

# THE MAKING AND UNMAKING OF THE THIRD WORLD THROUGH DEVELOPMENT

Arturo Escobar

The following text is extracted from Chapter 2, 'The Problematization of Poverty: The Tale of Three Worlds and Development', of *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J., 1995. The book poses a number of fundamental questions. For example, why did the industrialized nations of North America and Europe come to be seen as the appropriate models of post-World War II societies in Africa, Asia and Latin America? How did the postwar discourse on development actually create the so-called Third World? The book 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 analysing the representation of social reality were applied to specific 'Third World' cases. The author deploys these new techniques in a provocative analysis of development discourse and practice in general, concluding with a discussion of alternative visions for a post-development era.

ARTURO ESCOBAR is a Colombian anthropologist who is currently teaching at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. He is one of the first thinkers to have attempted analysis of the development discourse using Foucauldian methodology.

## THE DISCOURSE OF DEVELOPMENT

**W**hat does it mean to say that development started to function as a discourse, that is, that it created a space in which only certain things could be said and even imagined? If discourse is the process through which social reality comes into being – if it is the articulation of knowledge and power, of the visible and the expressible – how can the development discourse

be individualized and related to ongoing technical, political and economic events? How did development become a space for the systematic creation of concepts, theories and practices?

An entry point for this inquiry on the nature of development as discourse is its basic premisses as they were formulated in the 1940s and 1950s. The organizing premiss was the belief in the role of modernization as the only force capable of destroying archaic superstitions and relations, at whatever social, cultural, and political cost. Industrialization and urbanization were seen as the inevitable and necessarily progressive routes to modernization. Only through material advancement could social, cultural and political progress be achieved. This view determined the belief that capital investment was the most important ingredient in economic growth and development. The advance of poor countries was thus seen from the outset as depending on ample supplies of capital to provide for infrastructure, industrialization, and the overall modernization of society. Where was this capital to come from? One possible answer was domestic savings. But these countries were seen as trapped in a 'vicious circle' of poverty and lack of capital, so that a good part of the 'badly needed' capital would have to come from abroad.... Moreover, it was absolutely necessary that governments and international organizations take an active role in promoting and orchestrating the necessary efforts to overcome general backwardness and economic underdevelopment.

What, then, were the most important elements that went into the formulation of development theory, as gleaned from the earlier description? There was the process of capital formation, and the various factors associated with it: technology, population and resources, monetary and fiscal policies, industrialization and agricultural development, commerce and trade. There was also a series of factors linked to cultural considerations, such as education and the need to foster modern cultural values. Finally, there was the need to create adequate institutions for carrying out the complex task ahead: international organizations (such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, created in 1944, and most of the United Nations technical agencies, also products of the mid-1940s); national planning agencies (which proliferated in Latin America, especially after the inauguration of the Alliance for Progress in the early 1960s); and technical agencies of various kinds.

Development was not merely the result of the combination, study, or gradual elaboration of these elements (some of these topics had existed for some time); nor the product of the introduction of new ideas (some of which were already appearing or perhaps were bound to appear); nor the effect of the new international organizations or financial institutions (which had some predecessors, such as the League of Nations). It was rather the result of the establishment of a set of relations among these elements, institutions and practices and of the systematization of these relations to form a whole. The development discourse was constituted not by the array of possible objects under its domain but by the way in which, thanks to this set

of relations, it was able to form systematically the objects of which it spoke, to group them and arrange them in certain ways, and to give them a unity of their own.<sup>1</sup>

To understand development as a discourse, one must look not at the elements themselves but at the system of relations established among them. It is this system that allows the systematic creation of objects, concepts and strategies; it determines what can be thought and said. These relations – established between institutions, socio-economic processes, forms of knowledge, technological factors, and so on – define the conditions under which objects, concepts, theories and strategies can be incorporated into the discourse. In sum, the system of relations establishes a discursive practice that sets the rules of the game: who can speak, from what points of view, with what authority, and according to what criteria of expertise; it sets the rules that must be followed for this or that problem, theory or object to emerge and be named, analysed, and eventually transformed into a policy or a plan.

The objects with which development began to deal after 1945 were numerous and varied. Some of them stood out clearly (poverty, insufficient technology and capital, rapid population growth, inadequate public services, archaic agricultural practices, and so on), whereas others were introduced with more caution or even in surreptitious ways (such as cultural attitudes and values and the existence of racial, religious, geographic or ethnic factors believed to be associated with backwardness). These elements emerged from a multiplicity of points: the newly formed international organizations, government offices in distant capitals, old and new institutions, universities and research centres in developed countries, and, increasingly with the passing of time, institutions in the Third World. Everything was subjected to the eye of the new experts: the poor dwellings of the rural masses, the vast agricultural fields, cities, households, factories, hospitals, schools, public offices, towns and regions, and, in the last instance, the world as a whole. The vast surface over which the discourse moved at ease practically covered the entire cultural, economic and political geography of the Third World.

However, not all the actors distributed throughout this surface could identify objects to be studied and have their problems considered. Some clear principles of authority were in operation. They concerned the role of experts, from whom certain criteria of knowledge and competence were asked; institutions such as the United Nations, which had the moral, professional and legal authority to name subjects and define strategies; and the international lending organizations, which carried the symbols of capital and power. These principles of authority also concerned the governments of poor countries, which commanded the legal political authority over the lives of their subjects, and the position of leadership of the rich countries, which had the power, knowledge, and experience to decide on what was to be done.

Economists, demographers, educators, and experts in agriculture, public health and nutrition elaborated their theories, made their assessments and

### Silence! We Are Developing!

A certain mystifying discourse soon spread all over Africa. 'Partisan divisions are over. Everyone should unite behind the leader in the struggle for economic development.' In short: 'Silence! We are developing!' And in the process we have lost both development and democracy: 'Silence! We are killing!' Both through the open violence of the kalashnikovs and the deaf violence of structures. Stabilization funds aimed at protecting peasants from world price fluctuations have, in fact, served to accumulate surpluses during the good years, without rebates to the producers during the poor years. Thus, they often became the private safes of leaders who used them to build up their personal foreign accounts, hence contributing to the disinvestment and the plundering of their own country. As for the cadres, they migrate in masses. Why? Because an educational system inherited from the colonizer, which has not been fundamentally reformed, combined with an economy in which industrialization is structurally blocked by the absence of a sizeable market and an effective demand, have turned the African school into a factory to produce the unemployed. But also because the political conditions are often suffocating, almost suicidal, for the intellectuals. Africa, which contains 50 per cent of the world's refugees, suffers from a veritable collective cerebral haemorrhage. Eighty-five per cent of the research on Africa takes place outside the continent.

Joseph Ki-Zerbo, from his preface to Ahmadou A. Dicko, *Journal d'une défaite*, L'Harmattan/Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, 1992. (Translated by M.R.) Ki-Zerbo is president of the Centre des Recherches pour le Développement Endogène (CRDE), BP 606, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. See also pp. 153-4 below.

observations, and designed their programmes from these institutional sites. Problems were continually identified, and client categories brought into existence. Development proceeded by creating 'abnormalities' (such as the 'illiterate', the 'underdeveloped', the 'malnourished', 'small farmers', or 'landless peasants'), which it would later treat and reform. Approaches that could have had positive effects in terms of easing material constraints became, linked to this type of rationality, instruments of power and control. As time went by, new problems were progressively and selectively incorporated: once a problem was incorporated into the discourse, it had to be categorized and further specified. Some problems were specified at a given level (such as local or regional), or at various of these levels (for instance, a nutritional deficiency identified at the level of the household could be further specified as a regional production shortage or as affecting a given population group), or in relation to a particular institution. But these refined specifications did not seek so much to illuminate possible solutions as to give 'problems' a visible reality amenable to particular treatments.

This seemingly endless specification of problems required detailed observations in villages, regions and countries in the Third World. Complete dossiers of countries were elaborated, and techniques of information were designed and constantly refined. This feature of the discourse allowed for the mapping of the economic and social life of the countries, constituting a true political anatomy of the Third World.<sup>2</sup> The end result was the creation of a space of thought and action, the expansion of which was dictated in advance by the very same rules introduced during its formative stages. The development discourse defined a perceptual field structured by grids of observation, modes of inquiry and registration of problems, and forms of intervention: in short, it brought into existence a space defined not so much by the ensemble of objects with which it dealt but by a set of relations and a discursive practice that systematically produced interrelated objects, concepts, theories, strategies, and the like.

To be sure, new objects have been included, new modes of operation introduced, and a number of variables modified (for instance, in relation to strategies to combat hunger, knowledge about nutritional requirements, the types of crops given priority, and the choices of technology have changed); yet the same set of relations among these elements continues to be established by the discursive practices of the institutions involved. Moreover, seemingly opposed options can easily coexist within the same discursive field (for instance, in development economics, the structuralist school and the monetarist school seem to be in open contradiction – yet they belong to the same discursive formation and originate in the same set of relations; it can also be shown that agrarian reform, Green revolution, and integrated rural development are strategies through which the same unity, ‘hunger’, is constructed)... In other words, although the discourse has gone through a series of structural changes, the architecture of the discursive formation laid down in the period 1945–55 has remained unchanged, allowing the discourse to adapt to new conditions. The result has been the succession of development strategies and substrategies up to the present, always within the confines of the same discursive space.

It is also clear that other historical discourses influenced particular representations of development. The discourse of communism, for instance, influenced the promotion of those choices which emphasized the role of the individual in society, and, in particular, those approaches which relied on private initiative and private property. So much emphasis on this issue in the context of development, so strong a moralizing attitude, probably would not have existed without the persistent anti-communist preaching that originated in the Cold War. Yet the ways in which the discourse organized these elements cannot be reduced to causal relations.

In a similar vein, patriarchy and ethnocentrism influenced the form development took. Indigenous populations had to be ‘modernized’, where modernization meant the adoption of the ‘right’ values – namely, those held

by the white minority or a mestizo majority and, in general, those embodied in the ideal of the cultivated European; programmes for industrialization and agricultural development, however, have not only made women invisible in their role as producers but have also tended to perpetuate their subordination. Forms of power in terms of class, gender, race and nationality thus found their way into development theory and practice. The former do not determine the latter in a direct causal relation: rather, they are the development discourse's formative elements.

The examination of any given object should be done within the context of the discourse as a whole. The emphasis on capital accumulation, for instance, emerged as part of a complex set of relations in which technology, new financial institutions, systems of classification (GNP per capita), decision-making systems (such as new mechanisms for national accounting and the allocation of public resources), modes of knowledge, and international factors all played a role. What made development economists privileged figures was their position in this complex system. Options privileged or excluded must also be seen in light of the dynamics of the entire discourse – why, for instance, the discourse privileged the promotion of cash crops (to secure foreign exchange, according to capital and technological imperatives) and not food crops; centralized planning (to satisfy economic and knowledge requirements) but not participatory and decentralized approaches; agricultural development based on large mechanized farms and the use of chemical inputs but not alternative agricultural systems, based on smaller farms, ecological considerations, and integrated cropping and pest management; rapid economic growth but not the articulation of internal markets to satisfy the needs of the majority of the people; and capital-intensive but not labour-intensive solutions. With the deepening of the crisis, some of the previously excluded choices are being considered, although most often within a developmentalist perspective, as in the case of the sustainable development strategy.

Finally, what is included as legitimate development issues may depend on specific relations established in the midst of the discourse: relations, for instance, between what experts say and what international politics allows as feasible (this may determine, for instance, what an international organization may prescribe out of the recommendations of a group of experts); between one power segment and another (say, industry versus agriculture); or between two or more forms of authority (for instance, the balance between nutritionists and public health specialists, on the one hand, and the medical profession, on the other, which may determine the adoption of particular approaches to rural health care). Other types of relations to be considered are those between sites from which objects appear (for instance, between rural and urban areas); between procedures of assessment of needs (such as the use of 'empirical data' by World Bank missions), and the position of authority of those carrying out the assessment (this may determine the proposals made and the possibility of their implementation).

Relations of this type regulate development practice. Although this practice is not static, it continues to reproduce the same relations between the elements with which it deals. It was this systematization of relations that conferred upon development its great dynamic quality: its immanent adaptability to changing conditions, which allowed it to survive, indeed to thrive, up to the present. By 1955 a discourse had emerged which was characterized not by a unified object but by the formation of a vast number of objects and strategies; not by new knowledge but by the systematic inclusion of new objects under its domain. The most important exclusion, however, was and continues to be, what development was supposed to be all about: people. Development was – and continues to be for the most part – a top-down, ethnocentric and technocratic approach, which treated people and cultures as abstract concepts, statistical figures to be moved up and down in the charts of ‘progress’. Development was conceived not as a cultural process (culture was a residual variable, to disappear with the advance of modernization) but instead as a system of more or less universally applicable technical interventions intended to deliver some ‘badly needed’ goods to a ‘target’ population. It comes as no surprise that development became a force so destructive to Third World cultures, ironically in the name of people’s interests.

The crucial threshold and transformation that took place in the early post-World War II period discussed [above] were the result not of a radical epistemological or political breakthrough but of the reorganization of a number of factors that allowed the Third World to display a new visibility and to irrupt into a new realm of language. This new space was carved out of the vast and dense surface of the Third World, placing it in a field of power. Underdevelopment became the subject of political technologies that sought to erase it from the face of the earth but that ended up, instead, multiplying it to infinity.

Development fostered a way of conceiving of social life as a technical problem, as a matter of rational decision and management to be entrusted to that group of people – the development professionals – whose specialized knowledge allegedly qualified them for the task. Instead of seeing change as a process rooted in the interpretation of each society’s history and cultural tradition – as a number of intellectuals in various parts of the Third World had attempted to do in the 1920s and 1930s (Gandhi being the best known of them) – these professionals sought to devise mechanisms and procedures to make societies fit a pre-existing model that embodied the structures and functions of modernity. Like sorcerers’ apprentices, the development professionals awakened once again the dream of reason that, in their hands, as in earlier instances, produced a troubling reality.

At times, development grew to be so important for Third World countries that it became acceptable for their rulers to subject their populations to an

infinite variety of interventions, to more encompassing forms of power and systems of control; so important that First and Third World elites accepted the price of massive impoverishment, of selling Third World resources to the most convenient bidder, of degrading their physical and human ecologies, of killing and torturing, of condemning their indigenous populations to near extinction; so important that many in the Third World began to think of themselves as inferior, underdeveloped and ignorant and to doubt the value of their own culture, deciding instead to pledge allegiance to the banners of reason and progress; so important, finally, that the achievement of development clouded awareness of the impossibility of fulfilling the promises that development seemed to be making.

After four decades of this discourse, most forms of understanding and representing the Third World are still dictated by the same basic tenets. The forms of power that have appeared act not so much by repression as by normalization; not by ignorance but by controlled knowledge; not by humanitarian concern but by the bureaucratization of social action. As the conditions that gave rise to development became more pressing, it could only increase its hold, refine its methods, and extend its reach even further. That the materiality of these conditions is not conjured up by an 'objective' body of knowledge but is charted out by the rational discourses of economists, politicians and development experts of all types should already be clear. What has been achieved is a specific configuration of factors and forces in which the new language of development finds support. As a discourse, development is thus a very real historical formation, albeit articulated around an artificial construct (underdevelopment), which must be conceptualized in different ways if the power of the development discourse is to be challenged or displaced.

To be sure, there is a situation of economic exploitation that must be recognized and dealt with. Power is too cynical at the level of exploitation and should be resisted on its own terms. There is also a certain materiality of life conditions that is extremely preoccupying and that requires great effort and attention. But those seeking to understand the Third World through development have long lost sight of this materiality by building upon it a reality that, like a castle in the air, has haunted us for decades. Understanding the history of the investment of the Third World by Western forms of knowledge and power is a way to shift the ground somewhat so that we can start to look at that materiality with different eyes and in different categories.

The coherence of effects that the development discourse achieved is the key to its success as a hegemonic form of representation: the construction of the poor and underdeveloped as universal, preconstituted subjects, based on the privilege of the representers; the exercise of power over the Third World made possible by this discursive homogenization (which entails the erasure of the complexity and diversity of Third World peoples, so that a squatter in Mexico City, a Nepalese peasant, and a Tuareg nomad become equivalent to



each other as poor and underdeveloped); and the colonization and domination of the natural and human ecologies and economies of the Third World.<sup>3</sup>

Development assumes a teleology to the extent that it proposes that the 'natives' will sooner or later be reformed; at the same time, however, it reproduces endlessly the separation between reformers and those to be reformed by keeping alive the premiss of the Third World as different and inferior, as having a limited humanity in relation to the accomplished European. Development relies on this perpetual recognition and disavowal of difference, a feature identified by Bhabha<sup>4</sup> as inherent to discrimination. The signifiers of 'poverty', 'illiteracy', 'hunger' and so forth have already achieved a fixity as signifieds of 'underdevelopment' which seems impossible to sunder.

## NOTES

1. The methodology for the study of discourse used in this section follows that of Michel Foucault. See especially M. Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, Harper Colophon Books, New York, 1972; and 'Politics and the Study of Discourse', in Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon and Peter Miller, eds, *The Foucault Effect*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1991, pp. 53–72.

2. The loan agreements (Guaranteed Agreements) between the World Bank and recipient countries signed in the late 1940s and 1950s invariably included a commitment on the part of the borrower to provide 'the Bank', as it is called, with all the information it requested. It also stipulated the right of Bank officials to visit any part of the territory of the country in question. The 'missions' that this institution periodically sent to borrowing countries was a major mechanism for extracting detailed information about those countries.

3. The coherence of effects of the development discourse should not signify any sort of intentionality. As with the discourses discussed by Foucault, development must be seen as a 'strategy without strategists', in the sense that nobody is explicitly masterminding it; it is the result of a historical problematization and a systematized response to this.

4. Homi K. Bhabha, 'The Other Question: Difference, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism', in Russell Ferguson et al., *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York and MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1990, pp. 71–89.