

**RESEARCH PAPER**

Development as Imperialism: Problematization of Poverty and the Rhetoric of Freedom

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ABSTRACT

This article problematizes the Westernized notion of development as a colonial concept that continues to organize postcolonial societies, with specific attention to poverty, freedom, and colonial epistemology. Development has often been presented as a universal path toward prosperity, justice, and freedom, yet its postwar history shows how poverty was produced as a problem requiring external intervention. This framing allowed Western powers and global institutions to continue colonial relations through the language of improvement. The article uses qualitative conceptual analysis, drawing on neoliberal critique, de-colonial theory, post development thought, and Indigenous philosophy. It recommends that development be examined beyond policy reform and economic growth, and argues that decolonizing development requires challenging the colonial epistemologies that separate humans from land, nature, and place based knowledge.

Keywords: Development, Decolonization, Poverty, Neoliberalism, Colonial Epistemology, Indigenous Thought, Post-development

Introduction

Living in the modern age, the problematization of the Westernized notion of development is necessary. This notion has redefined human life and overtaken almost every aspect of it. The politics and economics of the past few decades, especially after the Second World War, have revolved around it. Development has acquired this power because it presents itself as a universal project of improvement, even though its history is deeply tied to Western assumptions about progress, modernization, and the proper direction of human life (Rist, 2019). Surprisingly, despite being a contentious concept, development has remained unquestionable in the politics of common sense. The main reason for this could be that, despite being a Westernized concept, development integrates itself into the culture of the subaltern subconsciously, indigenizing itself in the process.

Development is usually seen in terms of the material progress of a nation. Physical infrastructure, economic growth, education and health, human rights, alleviation of poverty, and similar factors are commonly used to judge development. The more developed a nation is, the more materially prosperous it is expected to be. These factors can be measured statistically. But development, paradoxically, is also seen as something more than material progress alone. It is attached to the promise of a better life, a freer life, and a happier life. This gives development the power to appear practical, moral, and inevitable at the same time (Peet & Hartwick, 2015).

For some, development might entail happiness and spirituality as well, besides, of course, its material criteria. Happiness is often confused with an outcome of material prosperity, achieved by following the linear path prescribed by developed nations. This makes development appear as an inclusive and comprehensive phenomenon. Development is therefore more than an economic category. It is also a worldview through which nations,

cultures, and forms of life are ranked against an imagined standard of progress (Esteva, 1992). This is probably why, despite being contentious, it remains indisputable. Its indisputability in the political economy of the modern world owes a lot to Western propaganda. Picturing capitalism as the final destination of man, the American dream as the ideal of the human race, neoliberal democracy as the only path available toward individual happiness, and big city corporate consumerism as the ultimate road toward victory are some of the many big lies garbed under Western rationales that have been sold to poor people all over the world. That such propaganda, built on creative lies, has been successfully pulled off is itself perplexing. That it continues to sell remarkably well to this day, despite being exposed time and again, remains an insult to human intelligence.

In this paper, I argue that development is an essentially imperial concept. It has been used as a cover to hide the imperialistic and colonial ambitions of the developed world and to continue and propagate its supremacy after the Second World War. Development should be seen as a product of Western rationality and not as an innocent universal concept. This Western rationality is part of what Quijano calls the coloniality of power, through which colonial domination continued to organize knowledge, labor, authority, and subjectivity even after formal colonial rule ended (Quijano, 2000). To project development as an unquestionable universal, colonial powers invented poverty as a new category of intervention, giving a new lifeline to their supremacy (Escobar, 1995, pp. 21–23). Development was projected as the only sane answer to the dilemma of poverty, starvation, oppression, and barbarity. Hence, the old guard of the civilized world was called for once again, this time as the prophets of development, the saviors, and they accepted the burden to save the world.

The encounter between development and the underdeveloped world has been paradoxical, to say the least. The paradox arises from the desire to develop without sacrificing roots and tradition. People want development, technology, roads, dams, and electricity, without surrendering their native language, tradition, and way of perceiving life and reality to cosmopolitan global norms. I argue that, given the essentially imperialistic and expansionist nature of neoliberal development - the only form of development enforced by powerful states over the last four decades- we risk losing our cultures in favor of an extremely homogenized and bland world. The cost of development, hence, is bigger than what Westernized models of economy portray. For example, the impending climate crisis, the threat of which overwhelms scientific and humanities discourse alike, is an outcome of treating development as an unquestionable universal reality. There is a strong connection between the environmental crisis and the histories of extraction, expansion, and the developmental desire to turn land into resource, and life into market value (Shiva, 1988).

Moreover, development has been used to exploit and manipulate the dreams of the poor in order to expand the control of the rich. Social injustice and inequality have increased. Traditional ecologies, epistemologies, and cosmologies have been destroyed. No matter how environment friendly a philosophy or way of life was to the earth, it has been wiped out or viciously condemned to make way for the development discourse. Those who supported this scheme have always used humanitarian slogans and rhetoric to cover their internal motives. One such slogan, freedom, will be discussed later in this paper.

The bewitching charm of development lies in the fact that, despite having achieved little in terms of elevating poor people of the world above the poverty line, it continues to enjoy the stature of a messiah. The power of development rules the political sphere of third world countries. Politicians win elections by presenting and manipulating the ideals of Westernized development in their everyday political discourses. Unsurprisingly, development is usually promoted as the foremost agenda to be pursued after elections. In this way, development has become synonymous with equality, prosperity, happiness, and justice. Problematizing development is treated as akin to a conspiracy theory, even when the facts of the past few decades demand this problematization.

Literature Review: Development as Imperialism

Problematization of Poverty

While development has almost never been problematized in the political sphere, poverty had to be problematized if the former had to remain convincingly unproblematic. In *Encountering Development*, Arturo Escobar gives a detailed analysis of the need to problematize poverty for the imposition of a new form of economic imperialism that was to redefine politics after the Second World War. Escobar believes that Truman's postwar development doctrine and its emphasis on relieving the suffering of third world people by introducing them to the world of science and development were motivated by power and greed instead of apparent altruism (Escobar, 1995, pp. 3–6). The arrogance with which international organizations linked the potential of progress with the total rejection of ancient philosophies and lifestyles that needed to be scrapped could be seen as racist and xenophobic. The dream of development was imposed, and after several decades of uncritical hegemony over third world fortunes, it resulted in poverty, malnutrition, and violence. But development continued to be unquestionable for both the right and the left. For Escobar, terms such as alternative development, participatory development, and socialist development show that the critique of capitalist development was coming only in terms of development. There was no way except to see the world in terms of development. It had achieved the status of a certainty in the social imaginary.

Escobar believes that the discovery of poverty in third world countries was used as an excuse to pursue developmental agendas that covered the vested interests of Western powers. Poverty in the third world was portrayed as a threat to the civilized world. Hence, a large scale problematization of poverty ensued, in which first world countries, particularly the United States, with the help of international organizations such as the IMF and the World Bank, devised schemes to invest in the underdeveloped world to get rid of this problem. This was something new. The problem was poverty, and its treatment was development. Poor people increasingly appeared as a social problem requiring new ways of intervention in society (Escobar, 1995, p. 22).

Ferguson's account of development as an anti-politics machine is useful here because it shows how development transforms political questions into technical problems to be solved by experts and bureaucracies (Ferguson, 1994). Poverty was a disease to be treated, and for that, social management had to be devised. New surveillance mechanisms were introduced to manage poor people of third world countries. Li's account of the will to improve similarly shows how development experts diagnose landscapes and populations as deficient in order to justify new forms of intervention, discipline, and reform (Li, 2007). The problematization of poverty led the way to the invention of development, which subsequently became a quasi-religion. Salvation was being granted through development.

This, consequently, resulted in the continuation of colonialism. The masters had changed and brought with them the newly created phenomenon of poverty and the countering mechanisms of development, giving developed countries, particularly the United States, the right to intervene politically in poorer countries. A new term, the third world, was created after the Second World War to serve the agendas of development (Escobar, 1995, pp. 31–39). The language of the third world made it possible to imagine vast and different societies as sharing a single lack, which could then be addressed through the same developmental vocabulary of aid, progress, planning, and reform (Rist, 2019).

Development, hence, is a politically biased agenda imposed on poorer countries to create a homogenized culture that could constantly reflect and acknowledge Western superiority. During the 1980s, poststructuralism's critique of Western rationality had already exposed the biased and one dimensional approach of a thesis that claimed itself to be universal. All rationality is contextual, and so is Western rationality. Escobar's

problematization of poverty, combined with influences coming from postcolonial and neo Marxist thought, exposed the structural flaws of the Western ideals of a developed world as well. These flaws act out in two ways. First, the Western burden of ridding the third world of its misery is just another form of superiority and savior complex. Second, this superiority complex is based on a wrong interpretation of history, which assumes that development models can have teleologically linear paths. Assuming that economic models can work like scientific laws and will always reproduce themselves objectively, irrespective of location and culture, is dangerous because this assumption gives the developed world a license to annihilate traditional cultures by considering them obstacles in the path of prosperity. Scott's critique of high modernism is relevant here because it shows how schemes of improvement fail when they impose abstract plans on complex local worlds that cannot be understood through centralized knowledge alone (Scott, 1998). These structural flaws are being treated here for their apparent generosity, although it could also be argued that the original intention of the developed world and its capitalist elites was never to save the third world by developing it into prosperity. The agenda was to problematize the poverty of the third world through a homogenized idea of development so that its resources could be controlled and its markets opened to the corporate devils.

Colonization of Freedom through Development

Twentieth century politics has revolved around the debate of freedom, and development has been thought of as a prerequisite for it. A free society is a developed society. A developed society must be a free society. David Harvey, in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, calls freedom just another word (Harvey, 2005, pp. 5–38). In his analysis of the victory of the neoliberal economy over everything else, Harvey exposes the use of seductive ideals of freedom and human dignity for the restoration of the class order of the elites. Keynesian economics was seen as a threat, and hence, a new form of shock therapy was introduced to benefit the rich of society. The rise of neoliberal politics from third world countries such as Chile and Argentina to the developed United States and United Kingdom was a necessary transformation to expand the exploitation of the elite and to control the resources of their own respective countries as well as the world. Milton Friedman's Chicago boys played an important role in the spread of the viral disease of neoliberalism and were supported by developed nations such as the United States and the United Kingdom to implement their exploitative agendas throughout the world (Klein, 2007, pp. 3–21).

Harvey believes that the United States' imperial tradition had been long in the making (Harvey, 2005, p. 27). Neoliberalism provided it the impetus to control the IMF and the World Bank, through which it could impose privatization and deregulation of public institutions while ensuring a good business climate for multinational corporations. All of this was carried out in the name of freedom. This rhetoric of freedom is also connected to the global history of coloniality, where the language of liberation often travels with practices of control, extraction, and economic dependency (Mignolo, 2011). Freedom of the market was seen as a necessary step toward the freedom of the individual. Resultantly, what happened was the opposite. Market fundamentalism has dismantled individual liberty instead of expanding the horizon of individual freedom, narrowing it down to the privilege of those who can fit well within the competitive nature of capitalism. Hence, freedom, practically, was just another word, like democracy and human rights, manipulated to serve the ends of neoliberal economics.

On this point, I believe freedom can also be explored as a strategy for carrying out the developmental agendas of the global status quo. The notion of development outstrips freedom in its importance as a concept for carrying out such agendas. It has been manipulated as a prerequisite for individual freedom. Under neoliberalism, freedom of the market is necessary for development. Freedom of the market, in this way, could be seen as the license to develop a nation without check. Once a nation is developed, it can stand shoulder to shoulder with other developed nations and act as an exemplary figure for the

underdeveloped. At an individual level, this is the hypothetical stage where a citizen of the concerned nation could enjoy complete freedom. Development, in this way, precedes freedom as a goal to be achieved to serve the poor better.

The development thesis, if seen from an apolitical and scientific lens, might be unproblematic. The developmental path and progress should be predictable. Achieving certain parameters should prosper the investing country involved, ending or at least decreasing poverty along the way. This thesis becomes problematic when we consider that freedom was neither desired nor intended as the outcome of developmental agendas. The supplementary goal of development was to keep the majority of the third world population in check. I call this power and knowledge relation supplementary because it was only a means to achieve the higher agenda of what Harvey calls the freedom to spread monopoly power everywhere and to concentrate capital and resources in a few hands (Harvey, 2005, p. 38). For this concentration or reconcentration of capital in the twentieth century, the notion of development has played a central role.

The results of such an endeavor are obvious and predictable. Poverty has risen, and third world countries have lost their little erstwhile freedom to the IMF and the World Bank, both of which have made sure that countries like Pakistan are kept alive on the promise of development but are never given enough space to operate outside the vicious demands of global capitalism. Development, hence, has been used to colonize the so called postcolonials. In this sense, development does not merely operate after colonialism. It becomes one of the forms through which coloniality continues under the language of reform, progress, and economic necessity (Quijano, 2000). Post in postcolonial is just unnecessary.

Results and Discussions: Why do we need to Decolonize Development?

As is evident from the arguments I have been trying to make in this paper, development has been used by Western powers for the continuation of colonization in a postcolonial world. So, an important question arises. Since development and colonization are inseparable, should the decolonization of development be seen as a necessary step to liberate the world from the clutches of colonialism? There is no straight answer to this question. But I want to explore the relationship between colonial epistemology and development, and how decolonizing the former is an important step toward decolonizing the latter. Development is a product of colonial epistemology. The coloniality of development lies in the fact that it naturalizes one form of knowledge as universal while reducing other ways of knowing, living, and relating to land as backward, irrational, or premodern (Mignolo, 2011). Without the license to exploit land provided by colonial epistemology, development cannot be materialized. It might be argued that decolonizing colonial epistemology is a prerequisite to decolonizing development.

One significant feature of colonial epistemology is its reliance on the divide between humans and nature to pursue the ideals of development. René Descartes laid the foundation for this divide in modern Western thought. This divide was essential because, in traditional and Indigenous epistemologies, the harmonious unification of humans and nature meant that humans had to refrain from extracting resources from nature for exploitative purposes. If land is to be taken as a mother out of which humans have evolved and on which they depend for their survival, there will, of course, be a certain moral impediment in appropriating the same mother for wasteful luxuries. Cartesian dualism solved this moral dilemma and announced that man should become the masters and possessors of nature (Descartes, 1998, p. 35). This was the beginning of a new kind of epistemology in Western thought, one that professed its yearning to control nature with the power of man. Shiva's critique of development is useful here because it connects Western models of progress with ecological destruction, reductionist science, and the displacement of life sustaining relations with nature (Shiva, 1988).

Descartes, along with Bacon, Hobbes, and company, laid the theoretical grounds for the practical destruction that ensued in the form of appropriation of cheap nature. Their thoughts were utilized for political motives. Philosophers like Locke justified private property for personal gains, as he had significant personal investments in British settlements in North America (Burkhart, 2019, p. 37). Appropriating land and transforming people into acceptable, enlightened human beings were portrayed as the desired goals to be achieved through the introduction of colonial private property laws. The result was an unending adventure in capitalistic development. This adventure required the translation of land into property, local knowledge into ignorance, and ecological relations into resources available for improvement and extraction (Scott, 1998).

In colonial epistemology, the subject is given the right to exploit and extract from nature for its own benefit. Rejection of the divide between humans and nature is the first and most fundamental step to countering the colonization of knowledge and the world. Thereby, decolonial thought begins with a critique of this divide. Colonization corrupted Indigenous forms of knowledge, which were based on harmony between place and thought instead of division. This divide is the product of a knowledge system in which knowing and living are two separate things. The subject is the knower, and nature is an object to be known. This subject object relation is central to colonial modernity because it makes both land and colonized peoples available to be studied, classified, improved, and governed (Quijano, 2000). Moreover, the binary between place and thought elevates thought to a superior position, which then defines and rationalizes the place in which it operates (Watts, 2013, pp. 21–23). It could be said that Indigenous and traditional knowledge formation is pre epistemological if epistemology is to be taken in its Westernized form as it operates today.

In Indigenous knowledge formation, there is no difference between place and thought, nature and human, land and its inhabitants. Thought develops organically through its relation to land. Thought is the product of land. There is no difference between ontology and epistemology, knowledge and being, thought and the place in which it operates. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's account of her time with the elders of her community shows that the elders lived their philosophies. For them, doing produces knowledge. Thinking in isolation from experience and dislocating thought from movement cannot be considered knowledge. This is their grounded normativity, a place based and practice-oriented knowledge system (Simpson, 2017, pp. 11–25).

For the successful imposition of colonial epistemology, this grounded normativity had to be displaced. Therefore, the belief and thought structure of Indigenous people were ruthlessly targeted, and their histories were reduced to mere myths. Indigenous cosmologies, which were depictions of realities, were reduced to convenient and useful rituals. These cosmologies were treated as anything except real events. The land was reduced from its position of being alive and thinking to the position of a passive object ready to be manipulated by an active perceiving subject. Watts emphasizes that Indigenous people possess complex theoretical frameworks, which are lived realities and not merely useful or beautiful myths. Their theoretical framework is not separate from their praxis. When Indigenous people believe that land is conscious, their relational responsibility toward it is reflected in practice, and maintaining communication with the land is an aspect of that responsibility (Watts, 2013, pp. 27–30). Thus, praxis and thought are inseparable. Colonization had to annihilate this practice oriented communication between land and its people. Over a period of time, it did so by introducing narratives of development under the capitalist economy, a requirement if the settler goals of colonizing land were to be achieved.

Development, thus, is a product of colonial epistemology. In order to decolonize development, colonial epistemology will have to be decolonized first. For this reason, decolonizing development cannot only mean revising development policy. It must also mean refusing the epistemological authority through which development became the name

for progress, freedom, and the future (Esteva, 1992). Tuck and Yang argue that decolonization is not a metaphor and that it does not have a synonym. They also argue that the easy absorption, adoption, and transposing of decolonization is another form of settler appropriation (Tuck and Yang, 2012, pp. 3-7). They believe that decolonization, in the settler colonial context, must involve the repatriation of land, all of the land, and not just symbolically. Decolonization demands commitment without letting appropriation interfere with the original goals. Decolonization of development in a postcolonial context will require a commitment to refuse global capitalist development while sticking to local and Indigenous roots. This, again, is not an easy thing to do. But it is necessary if we are to make the world a livable place for future generations.

Conclusion

The argument of this article has been that development cannot be understood as a neutral vocabulary of improvement because it has historically functioned as a colonial formation through which poverty was problematized, freedom was attached to market rationality, and colonial epistemology was preserved in the postcolonial world. Development acquired its authority by presenting itself as the solution to poverty while concealing the political and economic relations through which poverty had already been produced and managed. In this sense, development has helped produce the so-called underdeveloped world as an object of intervention.

The decolonization of development therefore requires more than the search for alternative policy models. We need to comprehensively critique the epistemological foundations through which land, nature, culture, and human life were made available for extraction and management. As the discussion of indigenous and decolonial thought in this article has shown, colonial epistemology depends on the separation of humans from nature, thought from place, and knowledge from lived practice. To challenge development while leaving these separations intact would preserve the grammar through which development became possible.

This is why the question of development remains especially urgent for postcolonial societies like Pakistan. Formal independence did not end the power of colonial categories but left behind economic, administrative, and intellectual structures through which postcolonial societies continued to measure themselves against Western ideals of progress. The hold of institutions such as the IMF shows how the promise of development continues to organize political and economic life in ways that limit genuine autonomy. Postcolonial societies are therefore compelled to pursue development while also suffering from the colonial assumptions that development carries.

The recovery of cultural pride among North American Indigenous communities, as Alfred argues, shows that colonial epistemology can be challenged through renewed attachment to native identity, memory, and political struggle (Alfred, 2009, p. 2). A similar intellectual and political task remains necessary in postcolonial societies. This would not mean a simple return to the past but a means of taking seriously those local, indigenous, and non-capitalist ways of living that were dismissed as backward in order to authorize development as salvation. The growing calls for indigenization of knowledge, radical pluralism, simple living, degrowth, and the reappraisal of non-capitalist spaces are an important step towards that direction because they refuse the idea that the Western path of development is the only possible horizon of social life (Peet & Hartwick, 2015, pp. 256–258).

Development, then, can be decolonized only if its colonial grammar is exposed and refused. The task is to make development more inclusive or locally sensitive. The deeper task is to ask why development became the name for justice, freedom, prosperity, and human possibility in the first place. Without that question, development will continue to appear as a cure while reproducing the conditions of dependency and extraction that it

claims to overcome. The future of decolonization depends on the courage to imagine life beyond the bewitching charm of development.

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