COMMENTARY

History, time and temporality in development discourse

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Trained as a geographer, time, as well as space, has been central to my understandings and interpretations of social processes and social change. The comments here, therefore, focus on two areas in which I think history can make a contribution, conceptually and methodologically, to understanding constructions of time and the past in development policy. First, I explore the problematic way in which the discourse writes and conceals its history, and address how we can usefully engage an historical perspective to move beyond a bounded history that simply charts a linear chronology of events and sequential theoretical positions. Second, and perhaps more importantly, I argue that how we understand, invoke and imagine time and temporality in development – particularly in relation to other people in different places – reproduces and embeds global hierarchies and distinctions. Indeed, particular understandings of the past and constructions of the future not only dominate development discourse and practice but reinforce inequalities. Thus, an historical analyses that can challenge how, for example, development problematically creates and uses temporal distinctions between past, present and future as well as how it discursively imagines other places as existing in the past, is central to unpacking development policies and its institutions as well as complex processes of planned social change more broadly. Finally, I suggest that a postcolonial historical analysis can offer ways of writing different histories and of moving beyond this problematic framing of time.

Mainstream development discourse is silent about its history, legacy and genealogy. It rarely acknowledges its full historical antecedents and in particular its roots in a colonial past, despite ample evidence that the post-war international development industry was built on colonial foundations and reworks relationships, perceptions and attitudes of empire. Instead, much research and teaching in Development Studies continues to reify 1945 as the key year in which devel-

opment was initiated with the establishment of the World Bank and other Bretton Woods institutions. With a few notable exceptions (Crush 1995, Slater 1995, Power 2003), the history of development, often rehearsed, has tended towards a compartmentalization of clearly bounded, successive periods characterized by specific theoretical hegemonies (see Hettne 1995, Preston 1996 for examples of this). Thus, they begin with economic growth and modernization theories, move on to discuss 'underdevelopment' theories, neo-liberalism and the (post) Washington consensus and culminate in current thinking around globalization and security. This bounded classification not only obscures the colonial genealogy of development but also undermines attempts to demonstrate historical continuities and divergences in the theory, practice and policies of development.

This delimited and linear history constructed and continuously represented emerges, in part, out of a perceived necessity to distance development, which is understood as inherently 'good', humanitarian and progressive, from the contemporary negativity surrounding Britain's imperial history and a colonial encounter that was 'bad', exploitative and oppressive. So there is a political imperative to avoid tarnishing what is presented as a humanitarian project far removed from the supposed exploitation of the colonial era. Invoking this reified narrative of development's history, individuals and institutions involved in development today have effectively distanced their work on poverty alleviation from the past, thus absolving them of the responsibility of considering how their activities might in some ways reflect colonial practices and perceptions. One former colonial administrator and subsequent development professional indicates this social distancing from colonialism when he said, 'It was necessary to present oneself as a 'new' kind of Brit, not like those gin guzzling, idle, red faced colonial chaps'. In this way, development has successfully been recast as a universally 'good thing' even though it may be ridden with paradoxes.

Understanding the form and extent of colonial traces, however, is necessary if we are to explore how development mediates, extends, entrenches or counters colonial legacies. These historical relationships need to be analysed, not only to examine why international development has evolved in the ways in which it has, but to evaluate the potential for future development strategies specifically and the form of North/South relations generally. Since development institutions and policies continue to articulate at different levels and in different ways a relationship between the 'west and the rest', it is clearly important that we understand the history of that relationship, the form that it takes in the present and the likelihood of its transformation.

Continuities and divergences over time have recently been identified through institutional histories, analyses of the origins of the 'doctrines' of development and the colonial genealogy of ideas and practices of development (Cowen and Shenton 1996, Havinden and Meredith 1993, Munck and O'Hearn 1999) as well as through life histories of individuals (Kothari 2005). And, there is increasing recognition that the current economic, social and political situation

in developing countries and the continuing interest of the West in the Third World cannot be properly understood without an adequate understanding of their historical background. However, despite these critiques of the distorted history of the discourse, identifying and understanding the implications of a historical trajectory that links colonialism to development is not a mainstream preoccupation within the field of development. Furthermore, because development is embedded in notions of modernity and progress, the idea that particular linear changes take place in linear time is reproduced. Moreover, this limited historical analysis also reveals the largely unreflexive nature of the discipline, partly engendered through the necessity to achieve development goals and targets such as project outputs and, at a larger scale, the Millennium Development Goals.

The problematic way in which the field writes its history and the kinds of relations this conceals is compounded by how we understand and imagine 'time'; a notion that is central to development based as it is on ideas of progress and change. Development policies, practices and interventions devised to bring about these transformations are severely time bound, as evident, for example, in the very short period allocated to a development project cycle and the speed at which change is supposed to occur with the setting of endless projections and targets, best exemplified by the Millennium Development Goals devised in 2000 with an end date of 2015. Historians who take a much longer view of history and study how economies, politics and societies change over hundreds of years must surely question whether these massive transformative goals of development are achievable in such a truncated time period. Perhaps historians can, therefore, identify more realistically what is and what is not achievable.

Perceptions of modernity and progress, foundational to a development concerned with transformation, transition and change, are deeply embedded in notions of time. However, how the past and the future are understood and imagined in development policy is largely ignored, under analysed and poorly theorized. Thus, a history of development is not simply about what events took place in the past, the charting of a trajectory of dominant ideas and approaches over time, but also how the past is imagined and mapped onto other places in the present. The issue here is how the boundaries that delimit where development takes place, to and by whom, are marked out and how this subsequently frames the spatial and temporal limits of development as a field of study and intervention.

At the outset, development policy depends upon the identification of a subject, the poor and marginalized recipients of aid and policy interventions, as distinct from those who are developed and can legitimately bestow ideas about progress, morality and civility. Indeed, development has always been premised on a complex and contested set of boundaries, opposites and dualisms. These spatial (first and third worlds) and ideological (modern and traditional) binaries that demarcate the geographical location and the characteristics of different societies,

and that essentialize much development thinking, are further imbued with notions of temporality (past and future; old and new).

In development discourse people in distant places became what Appadurai (1988) calls 'incarcerated', confined, in particular locations 'over there'. This distancing and incarceration is informed by ideas about modernity that underpin development discourse and is further perpetuated by the language of, for example, the 'local', 'indigenous' and 'grassroots' that embeds recipients of development interventions in certain places and abstracts, excludes and separates them from the global. While this produces geographical separations of 'over there', it also creates temporal ones, as these places and the people who inhabit them are also imagined as existing 'back then'. Through a discourse of tradition, backwardness and underdevelopment, they become confined and consigned to the past. These social imaginings of the past that are mapped onto contemporary spatialities show how the past is not simply another time but also another place. Different temporalities then are ascribed to different spaces and peoples and in this way, a distinction is produced between the 'here and now' of the west that is positioned in relation to, and against, the 'there and then' of the Third World. Development interventions are subsequently framed to help the so-called Third World move into the future – not necessarily a future of their own imagining, however, but a future as exemplified by the west. With the past imagined as a place in the present, it is literally another country where they do things differently, allowing the west not only to live in the present but to represent the (global) future.

The past is a contested historiography, therefore, but so is the future problematically framed. Development is a term used to both describe processes of change and to offer a normative framework to guide change. However, projections of where we are, where we should be going, and how we move from one set of circumstances to another are predetermined in ways that foreclose the future. The practice of development depends on notions of progress that assume universal trajectories of development in which certain people and places are left behind and have to be brought into modernity through development interventions (Ferguson 2006). Such assumptions are founded on western epistemologies in philosophy and social theory that establish the categorical split between past, present and future as distinct kinds of time. The future then, is predictable, ordered and regulated; pre-empted and foreclosed through formal planning procedures exemplified through the targets and future scenarios of major development agencies that can be achieved through the adoption of a particular set of policy prescriptions and planning instruments that impose a predicted future within a short timeframe and with known outcomes. The World Bank's influential *Voices of the Poor* study (Narayan et al. 2000), reinforces this when it concludes that the poor need to change in order to fit in with a future which is already known and aspired to for them. Such perspectives, and the policies that stem from them, ignore the steps and strategies that people use to imagine and realize

their own futures or as Appadurai puts it, their capacity to aspire (Appadurai 2004). The implications of this way of thinking are profound, namely that universal history, and inclusion within it, is about progression towards the modern in the context of capitalist development.

I have argued that spatial and temporal distinctions ‘incarcerate’ the poor in specific times and places and (re)produce hierarchies. History scholarship can, I think, contribute methodologically, empirically and conceptually to uncovering and understanding these perceptions of time and move development policy beyond the temporal boundaries that continue to inform the industry. Taking a historical perspective can illuminate how history-making so often conceals legacies of the past evident in the contemporary period and more significantly challenge representations of the Third World as a place inhabited by peoples with no history until they become part of the story of the west. Indeed, as Slater (1993) reminds us, Third World histories have been envisaged as only beginning with their encounter with the west when he writes, ‘the rise of the west, as an idea rather than a geographical frame, is indeed a global story’.

Change over time then is embedded in a series of dualisms whereby development articulates a progression which is cultural (from traditional to modern), moral (from bad to good), spatial (Third to First worlds), political (autocratic to democratic) and temporal (from past to future). There have been attempts to unsettle and disrupt these and the categories they construct. For example, postcolonial analyses provide critical responses to the historical effects of colonialism and the persistence of colonial forms of power and knowledge into the present. In exposing colonial discourses and practices, postcolonialists reveal how contemporary global inequalities between rich and poor countries have been, and continue to be, shaped by historical power relations in multiple ways. Through problematizing, deconstructing and decentring the supposed universality of western knowledge, postcolonial perspectives critically engage with, and resist the variety of ways in which the west produces knowledge about other people in other places and interrogates hegemonic histories that often obscure the continuing effects of colonialism (see Kothari 2004). However, the implications of how time is invoked, particularly in its imaginings of past and future, have yet to be fully understood (Slater and Bell 2002). The challenge, therefore, is to explore how time is used to construct the other so that, as Fabian (1983) argues, we can begin to see the Third World as contemporaries of the west. A critical historiography, one that draws on a range of different sources, can help us do this by providing different histories of development, identifying continuities and divergences with the past, exploring the discursive distinctions between past, present and future and their spatial mapping and challenge the compressed time-scale of much contemporary development policy.

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