



Encountering Development: The Making and the Unmaking of the Third World (2nd ed.)

Arturo Escobar

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In this second edition of *Encountering Development*, featuring a new preface by the author, postdevelopment anthropologist Arturo Escobar reviews the validity of the thesis he posed fifteen years ago, and assesses the ways in which the “postdevelopment era” he advocated for has led to alternative discourses on development.

Drawing on Foucaultian critical discourse analysis and Said’s concept of Orientalism (Foucault, 1980; Said, 2003), the first edition of the book – published in 1995 – presented a groundbreaking and innovative way of studying the relationship between the processes of discourse formation and power relations embedded within the field of development, which, in his view, had constructed an ethnocentric apparatus for the “West” to continue dominating the “Third World” through discourses and practices analogous to their colonialist and imperialist historic counterparts. In this new edition, Escobar affirms that “development continues to play a role in strategies of cultural and social domination”, yet acknowledges that “[his] own views on the subject have changed in important respects” (p. vii). These changes, according to Escobar (pp. vii-xii) are consequence of simultaneous and intertwined processes of global restructuring: the rise of China – and, to a lesser degree, India –; the 9/11 terrorist attacks; the so-called Washington Consensus that paved way to the advent of neoliberalism in the international politico-economic arena; the various effects of the 2008 (and ongoing) global financial crisis; and the birth of the “transition

studies”, which analyse the emergence of alternative discourses on development.

Building on the critiques and appraisals of Escobar’s 1995 thesis, this new edition aims to address the following questions: In what ways have the aforementioned processes of global restructuring influenced the formation of alternative discourses to development? How successful are these alternative discourses in generating “sites of resistance” to mainstream Western-led development in the “Third World”? In other words, how can the “postdevelopment era” be assessed when looking through contemporary lenses?

The book is comprised of a preface to the 2012 edition, plus the preface and the six chapters of the 1995 edition. All chapters start with a relevant, thought-provoking citation that leads the author to introduce each sub-thesis, which is then verified using ethnographic examples. In the 1995 edition, Escobar examines – from a poststructuralist and discourse-analytical perspective – the dynamics between the processes of Western-led discourse production *in* and *on* development and its consequences in terms of power relations, i.e. the development practices undertaken by national and international development institutions) in the “Third World”.

Chapter 1 problematises the issue of development as a tool for domination of the “Third World” by the “West”, a mere continuation of colonialist and imperialist, Orientalist and patronising, discourses and practices

(pp. 3-20). Chapter 2 tells the “tale of three worlds and development” through perhaps one of the most moving representations used by the “West” to call for action in the “Third World”: poverty (pp. 21-54). Chapter 3 provides an overview of the processes of economicist discourse generation by the Western knowledge-producing agents and institutions – namely research communities such as Harvard University, and multilateral institutions such as the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) – since the end of World War II until the 1980s, as well as specific ethnographic examples relating to development interventions in the “Third World” that generated “sites of resistance” to these discourses and practices (pp. 55-102). In a similar vein, chapter 4 looks into the rather inhumane and excessively physiological representations of “malnutrition” and “hunger” as a pivotal point to be tackled in the quest for “development” (pp. 102-153). Chapter 5 addresses issues of power and visibility by analysing the ways in which development interventions have targeted formerly ignored development “objects”, such as “small farmers”, “women”, and the “environment” (pp. 154-211). Finally, the concluding chapter envisages a “post-development era” that moves away from “techno-representations” of the “Third World” (p. 213) to disentangle the underlying power relations deeply embedded in the discourses on, and practices of, development, and to create alternative discourses to development, building on local knowledge and hybrid cultures (pp. 212-226).

Despite Escobar’s convincing and even bold tone when positing his theses, there is an underlying tendency to generalise when utilising concepts like “development”, “discourse”, “practices” and “institutions” as instruments of hegemonic power. Consequently, as Gardner (1996:171) sharply pointed out, “‘development’ is largely spoken of as if it were a homogenous, unitary set of representations and practices, epitomized and led by the World Bank”. Precisely because his analysis is generally limited to WB- or USAID-led development interventions, Escobar overlooks other academic perspectives within the political economy realm that advocated for a paradigm shift towards smaller-scale, person-centred approaches to capitalism (cf. Schumacher, 1973).

More specifically, Escobar’s succinct account of the “discovery” of women as development “objects” by the

hegemonic discourses and practices (pp. 171-192), due to its almost exclusive focus on the Women in Development (WID) liberal approach, the author systematically dismisses the contributions of the Gender and Development (GAD) approach. It should be noted here that both WID and GAD discourses tend to homogenise the problems and needs of “the average Third-World woman” (Mohanty, 2011), and generally incur in ethnocentric assumptions about gender relations in different societies (Gardner & Lewis, 1996, p. 124). However, in the new preface, Escobar again fails to even mention the plentiful and promising contributions of feminist postdevelopment and postcolonial thought (cf. Saunders, 2002; Visvanathan et al., 2011¹), although he does hint that “women have come to occupy a central place as subjects, objects, and conceptualizers of development” (p. x).

Let us step now back to the new edition’s broad aim: to critically assess whether the author’s theses are still valid against a backdrop of contemporary context. Firstly, Escobar does outline the “transformations [...] at the global level that have direct bearing on development” (p. vii), yet he does not establish a clear link between these processes and its effects throughout the “Third World” in terms of the emergence of alternative discourses. The author leaves the question open for anthropologists to address in future inquiries, and instead discusses the “emerging trends” in the field of “discourses of transition” (pp. xix-xxiv), especially in relation to Latin America (pp. xxiv-xxv).

At this point Escobar makes some trenchant arguments. He notes the emergence of alternative discourses – which he refers to as “the ascendancy of the pluriverse” –, based on local and indigenous knowledge. Case in point are the *Buen Vivir* (“living well”) approach and the recognition of the “rights of nature”, which have made their way to the Ecuadorian and Bolivian constitutions, both sanctioned in 2008 (pp. xxiv-xxxi). The mere existence of these alternative discourses is Escobar’s key contribution to the contemporary postdevelopment debate (cf. Sachs, 2010), for they aim at decentering the concept of development away from Eurocentric, anthropocentric and economicist approaches towards a more nature-

1 Whilst Visvanathan et al. 2011’s compilation might have been published at the time of writing of Escobar’s new edition of *Encountering Development*, it is a revision of an earlier edition, published in 1997, which Escobar does not refer to in his new preface.

centred and holistic outlook (p. xxxi). This is precisely the turn that Escobar so vehemently advocated for in the first edition of *Encountering Development*. Furthermore, it could be regarded as imbued with Appadurai 2004's concept of the "capacity to aspire", which places culture at the centre of a people's capability to work towards the kind of development they want.

Sadly, Escobar does not step back from the "slippery" view of hegemony that characterised the 1995 edition (Gardner, 1996, p. 171). Instead of embracing what he terms "the new ethnography of development" (pp. xv-xix), Escobar reiterates that contemporary discourses on development, although less monolithic and more inclusive² than in the past, still need to be deconstructed in a Derridian sense (cf. Fagan & et al., 2007). "Hyperethnographies", as Escobar coins them (p. xv), have emerged as an extremely valid alternative – or even complement – to discursive analyses of development. They "[allow] the ethnographer to see the entire development network, investigating in depth the main sites with their respective actors, cultural backgrounds, and practical appropriation of the interventions by local groups" (p. xv). This approach has contributed greatly to the study of how the development network operates from a holistic, all-encompassing perspective (for instance, cf. Mosse, 2005; Wedel, 2004).

It remains the task of anthropologists to further develop Escobar's key contribution to the new edition of *Encountering Development*—embracing the alternative discourses embedded in local and traditional knowledge, as well as the hybrid cultures that are borne out of the development encounter, whilst simultaneously attempting to conciliate Escobar's discursive mindset with other anthropologists' (such as David Mosse) analytical and comprehensive way of conceiving ethnographies of aid and development.

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2 Escobar (2012, p. xvi) points at the discursive shift in the aid industry, which has now mainstreamed concepts such as "good governance", "partnership" and "ownership".