Book Review


Escobar is deeply disturbed by the idea that "development" is the solution to the "problems" of Third World countries. In 1949, Harry Truman stated that "Greater production is the key to prosperity and peace" (p. 3). "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'" (p. 44). To the dismay of many economists, development has failed to resolve many of the Third World's "problems," such as poverty and violence, and in most cases, has even caused increased debt. Still, unfortunately, "experts" either ignore these facts, content with an increase in GNP or production (which usually suits the interests of First World countries) or the "experts" may search continually for other ways of forcing development to work, possibly blaming natives for not understanding how to implement the rules/structure provided by the "experts." The discourse of development was (and still is) an illusion, at best.

The first issue Escobar discusses is the construction of the idea of the Third World and the idea that these countries "needed" reformation. "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" (p. 41). The Third World is represented "as a child in need of adult guidance" (p. 30). Insufficient income was defined as the problem, and therefore economic growth was preached as the ultimate solution (p. 24). And as in most cases, the actual underlying causes of the problems were hardly identified or considered (p. 165).

Unfortunately, the development discourse was created (and even implemented) without the input of those that "required" the reform. "In the process, they [economic historians and anthropologists] deny the capacity of people to model their own behavior and reproduce forms of discourse that contribute to the social and cultural domination effected through forms of representation" (p. 95). Many times, the cultures of these Third World countries have been and are destroyed in this process. And many times, this process does not solve problems, but merely creates new ones, such as greater income disparity. Escobar quotes Alonso (1992), recognizing the transformation of the peasant "into the docile subject of the epic of progress" (p. 171). Escobar seems to believe that one of the main underlying motives of development is not necessarily to eliminate poverty, but instead to increase opportunities and production possibilities for First World countries. The World Bank "should be seen as an agent of economic and cultural imperialism at the service of the global elite" (p. 167).

Escobar beckons for a new paradigm of thinking. "The crisis in the regimes of representation of the Third World thus calls for new theories and research strategies; the crisis is a real conjunctural moment in the reconstruction of the connection between truth and reality,

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1 Arturo Escobar is a “Kenan Distinguished Professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of North Carolina, USA. His research interests are related to political ecology; the anthropology of development, social movements; Latin American development and politics. Escobar's research uses critical techniques in his provocative analysis of development discourse and practice in general. He also explores possibilities for alternative visions for a post-development era. He is a major figure in the post-development academic discourse, and a serious critic of development practices championed by western industrialized societies (Wikipedia).”

between words and things, one that demands new practices of seeing, knowing, and being” (p. 223). I agree that we must develop a new way of viewing the Third World, as the present constructed view is inaccurate.

Secondly, Escobar calls attention to those communities who have managed to develop a "hybrid culture." "Rather than being eliminated by development, many 'traditional cultures' survive through their transformative engagement with modernity” (p. 219). More frequently, popular groups in the Third World are resisting development and modernity, and are creating alternative solutions, which protect their culture. Escobar seems to identify the rise of popular groups and social movements as the only solution in avoiding or refusing modern development. This scribe is concerned with the possible weaknesses of this solution. While I am supportive of local social movements, I am uncertain that this will be a strong enough solution to stop powerful global institutions and corporations in their quest of “developing” the entire world. Also, Escobar fails to explain exactly how it is that these cultures are able to avoid being subject to the onslaught of “development”. Agreed that he points to different ways of social and cultural life which are not individualistic and purely self serving, he does not describe how this is accomplished. Given how rapidly the development discourse is getting absorbed and propagated, I think it is next to impossible and rather utopian to think that one can remain uninfluenced by it.

I am, therefore, surprised and disappointed at the extent to which Escobar rejects the idea of sustainable development. After all, the environmental movement did begin at the grassroots level, which is exactly what Escobar proposes as his only solution. "To think about alternatives in the manner of sustainable development, for instance, is to remain within the same model of thought that produced development and kept it in place. One must then resist the desire to formulate alternatives at an abstract, macro level” (p. 222). Although the idea may have been formulated under Western ideals, without the input of any Third World people, sustainable development calls for more local control. Escobar's abhorrence of macro level solutions seem to blind him from the possible benefits of the idea of sustainable development. The failure of (and damage created by) so many global solutions seems to have scared him, and unfortunately, he seems to have given up on the possibility that any macro level solution would be at all beneficial.

Escobar's dependence on local popular groups and local social movements will most likely lack the strength needed to stop further development. I believe he is idealistic in thinking this solution will succeed and unrealistic in fully rejecting the ideas put forth by sustainable development. To stop uncontrolled development, it is most likely necessary to create a global solution. Sustainable development is, at least, a step in the "right" direction. Of course, though, I am not denying that it is also necessary to promote local agency, as Escobar advocates. I do agree that “To the extent that new social practices are being constructed around the new technologies, it is crucial for the Third World to participate in the global conversations that generate such practices; local groups must position themselves in relation to the processes of material and symbolic globalization in ways that allow them to overcome their position of subordination as actors in the global scene” (pp. 209-210). It would be wise, perhaps, to create a blend that involves both local and global solutions.

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