

# Decolonising Development: Putting Life at the Centre

Written by Gisela Carrasco-Miró

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GISELA CARRASCO-MIRÓ, APR 14 2021

In my neighbourhood, in el *Barri de Gràcia*, in Barcelona, there are several graffiti, but there is one that I always pay attention. The graffiti states 'fragility is the soul of the revolution' (see featured image, above). The first time I stooped and carefully looked at it, my first thought was that the graffiti seemed to challenge two assumptions prevalent in popular and theoretical discourses. The first holds that fragility is the opposite of revolution and cannot be conceived as part of that practice; the second supposes that fragility requires and implies the need for protection and the strengthening of paternalistic forms of power at the expense of collective forms of social transformation.

Feminist scholars have already called into question the basic assumption that fragility and revolution are in mutual opposition. For Judith Butler, what makes us human is precisely what make us vulnerable and dependent on other humans, as she explains in her book *Precarious Life* (2006). Butler speaks of vulnerability to account for the fragility of human life, which depends at all times on others and on the material and circumstantial conditions that surround it. Her approach to the question of human fragility places it in politics, making it a central aspect of democratic life. At the same time, Paul B. Preciado in his text *The courage of being oneself* published in the French newspaper *Libération* carries a call to be weak and despicable. He says: Because I love you, I desire you to be weak and despicable. Because it is through fragility that the revolution operates (Preciado 2014).

Butler and Preciado take some ideas from philosopher Michel Foucault (1996) who had already suggested fragility as an element that shows the external conditions that subjugate the subject and its transformative potential. For Foucault, any analysis about the present conditions requires an exercise that:

It is not about a simple characterisation of what we are, but –following lines of fragility in the present– of being able to understand why and how what-it-is could no longer be what-it-is. In this regard, any description must be done according to this kind of virtual fracture that enhance the space of liberty, understood as space for concrete liberty, of possible transformation (121-122).

In that sense, while fragility can be affirmed as an existential human condition –since we are all subject to accidents, illness, and attacks that can expunge our lives quite quickly–, fragility is also conceived as part of the very meaning or action of the possibility of social transformation itself. The human, however, is not at all a neutral category. We are not one and the same. As feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti (2020, p. 28) argues '[h]umanity is rather a selective and exclusionary category that polices access to rights and entitlements. The 'human' is defined as much by what it excludes as by what it includes in the golden circle of its privileges and in the structural distinctions that support them'. And yet there is still a 'we'.

This collective 'we' is a heterogeneous assemblage that connects 'us,' (...) it is time to accept multi-species interdependence not as a wound, or a form of exposed vulnerability, but rather as a strength and a mutually enforcing form of solidarity. Sameness must not be a pre-requisite for equity, respect, and solidarity. Differences need not generate dialectical oppositions and hierarchies—they can be a measure of virtual possibilities for interdependence and shared ways of becoming-world together (Braidotti 2020, pp. 29-30).

In the light of this, what the graffiti is suggesting, I think, is that by appropriating fragility, the human can be recast in the direction of a heterogeneous and collective assemblage –'we'– where diverse forms of the common/s are

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activated (rather than a 'paralysing fragility' generated by the alleged death of the subject and the omnipresence of consumption and simulacra). Revolution, as I understand it here, is not about a single event that will forever change the course of history (a post-historical world) or a mere seizure of political power (a post-political world), but the collective reappropriation of life. Revolution, therefore, is about resistance or as Braidotti (2020) would say: an active activism, a commitment to creating affirmative values. In thinking together fragility and revolution, therefore, we can move away from ideas of authenticity or to get in touch with our feelings or a new moral value as a way of doing politics since fragility enters into agency and the fragility vs revolution binary has been undone.

Fragility has also been used in problematic ways. For example, when nations advertise their fragility to new immigrants or when the fragility of 'white people' constructs black people as threat to their existence. The recourse to fragility in such instances can become the basis for a racist policy that seeks to exclude or contain black people and minorities. Employing here the work of Butler, these calls to 'fragility' are a form of racist violence and active performance of invulnerability (Butler 1990/1999). They are about closure to a certain understanding of our relations with others as well as closure to certain features of ourselves, including our fragility and vulnerabilities.

The graffiti has been there for a while. Although often these days we hear, read and speak about fragility, the graffiti was there before the pandemic. I have to confess I have been surprised that many of us, including scholars, artists or the UN Secretary, said: 'The coronavirus pandemic has revealed how fragile everyday life is'. I have asked myself what kind of realities do we know when we state that. Don't we have dependent old people in our families? Don't we live with disabled people or people with mental problems? Don't we know the highly vulnerable reality of many neighbourhoods and territories in our cities? Don't we suffer the impact of cancers and other pathologies from environmental, economic and social factors? Fragility is already there, every day, as an everyday reality for most. For many indigenous people on earth, for example, widespread epidemics, systemic dispossession and environmental devastations were the mark of the Europeans' colonial appropriation and destruction of indigenous cultures. Catastrophes on this scale are for many people on earth an everyday reality, and because so many of them survived it, there is a great deal that Europeans can learn from them, as we all learn to do better in terms of anti-racism and anti-colonialism.

Taking up the challenge to think together fragility and revolution posted by the graffiti, I will look at this question through one of the most dominant political discourses today: international development. By so doing, I will structure the article into two sub-questions: 1) Why is now easier, maybe useful, to talk about fragility? And I will conclude by approaching 2) What happens if we change perspectives and let fragility interrogate us? What happens if we live fragility with more dignity and not with frightening fear?

## **Why is now easier, maybe useful, to talk about fragility?**

Fragility informs development engagement in countries deemed 'fragile'. Fragile states play a key role in foreign policy decisions to deliberate which countries are seen as threats to international security or which countries are sanctioned. In this framework,

fragility is taken as foundational to violence and as a problem in its own right which at times may even need to be violently corrected. Fragile states are considered the 'breeding ground for terrorism' (Kaplan, 2008: 4), a cause of underdevelopment, and a 'menace not only to [their] own people, but also to their own neighbours, and indeed the world' (Former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan quoted in Grimm et al., 2014: 200); (Saeed 2020, p. 768).

Both security and development come together in talk of fragile states, a label whose origins are widely ascribed to the World Bank (Osaghae 2010). In development circles, development work on fragility responds to increasing concerns about the implications of fragility for stability and development, especially in the context of the global Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development and the international promise to 'leave no one behind'.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OCDE), for example, has produced reports on fragility since 2005. The OCDE, echoes the World Bank, the United Nations and other development agencies, and states that: fragility is where states, contexts or groups 'have weak capacity to carry out basic functions of governing

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a population and its territory, and lack the ability to develop mutually constructive and reinforcing relations with society [thus] trust and mutual obligations between the state and its citizens have become weak' (OECD-DAC 2011, p. 21). The OCDE reports aim to help mobilise aid flows to 'fragile states' and it has increased every year since 2014. According to OCDE (2020) fragility is on the rise, bringing economic, political and environmental costs. Although in development circles there is no consensus of what fragility itself means, in 2018, \$76 billion in bilateral overseas development assistance (ODA) went to fragile contexts — more than ever before (OCDE 2020).

Last year OCDE's report *States of Fragility 2020* underlines that,

(...) a focus on fragility is now more necessary than ever before (...) putting people at the centre of the fight against fragility should be the starting point. Fragility undermines our sense of well-being and people's legitimate aspirations for education, health, community, representation, peace and security in clean and sustainable environments. (3)

But who has the responsibility to determine when states and contexts are no longer fragile? Following the OECD Report publication, in October last year three experts from the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) weigh on whether fragility is a valid concept following Covid-19. In a post called 'Fragility: time for a rethink', the experts celebrate that the OCDE report refers to 'fragile contexts' instead of 'fragile states' and has usefully reconfigured fragility as 'global and dynamic' (ODI 2020). The experts concluded that fragility goes beyond fragile contexts and development actors should place a much stronger emphasis on opportunity and not just fragility. However, why is fragility something to be defeated, overcome, or even shyly withdrawn into the private sphere?

If we take a decolonising look at the current development discourse, we see the image of fragility is historically aligned with the Global South. Fragility is here associated with weak, soft, underdeveloped, illegitimate, poor, irrelevant, feminine, queer, de-rooted, rogue, collapsed, passive and failed. As the political scientist Eghosa E. Osaghae's (2010) argues fragility in development 'suggests deviance and aberration from the dominant and supposedly universal (but western [and modernist]) paradigm, which played a key role in the development of capitalism' (282). Under western eyes, therefore, the Global South has been produced fragile in the same sense of the Saidian Orientalism, that is, the 'enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient' (Said 1978, p. 3). In that sense, the Global South has been represented, regulated and disciplined as fragile.

In this framework, resilience has become a protagonist to address fragility by international development institutions and donors. In conjunction with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, the World Bank increasingly promotes resilience as the means for tracking and growing the wealth of the poor (WB 2021) – maybe here is where resides the 'leaving no one behind' development promise. Resilience, feminist scholar Sarah Brake (2016, p. 52) explains, 'is a powerful idea whose deployment spans the macro-level of ecological and economic systems to the micro level of selves, and the complex circuits of power that connect and constitute these different levels of social reality'. Bracke (2016) foregrounds how the development category of 'resilience' is neoliberal and constitutes a new moral code that works against fragility through gendered notions of subjectivity and agency to produce the idea of a subject willing to cope with conditions of increasing precarization (see also Butler 2006). In that sense, resilience functions as a governmental and development tactic aimed at managing resistance and concealing destitution.

In doing gender and development, equality and women empowerment are considered the elixir to fight fragility. According to UN Women (2016), development interventions —better governance, improved economic outcomes, better child health, the holy grail of economic growth— should propel women to the forefront of eradicating poverty and strengthen the resilience of fragile communities and states. Women (from the Global South) and combating fragility become a means to securing those economic outcomes, instrumentalised to 'deliver' for development. Here, inequalities and oppression towards women are located in the fragility of the state but never found in the actual politics of the state, development and the economy. The reconfiguration of state relations that is taking place in development's fragile discourse is a view of the 'state' as a universal ahistorical and apolitical normative ideal of a proper (western modernist) institutional unit for social organisation (i.e. nation state), portraying it as an autonomous and homogenous technology of institutions. What this discussion seems to ignore is the need to understand the state, women and gender as heterogeneous and mutually constitutive terrains of contestation as well as the differences,

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complexities, and heterogeneities of the lives of people in a specific context. By so doing, desire for structural change is increasingly constructed as not only irrelevant, but culturally insignificant to the so-called fragile contexts and groups.

Once contexts and groups are marked as 'fragile' within the development discourse, those groups and contexts become reified as definitionally 'fragile,' fixed in a political position of powerlessness and lack of agency and designated as 'in need of protection' or 'empowerment'. All the power belongs to the state, international development agencies and their experts that are now supposed to offer them protection and advocacy. Such paternalistic and colonial moves tend to underestimate, or actively efface, modes of political agency and resistance that emerge within 'fragile' contexts. Further, these moves also expand biopolitical forms of regulation and control. When such development strategies abound, development (western) interventions and experts posit themselves as not fragile, self-sufficient, immune, invulnerable, if not impermeable, and without any such needs of protection. Therefore, when fragility is understood as something to be defeated, overcome, characterizes a form of thinking that models itself on mastery. In order to counter this untenable framework, the duality fragile and stability have to be understood as politically produced, unequally distributed through and by a differential operation of power.

Appropriating fragility would then propose a critique to the narrative and reproduction of the frail as a withdrawal towards the individual, the narcissistic, the regressive. In that sense, to understand different modes of resistance and social transformation, we would have to think what the graffiti claimed: how revolution and fragility work together, something that the paternalistic and colonial development model cannot do since it opposes them. Yet, and going back to our question, why is now more useful to talk about fragility within the politics of development? We need to critically look at the main international development economic model: the green economy/growth.

The OCDE 2020 report claims that fragility undermines our sense of well-being and people's legitimate aspirations for education, health, community and sustainable environments (OCDE 2020). Is fragility what brings human, political, economic and environmental costs? In a similar vein as the OECD report, the UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, in a recent opinion piece for the New York Times named 'A time to save the sick and rescue the planet' calls on countries to organize a green economy based in economic growth (Guterres 2020). Green economy approaches insist that the future of the planet and people rely upon the market system, economic growth and the advancement of the new technologies of geoengineering and nuclear renewal energy. But how can the same system that damaged the planet and the majority of people 'save and rescue the planet' and all people?

It has become clear that the now less fashionable green capitalism (now re-named as green economy/growth) – including development initiatives such as carbon taxes, dematerialising the economy, cap-and-trade schemes, debt-for-nature swaps, industrial agriculture, market-based green design, hybrid cars, and biogas– has completely failed (for empirical evidence on this see Hickel and Kallis 2019). With increased devastation to land and water, collapse in our food and agriculture systems, and uncontrolled growth in greenhouse gases, green economy has only brought us closer to an irreversible ecocatastrophe. In this economic post-Covid dimension, development's hope for the planet lies with an eco-industrial revolution sparked by technological innovation and directed by the signals of the market as the 'new' magic elixir for continuous growth. Technology can undoubtedly help in some cases to reduce inequalities, but there are already many studies and reports that confirm that we cannot trust that technology will maintain the current highly consumptive system in a time of natural resource exhaustion (Klein 2014; Hickel and Kallis 2019). So, in response to development's statement 'fragility brings more human, economic and environmental costs', I answer: in what extend development's privatization of life, individualization of decisions and perceptions makes us more fragile about what we can do?

In the light of this, and to sum up our first question, I highlight 4 points on how development discourses make easier/useful to appeal fragility to make development interventions possible:

1. False idea of objectivity: As we saw, fragility in development discourse is understood as rational, negative or even a neutral factor supported by empirical methods and development techniques (such as the World Bank list of fragile states or OCDE's fragility framework; see WB 2021 or OCDE 2020). This has caused a double erasure: the erasure of certain contexts by classifying them as inferior ('fragile') on the one hand,

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and the erasure of the work of development's cultural hegemony, thereby privileging the historical context of Western modernity in different world regions, on the other. In that sense, implementing development projects and programmes in 'fragile' contexts embodies not only the institutional and financial power of its proponents, the upgrading of living standards, and the modernisation of the productive and institutional apparatus, but also the cultural weight and discursive authority of development. Development binary thinking (fragile vs stability/developing vs developed) is, therefore, accumulative and expansionist about life.

2. A linear fiction: Fragility in development discourse creates a linear fiction about an unknown and frightful present towards the promise of stability/development. So, fragility is the state that needs to be corrected, removed or taken advantage of. In this modernist-colonial framework, fragility is linked to fear: is either the enemy to be defeated or the resource to be exploited.
3. Experts: Development represents the present as frightful that can only be understood as something to be evaluated in terms of risk and in need of protection by development experts. Experts are needed, therefore, to 'fix' fragility and bring 'hope'.
4. Adaptability: Fascination with the apocalypses is the dominant narrative of our time and has strongly influenced the development sphere (Garcés 2017). With the impossibility of imagining possible futures and understanding the future as a scarce commodity, development narratives are trap in, what I think, and paraphrasing philosopher Marina Garcés (2017), the apocalypses-salvation code. This apocalyptic-salvation code creates opportunism through a system of domination (that is capitalist, colonialist and patriarchal) where the best response for the 'client'/fragile country, state, group or context is the one that better adapts with 'green' responses to the changing fragile conditions of life. So, this fascination with the apocalypse-salvation perpetuates a sense of impotence, linked to the impossibility of dealing with and intervening in one's own living conditions. Is it not precisely our attitude of surrender that could actually be taking our species to the edge of sustainability? By carefully looking at development green narratives, we can see that this green-approach is used to recruit interested investors, much like a bank or investment company would. Green approaches not only pave the way for privatization of public assets and common pool resources, but also offer entirely new market opportunities. By positioning 'fragile' groups and contexts as a 'resource' and the donor as an agent, capable of bringing that 'resource' to life, the green economy campaign casts development both as an extractivist, capitalist and a settler colonialist venture that attacks life.

I find here the claim by the writer, thinker and indigenous leader Ailton Krenak (2019) relevant: 'we should be enough courageous to be radically alive and not having to be eternally negotiating our survival'. Fragility is a quotidian that the virus has come to intensify, but it is life that dominates the idea and not the other way around. Life is not something abstract, rather, life is the life of the planet, it's the life of the people. Human life is not sustained by itself; it needs to be sustained intentionally. So, human life is not a certainty but a possibility. In that sense, when fragility is not the premise of a dilapidated future or in need of salvation, but a space to activate the power of life against a development system that attacks life, I believe we can elaborate, personally and with others, life as a common problem.

## **What happens if we change perspective and let fragility interrogate us? What happens if we live fragility with more dignity and not with frightening fear?**

If we change perspective and let fragility interrogate us, it gives us an opportunity to stop thinking from a framework that attacks life to reorienting the subjectivities and practices that make life, fragile and finite, a priority. By putting life at the centre, we can now ask what are the consequences of our fragilities in a situated manner (and not fragility as a consequence of not achieving development's modernist paradigm of 'opportunities') – we can now, therefore, imagine, think, create and value ways of deciding about our fragilities (so not being powerless before our lives). Human and ecological fragility set the limits: the limits of the intolerable, the limits of dignity, the limits of growth, the limits we can recognize and therefore indicate. We can now answer with dignity and not through fear and impotence. This is, I believe, the fundamental critical capacity of decolonising development.

Fragility can create the conditions for actions of resistance and counter-hegemonic knowledges working towards

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better, more just and sustainable societies as shown in many current interventions such as post-extractivism in Central and South America (e.g. Gudynas 2020); Afro-ecofeminism in Sub-Saharan Africa (e.g. Tamale 2020) or degrowth in Europe (e.g. Kallis et al. 2018). Resistance to unjust and violent regimes, therefore, mobilizes fragility as part of its own exercise of power. This gives us another way to think about historical events, action and fragility in forms of resistance and social transformation. It would seem that, as exposed earlier by the graffiti in my neighborhood, without being able to think about fragility, we cannot think about revolution, and that by thinking about revolution (that is, thinking about the collective reappropriation of life), we are already under way, dismantling the resistance to fragility precisely to resist.

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