South through discourses that render problems fit for the technical solutions at hand. What is less convincing is the need to move from this critical framing of the development narrative to the "destruction of development" altogether (Escobar, 1995, p. 223).

At the most basic level, there is the unresolved matter of what to do with the development statistics he presents. At the most visceral level, they seem to proliferate with meanings unattended to by Escobar's treatment of development as discourse. Perhaps Escobar would argue that this merely reflects the strength of the development discourse. However, the very existence of the statistics—even granting the problems of data collection in the Global South or the interests of the collectors—still hint to a material reality that is beyond discursive representation. To say, then, that one must work toward the destruction of development also means that one must work towards the destruction of institutions like the World Bank and other epistemic communities that produce these statistics. But what of the material reality they represent? What remains unanswered in Escobar's argument is whether a post-development world is a world with new statistics, a proliferation of different statistics, or no statistics at all. Escobar's rush to begin the end of development suggests that the latter—a world without development statistics—would be the most immediate result. For all of these reasons, I characterize the appearance of these statistics in Escobar's text as awkward.

2. (Post) Development and its Discontents

For the purpose of this essay, I will work from the tentative assumption that there is a material reality of poverty that exists beyond discourse and that the desire to intervene on behalf of the poor may lie in human impulses that are pre-discursive. In addition, I grant Tania Murray Li's (2007) argument that the desire for development may be shared by

both elite organizations and the local populations that interventions are designed to help. Thus, while I grant many of Escobar's points regarding the strategic alliance between knowledge and power within mainstream development, I work from the assumption that there still exist fundamental problems of human poverty and environmental degradation that need to be represented and addressed. If anything, the critical literature on development (Adams, 2009; Escobar, 1995; Goldman, 2004) has pointed more toward the need for reform of macro-development institutions like the World Bank and for new development practices that move beyond the obsession with instrument-rationality (Adams, 2009)--not for a dismantling of development altogether. In a sense, this theoretical foundation is underpinned by the primal (postdevelopment scholars might read: programmed) need for more and better statistics, as well as forms of governmentalities that address their realities in more inclusive and open-ended ways.

The issue of governmentality is an essential one; too often poststructuralists look at any method of containment and management with a great deal of derision. Though both Goldman and Escobar use a Foucaultian foundation to criticize the World Bank for its excessive governmentality—"the process of converting the previously inconsequential forest, hill, and river communities into visible, communicative, and accountable populations" (Goldman, 2007, p. 174)—they simultaneously ignore the benefits of governmentality in providing collective benefits of security and social welfare. In terms of the forms of governance provided by institutions like the World Bank, Li states that "popular acquiescence" (p. 16), if not outright support, is an essential aspect for making development projects work. Though Li also notes that development projects can be used to contain more serious political grievances, she also demonstrates how the material improvements that development projects promise are often desired by both intervening actors and the populations they are targeted to help.

To undo the multilateral institutions and epistemic communities that produce development (and environmental) statistics would also be to undo the very intellectual ground on which multilateral state cooperation takes place.

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Development and environmental statistics, norms on information quality, and platforms for information exchange provide the foundations not only for cooperation on global threats such as climate change, but also provides important foundations for advocacy campaigns on behalf of the poor and the environment. Without these epistemic forums, it would be much more difficult to address issues of substantive injustice.

Though Escobar imagines a postdevelopment space where local solutions and cultural heterogeneity thrive, this postdevelopment future could also find itself amenable to new forms of incompetent state authoritarian rule (i.e. Zimbabwe and North Korea), radical forms of rural disenfranchisement, or greater degrees of apathy on the part of the affluent West. In short, the insight that development is a discourse does not justify the demise of development in and of itself. Instead, critics of development must either disprove the reality of the statistics or develop an alternative approach to addressing their reality grounded in alternative forms of governmentality. To ask that discursive analysis ground itself in empirical evidence is not be dismissive of poststructuralist approaches; narratives may not be "innocent" (Escobar, 1995, p. 20), but discursive rules of the rode, such as commitments to validity and reliability, ensure that inter-subjective epistemological spaces take place that are able to mediate differences.

In striving for a more just form of development, it is also important to move beyond the essentializing narrative of development as necessarily the destructive tool of modernization. As A.J. Bebbington (2000) argues in his description of the Quichua populations of the Ecuadorian Andes, we need to move toward "more nuanced interpretations of development that emphasize human agency and the room to maneuver that can exist within otherwise constraining institutions and the important roles that development interventions...have played in fostering this control" (p. 496). Critical Development Studies and Political Ecology, with their simultaneous focus on both political agency and issues of livelihood, offer some important tools for refocusing the work of development agencies and practitioners. Its mix of theoretical pluralism and rigorous empirical research provides an intellectual

foundation for a development that focuses less on irresponsible macro-projects—for Adams (2009) exemplified by the construction of ill-conceived dams throughout the Global South—and more on modest projects grounded in local knowledge and a respect for the political agency of local populations.

If anything, Escobar's arguments are most relevant to large, state and elite sponsored development projects, often with little input from local communities (Goldman, 2004; Adams, 2009; Escobar, 1995). For Goldman, in Laos large top-down development projects such as the hydro-electric dams on the Mekong valley are part of a larger phenomenon of eco-governmentality that "bleed the social sectors to nourish the newly capitalized ones" (p. 179), in this case the Laos energy sector. These projects are built on twin pillars of "arrogance" and "grandiosity" (Adams, 2004, p. 300). These large-scale projects often serve as breeding grounds for the displacement of communities, corruption, and inflated expectations. Eliminating this type of development, however, does not necessarily imply the destruction of development altogether, nor the means for addressing the serious issues of livelihood, environmental degradation, and access to resources that underpin the realities authoritative statistics try to represent.

3. Conclusion: Toward a More Inclusive Development

The issue is less the need to take apart all development institutions than with debunking entrenched ideologies that privilege the voice of economists and other experts over those of local communities. While the tools of Critical Development Studies and Political Ecology can help critique this variation of development, it cannot provide "solutions" to what are essentially political problems. As methodological tools, all they can do is highlight the political and environmental interactions that characterize these problems. Though Li expresses pessimism about the ability of culturally sensitive anthropologists to build bridges to experts in development (p. 3), these bridges will no doubt be necessary to avoid the myopic instrument-rationality approaches that characterize

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so much of the destructive processes of macro-development. If narratives are never innocent, then Critical Development Studies and Political Ecology tools are important to ensure that the theoretical and narrative closures enacted by either technocratic models or postdevelopment essentialism can be reopened and subjected to debate.

In conclusion, the awkward case of the statistics suggests neither the validation of development nor its early demise. If anything, it affirms the needs for new tables and the need for bolder political analysis to expose the processes of their making and the possibilities of their reform. Even as postdevelopment writing wishes away the basic human compulsion to help or the desire of local populations for development, it retains its importance as a means of pointing to development's excesses and for achieving better development results. The critical politics that postdevelopment brings ensures that what Li calls the "subliminal and routine" antipolitics of technical development (p. 7) is replaced with a politically acute alternative, complete with updated statistics and a reformed language for understanding their meaning.

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