



Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World

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How did the industrialized nations of North America and Europe come to be seen as the appropriate models for post-World War II societies in Asia, Africa, and Latin America? How did the postwar discourse on development actually create the so-called Third World? And what will happen when development ideology collapses? To answer these questions, Arturo Escobar shows how development policies became mechanisms of control that were just as pervasive and effective as their colonial counterparts. The development apparatus generated categories powerful enough to shape the thinking even of its occasional critics while poverty and hunger became widespread. "Development" was not even partially "deconstructed" until the 1980s, when new tools for analyzing the representation of social reality were applied to specific "Third World" cases. Here Escobar deploys these new techniques in a provocative analysis of development discourse and practice in general, concluding with a discussion of alternative visions for a postdevelopment era. Escobar emphasizes the role of economists in development discourse--his case study of Colombia demonstrates that the economization of food resulted in ambitious plans, and more hunger. To depict the production of knowledge and power in other development fields, the author shows how peasants, women, and nature became objects of knowledge and targets of power under the "gaze of experts."

Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World Details

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E says

I have a love/hate relationship with this book. On the one hand I think it does a really good job of grounding development discourse in its historically specific context and showing why representation is important. On the other hand, there are several issues that really bug me. First, Escobar doesn't actually demonstrate why his interpretation of the processes at hand should be considered authoritative; he doesn't consider any alternative explanations and presents his own as though it's simply the Truth, which is rather ironic considering the general poststructuralist aversion to totalizing truth-claims. Discourse analysis is supposed to allow one to "stand detached" from hegemonic discourses, to "[separate] ourselves from it by perceiving it in a totally new form." The implication of this logic is thus that anyone who disagrees is simply not fully separated and remains ensnared within the discourse - your basic patronizing false consciousness argument. Disagreement becomes not a matter of evidence, but mere difference in interpretation.

This brings me to my second problem with the book, and the one that is to me most frustrating. The fact that the content is nearly impossible to challenge on empirical grounds would be fine if it weren't for the fact that Escobar ascribes malicious intent to the actors he deems responsible for constructing and institutionalizing development discourse, writing for example that "the new strategy sought to provide a new hold on countries and their resources" and that "the work of development institutions has not been an innocent effort on behalf of the poor." This also applies to specific events; he charges that "an entire structure of propaganda, erasure, and amnesia on Bhopal was orchestrated by science, government, and corporations which allowed the language of compensation as the only avenue of expression of outrage and injustice."

Obviously global capitalism protects and rewards some interests and actors over others, and obviously these forces collude to maintain their positions of domination, but Escobar doesn't provide ANY documentary evidence to substantiate these claims (not to mention the fact that he undertheorizes the structural conditions that make this alleged assertion of agency possible in the first place). I'm not saying that Development was an accident or contingent; there was clearly a great deal of agency exercised in both the articulation and implementation of development plans. Nor am I saying that the lack of intent lessens or excuses the eventual results, or even that the intent wasn't there. But I think that if you're going to accuse people of deliberately setting out to do something terrible you have an ethical obligation to at least TRY to provide SOME kind of evidence.

The final thing that grates is that Escobar doesn't really move beyond criticism to the articulation of any proposed alternative. At the very end of the book he makes some vague comments about cyborg culture and hybridity, in the process glossing over the fact that legacies of modernization still directly affect the "developing world" and that appeals to cyber-culture probably don't resonate a whole lot with, I don't know, people who can't grow their own food because agribusiness poisons their crops and steals their water. It's not that I necessarily think anyone who criticizes should have an alternative, but the text is symptomatic of a lot of this type of scholarship that deconstructs without making any gesture toward reconstruction (a much harder task). What is left, after everything's been disassembled?

Michelle Seizer says

Recommended read for all those interested in development and in building a world that has space for all. It will make you think out of the box and question many things we take for granted.

Didem says

Best summary to this book is

"Dear Development World,
Here are all the things I hate: here are none of the solutions.
Love, Arturo. xoxo"

If these type of guys spent their lives putting a couple bricks together in rural Africa to build schools and hospitals, maybe the world would be a difference place. But instead they spend their lives ranting against everything and over-criticising things that they wouldn't do differently whilst providing the world with no solution. In my belief, if there is criticism, there should also be a solution. Solutions and criticisms should go hand in hand. Anyone can make a point in semi-intellectual sentences with big words, basicly saying "First world countries are ethnocentric and patronising towards third world." That much is rather obvious!

Yes, he makes relevant points. I agree that we must develop a new way of viewing the "Third World", as the present constructed view is inaccurate.

But all this crap?
Seriously?

Irina says

Basically besides listing everything that he hates in very confusing and complicated language, halfway through his research he realizes that he can't offer anything for a solution and decides to write chapter 6 with 4 pages conclusion after 200 pages hate speech.

Stewart Grant says

Encountering Development (ED) is essential reading for anyone interested in (or working in) development. It was a particularly refreshing read after wading my way through the development economists publications (Easterly, Collier, et al.).

Escobar's critiques of the development apparatus are compelling and promote fresh, new discourses still relevant today, perhaps now more than ever (let us not forget ED was first published in 1995).

Some will find the language of ED superfluous and at times vague. This leads to the primary criticism of ED which is that Escobar cites a whole plethora of problems to be addressed but in response offers only vague alternatives or solutions to development, at best.

Whilst an exact blueprint for an alternative is not provided (Escobar even acknowledges the task of implementing alternatives or concrete solutions is the much more difficult task) he does suggest multiple starting points and highlights spaces with reason for optimism e.g. Chapter 3 "Discourses of Transition: Emerging Trends" of the 2012 preface.

Kirk says

I really enjoyed his arguments, but I found his writing incredibly difficult. Style aside, he shows just how pervasive the power relationships in development work really are. It calls the whole project into question. Sadly, upon explaining the problem, he doesn't have much in the way of a solution. That may make sense, though: the West is caught in its own development fiction, so a real solution will need to come from elsewhere, possibly BRICS?

Jonathan says

There are some interesting arguments in this book. It seems to me in many parts more a critique of neoliberalism than of development per se. Some alternatives are sketched out in the end of the book, but in a sketchy way.

Ce says

I started to read this one as for a seminar I had to read 2 or 3 chapters. But then I realized Escobar does something few scholars have done. Given his experience in the third world, it only made sense to me to check what he had to say about the making of US patio.

Growing and living 24 years of my life in Bolivia, Escobar presentation makes sense and helped me connect some points that I always had in my observations as a simple biologist.

For first world citizens, this book might sound like fiction or exaggerated. I was satisfied to find there is one in English that addresses this issue.

Elfl0ck says

Arturo Escobar starts this book with an intensely interesting premise: that the discourse surrounding global development in the latter half of the twentieth century reflects the international hegemonic power more than an actual desire or ability to improve the situation of impoverished peoples. However, I felt like Escobar's writing doesn't go much farther than restating that basic premise in as many different ways as possible.

As much as I see the importance of discursive analysis, I think there needs to be a point when we go beyond discourse to talk about practicality. Escobar rarely delves into the details of specific case studies where communities were destabilized by development efforts, and fails to describe a specific kind of action or even a specific way of thinking and talking about these issues that would combat the problems he brings up.

While I still respect a lot Escobar's thinking, and think this book serves as a pretty good launch pad for getting into post-development studies, I personally found the book more frustrating than enlightening.

Farida El-gueretly says

The best book out there for development thinkers. While Escobar's postmodernist take on development remains shaky, he clearly contextualizes the power differentials that continue to pervade today's development discourse. Yes he does not provide much of an alternative, but his critiques of development policies are probably the most accurate I've read thus far.

James says

This book has so many faults that perhaps it's probably worth focusing on the positives for a moment. Escobar highlights some serious problems with the World Bank, and the problems development has created for itself in the past. It also provides an interesting background history of development from its formation as a discipline in the 20th century that will be of use to newcomers to the subject (as I am).

One of the worst aspects of this book is what it fails to focus on. For instance, Escobar begins with a criticism of the terms 'First World' and 'Third World', a condescending hierarchy that could be linked intellectually to the spectre of 'civilisation'. Yet instead of destroying this concept theoretically once and for all, the author drops the issue only to employ those terms himself throughout the book! And while he proves adept at condemning the actions of some development policies, these are never put in context. Are these policies cherry-picked? Are they really representative of development? Is it true (though never mentioned in the book) that some recipients of development aid in the past are now net exporters of aid themselves? Finally, Escobar's dream of 'postdevelopment' rests heavily on a postmodernist interpretation of the world (his chapter 5 and conclusion especially), yet not once are we treated to a reflection on how valid postmodernism is! For a person with many severe criticisms of postmodernism, I felt that this book contributed to the overwhelming tendency of postmodernist works to avoid reflection on their own contentious positions.

Another problem is that after reading 210 pages (plus the 2012 preface) of Escobar's book, I am still no nearer to understanding what 'postdevelopment' would, in fact, entail. The conclusion is a nightmare of ambiguity and non-committal statements. A few examples would have been welcome, but really the whole book should have set up the conclusion already -perhaps there was no saving this book with a good last chapter.

On a final note, the worst aspect of this book by far was its impenetrable nature. The chapters were poorly demarcated into specific themes, and seemed to run into one single, over-long narrative. The writing style (in true postmodernist style) was consistently vague and unclear. There were a number of 'endless' sentences there, as well, which were so hopelessly contrived that I had to post several up on Facebook -did this book

really undergo several drafts and an editor? I find it hard to believe so.

In a word, this book was 'disappointing'.

Rian says

Essential poststructuralist criticism of development theory. Contrary to other reviewers, Escobar does actually present a positive, postdevelopment approach.

Daniel Clausen says

Arturo Escobar's book *Encountering Development* is one of the foundational works of post-development studies. His research calls into question development as an institution, as an ordering system, and as a tool of capitalism and western hegemony.

Instead of an objective science, Escobar--building on the traditions of Edward Said, Michel Foucault, and James Ferguson--argues that instead we should think of development as a powerful discourse of power and control. Within this discursive system, Escobar argues "development" dictates what can be thought and not thought. Escobar's aim, then, is to hold up development itself as an object of study. Citing Donna Haraway, Escobar writes, "To treat science as narrative is not to be dismissive. On the contrary, it is to treat it in the most serious way, without succumbing to its mystification as "the truth"" (p. 19-20).

In this way, Escobar is also carrying on the tradition of questioning the strategic alliances of knowledge and power. In the Saidian tradition (also Foucault), the Third World is a site of intervention for power of knowledge, a field in which to work, and a place where the other is reproduced in order to reaffirm hegemonic identity (in this case, Western dominance and the ethos of the market).

As Escobar says, almost by fiat, two-thirds of the world's people were transformed into poor; the concept of the poor was created so that it could be solved with the solutions already on hand (p. 13). Though the project might change, the essential nature of the solution remains the same. The expertise remains the same, and the solutions remain divorced from the local nature of the problem.

As Batterbury and Fernando (2004) write on frequent criticisms of Escobar, the discourse of development is far from the essentialist bureaucratese that Escobar depicts it as. In addition, analysis that emphasizes politics and power miss much of the problems of livelihood and production that are real and not simply constructed features of the developing world (p. 116-117).

This book will remain a controversial classic for everyone interested in development, both those critical of development and those hoping to become practitioners.

If you are interested in my full critique of the book, you can read more here:
http://www.japss.org/upload/16._Claus...

Rachel says

Dear Development World,
Here are all the things I hate: here are none of the solutions.
Love, Arturo. xoxo

Karim Malak says

Best book ever. Postmodernist critiques of subject based reasoning through a rich anthropological tapestry across Africa and Latin America. Rich with theoretical debates between Foucault- the author's favorite theorist who he spares no critique- Habermas, Laclau and Homi Bhabha. Must read for anyone who works in development and is duped by the development industry. Extremely rich in substantive argumentation (or what positivists call "case studies"). He levels a bottom up powerful critique of positivist methodology and epistemology that reaches the high altar priest of capitalism: the world bank and IMF through several rich first hand examples and 'institutional ethnography[ies]!'.
