Postdevelopment

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The shortcomings and failed promises of conventional or mainstream development have long spawned lively theoretical debates, attempted reforms, and alternative visions. Beyond the confines of particular groups or institutions, consensus has never existed in respect of development theory, policy, or practice and probably never will. Critical engagement should be regarded as healthy and debates have differed considerably in terms of the extent of problems identified and changes proposed by the protagonists. Postdevelopment is emblematic of approaches that reject not just the outcomes but also the fundamental assumptions and approaches of conventional development.

In terms of intellectual history, the watershed moment was the so-called impasse in development first identified in the mid-1980s and which has been characterized as a profound crisis of existence for the discipline. Its significance lay in the coincidence of several major trends or processes, including the widespread disillusionment at the failed promises or deleterious effects of developmentalism and many development projects, increasing recognition of the environmental costs of conventional development, and the need for greater sustainability. The impact of the debt crisis and reversal of major previous gains by the enforced curtailing of development expenditure, and the profound challenge to modernist ideologies and discourses (which encompassed the major contending development theories and approaches) posed by postmodernism were also important.

After some years of foment and ferment, a series of poststructural approaches emerged that reject the monolithic, universalizing, and totalizing approach of modernist discourses like modernization theory, dependency, and neo-and structural Marxism, all of which contended to be “the” single truth. Underpinning poststructuralism, by contrast, is the embracing of difference, diversity, polyvocality, hybridity, and some degree of cultural relativism. The best-known such approaches include postmodernism, postcolonialism, posttraditionalism, and anti- and postdevelopment. Conventional modernist approaches privilege Western ideas, norms, values, and prescriptions as embodied in the bulk of post–World War II development theory, policy, professional expertise and the interventions based on them. In contrast, poststructural perspectives reject such singularity and acknowledge multiple truths and knowledges, including indigenous traditions and systems, all of which have potential value. Accordingly, processes and projects need to be formulated inclusively, drawing appropriately from each according to the specific context, and perhaps with hybridized outcomes.

Understanding anti- and postdevelopment

Since postdevelopment is itself something of an umbrella for diverse interpretations, it is helpful to distinguish between those that constitute essentially rejectionist critiques of conventional development(ism), often termed antidevelopment, and those seeking to envision or formulate
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alternative approaches. Probably the most widely cited “foundational” antidevelopment texts are The Development Dictionary (Sachs 1992), especially Gustavo Esteva’s essay therein on “development,” and Arturo Escobar’s (1995) Encountering Development. Several other volumes from the early to mid-1990s contained more diverse perspectives that preclude simple categorization, for example The Post-Development Reader (Rahnema with Bawtree 1997). By the late 1990s, critiques of these perspectives began to appear, and debate continued through the 2000s, not so much among proponents of anti- or postdevelopment themselves as with progressive critics of these approaches.

That said, it would be inaccurate to suggest that anti- and postdevelopment were entirely original interpretations, born of the development impasse and poststructural turn. Similar concerns, objections and alternative formulations have abounded through most of the history of development as a worldview, discourse, discipline, and set of practices. They were expressed in terms of opposing theories (e.g., the variants of Marxism and political economy) and paradigms or initially radical propositions and approaches to tackle perceived problems, violations, and omissions. Such propositions have included meeting basic needs, bottom-up or grassroots development, feminism and gender mainstreaming, environmental sustainability, and participatory development.

The stimulus for all such critical engagements has been strong objections on philosophical, ethical, and/or practical grounds to the flawed nature of postwar developmentalism and its impacts. Had such interventions been overwhelmingly positive, the critical concerns would have been far smaller in scope and number. However, conventional development as espoused and practised by the principal international financial institutions, donor agencies, national elites, and middle classes in low- and middle-income countries has often distorted conditions on the ground, had unintended negative consequences, or actually failed. Lessons of experience are often not learned and mistakes are then repeated as a result of “institutional failure” of various kinds (including corruption) or deliberate ignoring of evidence and recommendations on account of inconvenience, additional cost, pressure of time, vested interests, and/or misplaced faith that the implementing “experts” know best. Examples range from large dams to overambitious integrated rural development schemes, industrial “white elephant” projects, inappropriate urban housing projects, and diverse “soft” programs ill-suited to local conditions and perceived needs.

From an anti- or postdevelopment perspective, the common feature of all these problems and examples is their underpinning by an absolutely or relatively uncritical Western-centric developmentalist worldview. This perceives the objective of development as being to bridge material and other gaps and through large-scale interventions and modern technology to enable poor countries and communities to “catch up” with rich countries. Such “modernization-as-development” is generally driven by economic and technological considerations in an ideological lineage stretching back through the Cold War to the Marshall Plan, in a complex mixture of altruism and material and geopolitical self-interest (Simon 1998). However, this frequently neglects or devalues local institutions, traditions, cultures, and practices, and transforms or undermines relative or absolute self-reliance, environmental sustainability, and collective senses of wellbeing and quality of life. As a result, supposed beneficiaries as well as those who are excluded and deprived of previous resources are often alienated. Moreover, from this perspective, not only are resource-intensive, consumption-oriented,
and individualistic Western lifestyles almost universally desired, but they would be unsustainable at present for all 7 billion people on Earth.

**Critiques of anti- and postdevelopment**

One of the most widely articulated criticisms, especially of antidevelopment, is that of oversimplification and exaggeration. In particular, the considerable diversity of visions and versions of development among official agencies and institutions, as well as of practice and outcomes, are elided into a monolithic and demonic stereotype of deliberate and even cynical exploitation. To argue that the World Bank and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), for instance, are homogeneous bodies, let alone indistinguishable from other multilateral or bilateral agencies, is not credible. If nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and other actors are included, the diversity on every variable is greater still.

A variant of this critique is that of unjustified extrapolation, in which particular case studies are used as the basis for global generalizations. A good example of this is the way in which Escobar’s (1995) very detailed anthropological dissection of his native Colombia’s development experience and the interventionist role of USAID, in particular, then forms the basis for globalized antidevelopment claims. This is doubly ironic because these claims constitute precisely the same homogenizing and universalizing discursive fallacy for which anti- and postdevelopment advocates castigate conventional developmentalists, and because it is probably mainly on the basis of this broader argument that the book has achieved its classic status. The principal reason for regarding this book as a canon of anti- rather than postdevelopment in terms of the distinction being made in this entry, despite Escobar (1995, 215) himself positioning it as post-, is that it constitutes overwhelmingly a critique of development; there is only a very preliminary attempt to consider alternative possibilities at the end. It is only fair to point out, however, that Escobar’s subsequent writings reflect a moderation of this strident position as he engages more actively with the search and struggle for indigenous/local alternatives to development “from below.” He thus remains a leading postdevelopment voice.

The second major critique is that part of the oversimplification for which antidevelopmentalists are often taken to task is their overlooking or denial of the real gains achieved worldwide in terms of improved educational standards, health and welfare, and material standards of living that are reflected in widespread increases in life expectancy, improved public health, and reduced poverty. To be sure, this progress has been geographically and socially uneven but the Human Development Index and numerous other indicators bear this out. Moreover, the increased numbers of people worldwide living in absolute and relative poverty reflect growing populations rather more than people falling into poverty through development failures.

Third, as mentioned above, criticisms of development flaws and failings from within and beyond the ranks of conventional development organizations date back to the earliest overtly economic development initiatives. Some of these critiques have been far more than cosmetic and have generated entirely new understandings and approaches, the value of which has come to be widely understood to the point that they have been adopted or adapted by such agencies – the process often dubbed as “mainstreaming.” These provide evidence that institutions are not impervious to criticism or cynical and can “learn by doing,” to paraphrase an old World Bank motto.
Other radical and emancipator visions of development do not renounce development in its entirety but seek to harness appropriate elements in promoting positive, endogenously driven change. To this, postdevelopment proponents counter that reforming development is futile on account of its inappropriate (some would say objectionable) philosophical and ideological underpinnings and hence needs to be rejected or at the very least challenged fundamentally at that level. Essentially, it is the intellectual, philosophical, and/or political enterprise or “project” of development(alism), that is, the explicit intent to develop others and its underlying motives, that are fundamentally flawed rather than people’s or communities’ legitimate desire for and need of absolute and relative improvement in their material and psychological wellbeing. These latter constitute the basis of postdevelopment, starting with the experiences and aspirations of those “other(ed)” people and communities.

In addition and somewhat ironically in this sense, postdevelopment has been accused of reactionary or neopopulism in terms of a rather romantic and uncritical view of (particularly precolonial) local/indigenous traditions and cultures. Such positions avoid or ignore gender, caste, and other inequalities, exploitation, violence, and other ills in the implicit construct of indigenous cultural authenticity. This constitutes the fourth element of critique but, as Ziai’s nuanced assessments (2004, 1050; 2007) point out, this – like most other criticisms – is unfair in relation to many postdevelopment authors and highlights the dangers of generalization in relation to a very diverse and heterogeneous field. Indeed, even particular authors and individual works by an author reveal inconsistencies in terms of their vulnerability to the range of criticisms outlined here – for instance accepting the dynamic potential of cultural or biomedical hybridization while insisting on total rejection of development and all it stands for.

Fifth, some two decades since the emergence of identifiable anti- and postdevelopment critiques one might pose the question of what difference these dissident voices have made on the ground. In other words, how have they affected actual policy and practice in support of the aspirations and agendas of those at the bottom of the global pile? Undoubtedly some specific grassroots initiatives and NGO operations have been informed by such analysis and are operating more appropriately as partners and facilitators/advocates to people and communities. Despite many exhortations, however, very few published case studies exist to validate this assertion. Moreover, as with most of the poststructural perspectives and agendas, there is little evidence that anti- and postdevelopment have gained significant purchase within the larger development actors and agencies, where it appears to be business more or less as usual. Given the foundational principles of anti- and postdevelopment and the great momentum and vested interests behind such institutions, this is hardly surprising – indeed, anything else would be surprising. This in turn might be seen as at least partial validation of the common critique of anti- and postdevelopment as being more of an intellectual fashion than a practical guide and hence principally of value in academic debates and career promotion rather than being useful in the toolkit or field. Such criticisms emerged rapidly in the late 1990s and have also been leveled at most poststructural approaches (Simon 1998, 2006; Matthews 2008). It is also noteworthy that the leading postdevelopment voices have, with few exceptions, been academics or academic activists from or now based in wealthy countries. Whether the lack of purchase of these ideas in “southern” academia reflects perceptions that they have little relevance or
whether – as postdevelopment adherents would surely argue – such academics are themselves too intimately bound up with modernity and development, to abandon them is a moot point.

**Transgressing boundaries in a globalized world**

Such dilemmas are inevitable in the highly contested intellectual, policy, and project terrains constituted by development and no definitive resolution appears imminent or indeed feasible precisely because of the widely divergent perspectives, interests, and experiences. Beyond academia and some radical NGOs, it is likely that the principal recruits to agendas identifiable as substantively postdevelopmental will be individuals and groups (however defined) who feel irrevocably marginalized from the benefits of some form of development or who have been severely adversely affected by development schemes. Those who perceive some gains or hope of benefits are more likely to avoid the probable risks of total rejection, if indeed they even have any option. For instance, inhabitants of a river valley where a large hydropower dam is proposed and who will be displaced by the rising waters will surely oppose such a destructive scheme unless offered generous and appropriate compensation. In their struggle, they will probably seek support from civil society, NGOs, and internationally networked pressure groups. That does not mean, however, that they would reject or not appreciate access to reliable electricity (which such a scheme would be very unlikely to deliver them, even if they were relocated to safe ground nearby) and its potential benefits. Hence they would probably be far more positive about a meso- or micro-hydro scheme that would deliver them safe and sustainable water and electricity supplies without the massive capital cost and social, livelihood, and environmental destruction of a large scheme. Indeed, they might even lobby proactively for such a project to be commissioned. If it were undertaken as a genuinely participatory partnership between local communities and other partners (NGOs, private firms, official agencies) that ensured an appropriate degree of local “ownership” and output that was principally for local use in the first instance, all stakeholders would benefit. This would be a good example of appropriate and sustainable development and would address the objections raised by postdevelopment critics as outlined here, but whether it would qualify as being consistent with postdevelopment is a moot point.

Perhaps one lasting legacy of postdevelopment thinking will be a certain shift and sensitization of more critical thinking rather like that achieved by other poststructuralist approaches. In particular, as now acknowledged from different theoretical positions, ongoing globalization and progressively greater differentiation among countries between as well as within conventional “worlds” or other global categories have rendered such categories increasingly redundant except perhaps in world-system historico-evolutionary terms. That being so, persistent questions about why “development” is undertaken only in former colonial regions and not in some of the poorer countries of southern, central, or eastern Europe, for example, or in impoverished and deprived inner cities and peripheral regions of wealthy countries, become even more apposite. Historically, western Europe was the proving ground for postwar development efforts through the Marshall Plan; if semantic sensibilities nowadays preclude redeploying it in such contexts, perhaps it really is time to abandon this terminology and all it represents and to apply other, potentially less paternalistic or problematic vocabularies globally. Paradoxically
too, postdevelopment sensibilities suffuse the growing concern to develop “southern theory” as a counter to the traditional “northern” dominance of social theorization, although this self-ascribed label unhelpfully perpetuates the very dichotomous thinking that poststructural approaches supposedly eschew.

SEE ALSO: Dependency theory; Development; Developmentalism; Modernization theory; Postcolonial geographies; Power and development; States and development; Sustainable development

References


Further reading