

Post-Development and the Practitioner

Written by Christopher Keith Johnson

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CHRISTOPHER KEITH JOHNSON, JAN 8 2014

I find myself at an interesting, but not uncommon, stage in my career as an international development professional. I've worked for close to a decade in the field but am only now actively engaged in the interrogation of development concepts and theory. My professional experience was as an American trade union organizer. That background is of relevance to my current position, but my work has required a means to address issues outside of labor as of late. Of particular interest to me in my navigation of international development issues has been post-development thinking and how (or if) I should integrate it into my program implementation plans.

Post-Development as Response

Aram Ziai states, "Post-development texts have been interpreted as a cynical legitimization of neoliberalism or a futile romanticisation of premodern times; more sympathetic critics have at least acknowledged its potential to criticise the shortcomings of development theory and policy" (2004: 1035). I will attempt to navigate the two positions illustrated in the Ziai quote but will state clearly in agreement with Ziai that post-development is a response to a perceived failure of development theory and practice rather than a theory itself.

Post-development thinking does not constitute a theory of development. It is a useful and necessary concept. Operating as a concept, it does something very important and of great value to the field in which it is applied: it interrogates, navigates, examines, confronts, and at times supports existing theory in an effort to reform the huge post World War II "business" known as development. It forces us, as scholars and/or practitioners, to actively "think" about and challenge popularly held beliefs regarding progress and who is authorized to speak for the audience/clients/customers/subjects.

At its core, post-development thinking is focused on an examination and/or challenge of power dynamics. Caroline Kippler interpreting Aram Ziai states, "Whoever gets to decide what 'development' is and how it can be achieved, usually some kind of 'development expert', is also in a position of power, which has been described as a 'trusteeship'" (2010: 4). The theories that contribute to development practice, though varied, all support a profession providing livelihood for far too many people to allow anything to render the profession or its practitioners obsolete. Post-development thinkers are advocating an overhaul of the system.

As an alternative or oppositional concept, post-development poses a danger to the establishment in that it critiques both the practice and motives of the practitioners driving the development profession. That these established professionals might be "well-meaning" amounts to very little if what is motivating their interest is a prominent feature of the problem itself. Simon Reid Henry summarizes the work of one of the more well-known post-development thinkers:

[Arturo] Escobar felt development was, unavoidably, both an ideological export (something Walt Rostow would willingly have admitted) and a simultaneous act of cultural imperialism. With its highly technocratic language and forthright deployment of norms and value judgements, it was also a form of cultural imperialism that poor countries had little means of declining politely. "Perhaps no other idea has been so insidious, no other idea gone so unchallenged," Escobar sneered (2012).

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To work within an institution while at the same time being critical of it is a risky endeavour. Giving a voice to the object of study will be fiercely challenged. Isn't it the *duty* of the developed to speak for the underdeveloped? Doesn't the world envy all things Western? Therefore, aren't those trained in the West best positioned to "build the capacity" of those, most notably in the global South, in projects designed to raise their standard of living and improve their lives and life chances?

A Place within a History of Critique

But challenging authority is nothing new. Post-development does not stand alone without ties to history. As a concept it "overlaps with western critiques of modernity, the Enlightenment and techno-scientific progress such as critical theory, post structuralism, [and] ecological movements" (Pieterse, 1996: 20). The concept is as multidisciplinary and multifaceted as the modern university and workplace. It confronts accepted practice when that practice is, in whole or in part, problematic and without balance. That challenge is valuable and necessary. Post-development thinking analyzes the decades following the advent of the profession. It examines what has worked and what has not. And it is particularly harsh in its attacks against Eurocentrism and the objectification of the communities being "developed."

Post-Development in Practice

That said, what use is a concept in interrogating decades of Western theory if it cannot be practically applied? Jan Pieterse believes post-development to be without direction and characterizes it as having a "lack of interest in translating critique into construction" (Pieterse, 1996: 20). Is there room for interpretation by the communities engaged in the development process? Is it necessary for the West to create the theory, concept, model, and handbook for its application?

Pieterse's criticism that post-development concepts lack a blueprint could be viewed as a positive. Should the subject always be told how to apply the tools? Can the Western or Western-trained practitioner possibly be aware of every variable that could ensure success or failure of a model? Don't we as practitioners have to allow the subject to "go it alone" at some stage and perhaps develop their own answers or even their own questions? Could this be a part of the "radical democracy" that Aram Ziai speaks of? Would it lead to an internal conversation among the *subjects* where they determine next steps (Ziai, 2004: 1053)?

Perhaps a model that gives the subject too much power, one that acknowledges agency might lead to our un- or under-employment as development professionals, and would pose a very serious risk to a multibillion dollar industry. Although we say we are in the business of working ourselves out of business, where would we go if that was to occur? What good is a theory or concept if the people in power ignore it because it jeopardizes their source of income and status as experts? A theory is evidence-based. If the subjects themselves are to provide the evidence and the explanation, where would that leave the West?

The Objective

A "development concept is a development objective" (Sumner and Tribe, 2008: 84). The goal attempting to be reached in the post-development concept is to improve conditions while respecting the subject of the development project. Through the lens of post-development thinking, the practitioner should be able to listen, to observe, and to apply indigenous knowledge systems when possible while attempting to avoid essentialism. This concept has not been perfected.

For post-development thinkers the very notion that development can be taught within a system owing its very existence, in part, to the exploitation of the East and South, without a thorough interrogation of the system that created the global "haves and have-nots" is problematic and dismissive of world history:

We can only speculate on what our contemporary world would look like had there been no imperialism, no slave trade and no colonial and neo-colonial trade practices; however, it seems reasonable to assume that the developed parts of the world could not have achieved their current levels of material comfort if these practices had never taken place,

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and indeed did not continue to take place today (Matthews, 2007: 58).

The passage above covers centuries of world history and many of the theories created in the West from the past to recent times. The critique and awareness of the impact of theory itself—capitalism, socialism, neoliberalism, etc., is a starting point in a project that may over time develop on its own. The West largely wrote the script for the rest of the world over the last several hundred years without giving voice to the subject being *exploited* or more recently *developed* through its base of western theory. Post-development thinking is in place to challenge that reality and to change it through recognizing the agency of the subject.

Dancing to the Beat of Post-Development

Post-development thinking has a nice beat – but can the development practitioner dance to it? Morgan Brigg critically engages this question by stating what many believe to be its greatest weakness. “Both Jan Nederveen Pieterse and Frans Schuurman argue that post-development is flawed, in part because it does not offer a programme for development practice” (Brigg, 2002: 421). What good is a development theory that can’t be practically applied in the field? If theory and praxis must be linked to affect change, a critical component in that arrangement is noticeably and perhaps inexcusably absent according to post-development critics. The question raised earlier regarding whether post-development is practicable has to be revisited time and again.

Post-development thinking is most often linked to dependency theory. This is a theory now out of fashion. If the post-development concept was created to perfect an existing theory, David Lehmann questions whether it actually improves upon what many believed to be disastrous in its practical application. But he sticks the knife deeper, making a clear distinction between the two, stating that, “the difference now is that whereas dependency theory at least implicitly held out the hope of a future post-revolutionary state as a remedy, post-modern writing places its faith either in nothing, or in social movements of various kinds combined with the international NGO network” (Lehmann, 1997: 571). Many of its critics believe post-development thinking to be a lightweight exercise, rooted in a failed theory, guided by “nothing” as its advocates embark on a “journey of discovery at once of themselves and humanity through involvement in social movements and NGOs” (Lehmann, 1997: 569).

Is post-development thinking merely a feel good academic exercise designed to alleviate the pain of white guilt? In the academy, where its critics say it thrives, is it given a space or a pass in order to appease left-leaning critics of well-established development theory? Is it held to a lower standard in an effort to be inclusive? David Lehmann critiques the writing style of Arturo Escobar:

[...] is ‘discourse analysis’ analysis? and as such does it have an identifiable method? On this showing, it consists largely of two elements: a particular sort of style and a sprinkling of the name of Michael Foucault and quotations from his work [...] In the place of analysis of the effects of the projects, the motives of the progenitors, individual and institutional, are impugned (1997: 574).

Lehmann is calling Escobar’s work a lightweight, literary exercise restricted to the academy. And he believes it to be a poorly conceived one at that. Even within its confines in the classroom space and in academic journals the work of the post-development thinker is of little value to him and many other critics. It lacks rigor and exhibits “contempt for history and high culture” (1997: 574). It is neither theory nor is it a workable concept but merely a complaint. It can be viewed as a *simple* response to perceived Western failures without solution or remedy on offer.

Countering Lehmann’s position that the concept lacks analysis, many post development thinkers actively navigate representation and marginalization in their work and are consciously engaging the societal and cultural norms of the subject rather than insisting on a Western frame of reference. Poverty alleviation is a major goal of development but should poverty be defined the same globally? Paul Shaffer identifies a need for scholars and practitioners to recognize simplicity, analyze caloric intake levels, the effects of industrialization and urbanization, and the ‘social creation of scarcity’ when examining poverty (2012: 1771-1772). This type of analysis would require the use of statistical data and not merely quotes from recognized western intellectuals. Far from contempt of history, as claimed by Lehmann, within the post development concept there is an awareness that experience and history differs globally

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and that those differences must be acknowledged in development practice.

Post-Development in Practice: Reintegrating Child Soldiers

Let's examine the issue of reintegration of child soldiers into the community at the end of an armed conflict as a first example of how post-development thinking might be practically applied. To be forced into armed service as a child is wrong. That's an easy conclusion to reach. No one can dispute that. But new research is claiming that experience as a child soldier actually has created an identity among the demobilized in post-conflict states that if the practitioner were to actively listen to the child, rather than delivering a prepackaged development plan, could possibly result in better integration and re-entry for the former combatant. Transitional justice advocate Virginie Ladisch quotes a former child soldier from Colombia's FARC and provides an idea on how this voice could guide practice:

"Many of us [child soldiers] possess vast experience in the areas of survival, health, and discipline that we gained as a result of our time in the armed groups. But it's not appreciated. They force us to push aside these things, to erase them, in order to create a new future that denies what we were and what we learned. They guide us to accept an identity that is not ours, to be bakers and cobblers..." Not only does this approach ignore child soldiers' past and deny them agency in shaping their future plans, it restricts them to a certain socio-economic class and ignores a key factor leading to recruitment: poverty or a lack of economic opportunities (2013).

Can a theory or method be forced upon a population without first engaging in a conversation with the subject? If so, is the "product" created from this exercise of value? Can years of lived experience be erased through a series of workshops, strategic planning sessions, or campaigns not rooted in any meaningful way to the reality of the subject being trained or required to participate in the activity?

Conclusion

Post-development thinking, as a concept, challenges the many theories that have been positioned as development solutions. It interrogates the history, meaning, and motives of the development industry and the theories that support the work. That it offers more questions than answers is in part the point. How could anyone engage in a development of theory practice, or critique without questioning and examining history? The fact that the industry is not only feeding the subject but also the *experts* working in the field will be met with resistance by those very practitioners. The world is rapidly changing. For the development professional some of that change will be linked to how we view the world around us at present, interpret world history, and whether we talk *to* rather than *at* our partners in the field.

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