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Postcolonialism and international development studies: a dialectical exchange?

Luke Strongman*

Department of Social Sciences, Open Polytechnic of New Zealand, Wellington, New Zealand

‘Postcolonial studies’ is the term given to the study of diaspora and the ideology of colonialism. Since the 1970s, when postcolonial studies was termed ‘Third World’ literature, and the 1980s, when it became ‘Commonwealth’ literature, the persistence of the framework of centre and margin, coloniser and colonised, has endured as a lens with which to view human identity and cultural expression. However, the relationship of postcolonial studies to international development is less well explored. Much of postcolonial studies is concerned with articulating patterns of gain, loss, inclusion, exclusion, identity formation and change, cultural evolution and human geographical dispersal in the wake of the after-effects of colonial rule. Postcolonial critics examine texts and images in order to make inferences about the significance of cultural identity and expression under these conditions. Often this is with a diachronic view of history. International development studies offers postcolonial critics a synchronic perspective on both the policy and materiality of political ideologies affecting cultural identity and expression. This paper looks at how the relationship between postcolonial and international development studies might be furthered in a dialectical exchange. Postcolonial critics such as Said and Pollard et al offer a critical understanding that informs policy making in international development contexts.

Keywords: postcolonialism; international development; dialectics

Divergent or convergent dialogues?

[The choice] is not between traditional knowledge and modern knowledge; it is between different traditions of knowledge.¹

The liminal zones of ‘postcolonial readings’ were imagined to posit complex interrelations and provisional but culturally poignant combinations of nations, tribes and selves – in short, ‘identity’ – that could be perceived and understood

*Email: Luke.Strongman@OpenPolytechnic.ac.nz

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by the literary imagination. It was (and still is) thought that relations between inhabitants of ‘First’ and ‘Third’ world nations were irrevocably conditioned by the effects of colonial empire and that these could reflect socio-cultural processes that might be distinguished from the economic realities of transnational globalisation. In postcolonial discourse, biological, psychological, human geographical and inter-subjective identities were imagined to be negotiated in ways which combined a revision of what seemed to be monolithic narratives of modernism with the more fragile and fatalistic narratives of the traditional and indigenous. Yet poststructuralists such as Foucault and Derrida were pessimistic about the possibility of a normative ethics based on a universal human subject, and postcolonial critics read them with little meaningful riposte in terms that could be seen to be particular to the effects of colonialism. In the late 1990s the literary-critical movement of postcolonialism was arguably co-opted by poststructuralist reading strategies, which intended to challenge and subvert the hegemony of Western knowledge, or postmodernist interpretations of that knowledge, by self-reflexively questioning its authority, objectivity and universality. However, as Kumar suggests, ‘unlike anthropology and geography, development studies emerged during the colonial aftermath; as such, it entered postcolonial studies during the late 1990s’.

Immutable dialogical differences?

Much of the literature of postcolonial studies is concerned with defining what the field refers to. Almost any book dedicated to the topic will give a slightly different version of what postcolonial studies is considered to be, depending on the topic focus or reading perspective. A question that Mongia asks is whether the term refers to ‘texts or practices, to psychological conditions or to concrete historical processes’. Is it a new term for the re-examination of what used to be called Commonwealth literature, does it necessarily refer to the binary of coloniser and colonised, is it understandable within cosmopolitanism and globalisation, or is it a particular sensibility or philosophical reading paradigm? As Mongia states, ‘the term postcolonial refers not to a simple periodization but rather to a methodological revisionism which enables a wholesale critique of Western structures of knowledge and power, particularly those of the post-Enlightenment period’. From the perspective of marginalised voices and cultures concerned with the provisionality of identity, place and culture, postcolonial studies may seem occlusionary; nevertheless, as Sylvester states, ‘development studies has spent its intellectual capital in toing and froing between top-down and bottom-up creeds of developmentalism, all of which are too steeped in Western bureaucratic authority to generate substantially new ideas’. Such ideas might include the postcolonial desire to reinvent cultures of the marginalised in collaboration with development studies’ desire to raise the living standard of that culture structurally.

Knowledge management in development of human resources

Development studies is driven by the application of human capital to the furtherment of development and the potential of other forms of capital applied
to a geographical area in which a need is identified to alleviate the stress of under-resourcing. As McLean and McLean suggest, ‘Human resource development is any process or activity that, either initially or over the long term, has potential to develop…work-based knowledge, expertise, productivity and satisfaction, whether for personal or group/team gain, or for the benefit of an organisation, community, nation, or, ultimately, the whole of humanity’. Thus it may be informed by geographical, political, economic, sociological, health and education-based concerns. More generally development studies is characterised by the concern with growth, trade and security; green investment for climate and energy security, food security and health; resuscitating the global economy, and re-regulating the financial system. But it is also concerned with communication and psychology in developing (and at-risk) communities.

**Similarities and differences**

According to Silvey and Rankin, development studies in the twenty-first century is affected by ‘the retrenchment of millennial capitalist interests and the re-inscription of historic patterns of uneven development, all aggressively buttressed by new technologies of social control and tactics of domination’. Thus neoliberalism continues to result in uneven patterns of resource distribution among diverse groups that necessitate mobilisation and planning to remediate the effects of displacement and or to consolidate growth in undeveloped economies and societies. More specifically development studies continues to be concerned with issues such as ‘immigrant rights, poverty action, climate justice, and indigenous sovereignty’. However, strategists of development studies are quick to point out that their movement does not align itself with that of anti-capitalism or even with some extremist environmentalist causes, as Silvey and Rankin suggest: ‘anti-capitalist social movements promote geographic imaginaries that differ in almost every respect from those at the centre of developmentalist renderings of spaces of globalisation’. Development studies does share some commonalities with socio-environmental movements which promote social and economic good but may not do so under the prevailing rubric of sovereign ideology. Thus, as Silvey and Rankin suggest, ‘social movements refuse teleological models of sociospatial progress in favour of building coalitions with attention to diverse aspirations and trajectories’. However, there is more in common between the ‘diverse aspirations and trajectories’ of postcolonial critics and agents and development studies exponents than first might appear – both for example are interactionists in the name of geospatial history and progress. As Burnier suggests, ‘interactionists are committed to taking the perspective of situated actors in order to interpret and explain human life worlds, interactionist research is accordingly committed to the description, interpretation, and explanation of those worlds in language that is faithful to and reflective of the language (written and spoken) used by actors themselves’. Both are agents, actors and communicators of political and social identity and agency. Moreover, development studies shares some affinities with cosmopolitanism. In weak cosmopolitanism there is an equal concern shown for all persons in the world; however, strong cosmopolitanism adds the requirement that everyone be subjected to equal treatment.
Closer dialectical affinities: a shared geopolitics

It is also within these liminal border zones of transnational geospatial relations that development studies has an affinity with postcolonial studies. Like postcolonial studies, development studies concerns itself with the shifting balances of resourcing, of allegiances and conflicts in geospatial and geopolitical power between North and South, it also celebrates the role of international migration in locating sites of intervention in cross-border control. Thus development studies, like postcolonial studies may be concerned with critiques of ethnicity, of the local vs the global, of nationalism, race and racism, including unexamined racial representations, and with the colonial imaginaries and geopolitical shifts of ‘First’/‘Third’ worlds that form the dialectic of development studies. The continuum between postcolonial studies and development studies is further emphasised by Wacquant, who suggests that the hegemonic power structures of colonial and neocolonial rule are still latent in the ideologies of late capitalism. As he states: ‘Far from representing a peripheral by-product of “third-worldization” of rich countries…this return of the…realities of poverty, collective violence and ethnic-racial division issuing from the colonial past at the heart of the First World city must be understood as the result of the uneven disarticulating development of the most-advanced sectors of capitalist societies’.18

Microfinance as a hegemonic paradigm of poverty management, rooted in the promotion of markets and market subjects at the ‘bottom of the pyramid’ is a sub-prime frontier that either is liberationist or poverty enhancing – depending on the motivation of the controller of the capital, the rate of interest and the type of investment. While development studies is also associated with patterns of ‘violent dispossession’ as the result of war, famine and crime, it is also concerned with remediation of suffering and with ‘spaces of political possibility’.19 Thus development studies is partly defined by a redistribution of the ‘justice-oriented post-development map’,20 while postcolonial studies is instantiated with the aesthetics, identity formation, culture, ideology and theory of geopolitical experience and media imaginary in formerly colonial spaces. But, whereas postcolonialism might be accused of reflecting ‘universalisms and ideals’, development studies is more characterised by ‘earthly interests’, the direct confrontation of ‘ideologies and prejudice’ in their ‘experienced locales’ and the inter-relation of sites of competition, struggle and co-operation that comprise responses to alleviate these liminal zones of suffering. Consequently, where postcolonial studies may be thought of primarily as an aesthetic understanding of cultural forms, development studies focuses on the economic and social realities as central to the understanding of the ‘spatiality of development’.21

Aesthetics or practicalities?

Both postcolonial studies and development studies are thus linked to modernisation, the first in examining the rhetoric of knowledge systems as instruments of ‘power and coercion’ and the latter in the mix of affordances it offers to remEDIATE the living conditions of those who have been displaced by ideology or from whom resources have been taken or denied. As Behera states, ‘the defining principle of…modernization [was] that [it] projected a developmental sequence through which all cultures of societies must pass “as natural and universal”,
thereby, defining the key problematique of the third world – under-development. The fact that nearly six decades later, many still characterise themselves as ‘developing’ countries show how deeply the western definition of the third world has penetrated the collective psyche.22

One of the main challenges that development studies poses to postcolonial studies is that which perplexes both – namely, the validity and recognition of different systems of thought. In fact the very real necessities of development studies, broadly encompassing those patterns of geopolitical concern which fall under the gaze of the United Nations (but not exclusively so), the lived realities of starving, war-torn and displaced peoples, throw into question the ambiguities of the modernism within postcolonialism that may hinder or produce, but also positively effect, change. The voice of the displaced must be validated and supported and this postcolonialism does do. But this is not quite to ratify a universalist equality of knowledge structures. As Behera suggests, ‘Such local voices challenge the very basis of the positivist knowledge that there can be a single universalizing epistemology that will hold answers to giving all peoples in all a better life; and that “experts” and specialists, essentially from the west, had a monopoly to produce knowledge’.23 But, whereas postcolonial critics would probably reify expertise but possibly not reify ‘everyday life experiences’ except where they are indicative of wider cultural patterns, the opposite may be true of development studies, where direct action is valued above talk of direct action. Furthermore, there is another aspect at which postcolonial studies and development studies may converge: modernisation. ‘A modernist identity is a historical–political construct based upon convergence of individuals’ and communities’ (abstract) interests for pursuing common goals’.24 To perceive of a modernist identity in this aspirational way is refreshing for theorists of postcolonial studies who regard modernism in many respects as the voice of the colonial oppressor rather than a liberationist force of postcolonial identity; at the very least they are sceptical towards it. This suggests the frangibility, mutability and ‘provisional’ nature of modernity. Perhaps this points to a ‘common ground’ whereby both the general and particular are themselves symptoms of a wider misreading of identity. As Behera puts it, ‘Nativism is the exact reverse of universalism; both lack forms of self-reflexivity’.25 In comparison both development studies and postcolonialism are inherently concerned with the articulation and grounding of identity within geospatial contexts.

However, development studies also differs from postcolonialism in so much as it is not reliant on re-contesting voices of the past – narratives, traditions and politics – it is rather concerned with allowing the voices of those in the present and ameliorating the resource needs of those who are lacking development. The over-reliance on the past as a pathway to the future may by a symptom of the West’s ‘over-production’ of knowledge. As Behera suggests in an Indian context, ‘indigenizing…does not seek to reject everything modern (or western) or eulogize the pre-modern (or Indian) world. According to ancient Indian wisdom, every yuga or age has its own distinctive problems and needs to come to terms with them in its own way. The past can be a resource, or a great source of inspiration and self-confidence, but it can never become a model blueprint for the present’.26 Thus a distinct feature of indigeneity is accommodation and adaption to change. However, postcolonial studies and development studies do strike a
parallel in as much as they give voice to those on the margins but do so from different discursive viewpoints – postcolonialism by a form of discourse-politics and development studies by the practical effects of geospatial identities. There may be an anthropological difference in constructing these knowledge pathways, since indigenous peoples may not have shared the notion of Cartesian dualism inherent in the assertion of ‘self’ and ‘other’ understood as a pre-modern identity in modernist constructions of globalisation. But also, as Behera states, ‘traditional identities were not enumerated because they simply lacked the cognitive means to generate a global picture of the spaces in which social groups lived’. This highlights a feature that postcolonial studies and development studies have in common – one on an ideological basis and the other on a practical basis – that of ‘creating and regenerating subjugated knowledge’. Similarly both share a concern with questioning that version of the legitimate order which attempts to un-self-reflexively ‘reify’ and ‘legitimise’ the existing order and make it appear as natural’. Furthermore the legitimation of silenced people’s voices requires a form of cultural ‘suspension of disbelief’ – the ubiquity of the Western view of knowledge systems cannot un-self-critically be applied to judge non-Western modes of knowledge. This is a subtle means by which Western ideologues may wish to ‘universalise’ their knowledge constructs at the expense of the accommodation of indigenous responses. Moreover, by what rational argument does the West assume a right to impart legitimacy only to ‘approved’ knowledge systems? As Altbach states:

It is no surprise that relations between advanced industrial nations and developing countries in many respects are unequal. The influence of the advanced industrial nations has continued beyond the period of traditional colonialism and is one of the basic facts of economic, political, and social life of the developing world. Despite the self-evident nature of these facts, much of the analysis of the social, economic, and educational development of the Third World has ignored this basic aspect of the situation.

Thus cooperative strategies are needed at most stages of the international development enterprise. One such strategy might be the development of public–private partnerships (PPPs). A PPP is defined as ‘cooperation between public–private actors in which they jointly develop products and services and share risks, costs and resources which are connected with these products and services’. In United Nations terminology PPPs are defined as ‘voluntary and collaborative relationships between various parties, both state and non-state, in which all participants agree to work together to achieve a common purpose or undertake a specific task, and to share risks and responsibilities, resources and benefits’. Two important concepts arise in this consideration: first, the sharing of risks (through contracting/outsourcing arrangements) and, second, innovation (in which the public and private sector come together). Another feature is the long-term contract partnership which is organised around the activities of design, financing, building and owning. The operate–transfer model involves private sector financing and public sector project management capabilities. Public sector and private sector companies team up in new innovative formats to solve challenges.
Case study: attitudes towards developing rural tourism

Tourism is the largest and most diversified world industry. Tourism is utilised and exploited by many countries for income, employment, private sector growth and infrastructure development.\(^{35}\) It is estimated that by 2020 the world will have over 1.6 billion tourists at any one time. Tourism affects traditional living and rural areas. Some of its impacts are positive and some are negative. Local people have a right to participate in planning processes, and to the gains and losses with regard to tourism, but may often have lived in equilibrium with their environment before tourist development; on the other hand there may be bilateral benefits that follow from tourism. Tourism is associated with socioeconomic modification of rural areas. It enhances employment – creating capital, breaking rural isolation, refilling displaced populations. It places demands on goods, services and facilities. Tourism is often seen as arising from the motivation of private sector because it is small, varied and simple.

Other positive benefits of tourism are that it helps economic growth, creates variety and stability in employment, offers dynamism in commerce and industry, creates new markets for agricultural products and enhances the regional economy. Tourism can thus facilitate social and economic development. As a result of globalisation development of tourism in traditional areas is increasingly important because of weakening concepts of traditional culture, lifestyles and folklore. Modernisation and global homogeneity render ‘nativist’ concepts colourless and invisible. The relative peace and freedom of rural life is contrasted to urban life. Thus a fundamental question is whether eco-tourism empowers local communities or not.

The economic advantages of rural tourism are the creation of new jobs, food preparation, retailing, transport and entertainment.\(^{36}\) Social advantages include reinforcing and supporting local services, creating new facilities, developing social relationships, creating opportunities for social exchange, enhancing knowledge of local cultures, occupations and expressions of cultural identity, and repopulating rural areas.\(^{37}\) Environmental advantages include support for the natural environment, maintenance of historic houses, gardens and promenades, and environmental improvement by performing activities such as waste disposal.\(^{38}\) Economic harms include rising land, goods and services prices, ownership of country houses, displacement of local people connected to industry – supervision of local societies in a tourism area, increased crime and anti-social behaviour, overcrowding by temporary (tourist) populations, resulting in decreased local services, replacement of local small shops by restaurants and other tourist-oriented outlets, and villages become familiar with alien thoughts, fashions and wrong behaviour. Rural tourism may cause environmental harms in the modernisation and over-population of fragile ecologies. However, these may be mitigated by the implementation of policies for sustainable rural tourism development as exemplified in Figure 1.

However, while tourism demonstrates the positive benefits that may be created in developing communities, there are two critical factors which influence the health of developing communities in times of transition or distress. These are communication and psychological factors. The article now offers summaries of each.
What are effective communication practices for developmental zones in transition (tourism) or at-risk communities in crisis (for example, those developing communities that are struck by natural disaster)? As Quintanilla states: ‘It is critically important that affected communities know how, when and where aid services can be accessed, what’s going on around them, and how they can connect with aid providers’. The need for information increases and the availability and clarity of information decreases. Information sharing through effective communication systems is a form of investment in social capital, or a ‘safety valve’, which helps to strengthen community resilience. ‘Communication itself is a form of aid’. Mitigation of ‘siloiism’ or ‘isolation’ in communities is best achieved through planning. However, communication in a crisis situation needs both clarity and conciseness; it needs logical progression, a focus on the facts and the avoidance of jargon as well as effective channels – written and oral – and low and high culture.

In terms of hardware requirements for communication on aid, in developing societies where Information and Computer Technology (ICT) is not prevalent, the environmental constraints for a disaster area might include: temporary internet links, unavailability of servers, and limited or no internet access. However, where broadband computing is available through relief or remaining facilities, communication is improved when devices with simple interfaces are used, W-Fi notebook formats are popular or where power generation is also available. New technologies – mobile, SMS and social media increase the ability to access quality information. However, in communities where such infrastructure is not
available (or yet to be developed) reliability and trustworthiness of information is also deemed critical. Horizontal communication is important in such communities, as well as the vertical communication that aid workers must rely on for resources.

**Psychological effects**

As Somasundaram and Sivayoken observe, the populations of developing zones or communities in transition from catastrophe to development, which may be greater at risk, can be recognised as displaying a variety of ‘psychological and psychiatric sequelae’. Norris et al identify higher rates of anxiety following catastrophe and in community development and rehabilitation. Anxiety is frequently experienced in deracinated communities, followed by depression. They identify five main effects in the post-disaster scenario. These are non-specific distress, health problems or concerns (somatic complaints and medical conditions, quality of sleep), chronic problems in living (interpersonal relationships, occupational stress and financial stress, ecological stress), psychosocial resource loss (perceived social support, social embeddedness, self-efficacy, optimism), and problems specific to youth (clingingness, dependence, loss of sleep, aggressive behaviour, separation anxiety). The aim is either to reduce risk or to minimise it. Three orders of response to disasters are possible. These are adaptive and resilient coping responses; non-pathological distress; and maladaptive behavioural patterns – up to diagnosable psychiatric disorders. Collective traumatisation may result for large groups of affected people alongside ‘loss of community’ but is also best addressed by community interventions along the dimensions of economic development, social capital, information and communication, and community competence. Of course, traumatisation can be healed in healthy communities also. In any context health is seen as ‘complete physical, mental, [familial], social, [cultural], [spiritual] and [ecological] well-being and not merely an absence of disease or infirmity’. As Weine points out, it is only comparatively recently that scholars have integrated ‘social capital measures into a quantitative study of rehabilitation’. Social capital is defined as the ‘networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit’. The quantitative study of rehabilitation has tended to focus on the restoration of infrastructure, facilities and the capital input in so doing, as opposed to the human causal linkages that bring such restoration into effect. As Weine also suggests, social ties form a kind of ‘informal insurance’ of ready-made support networks – providing information, financial and administrative support and guidance. Politically active communities can present demands and extract resources better. Trustworthy neighbours share information, prevent dumping and looting and maintaining the relative integrity of community relations. Furthermore, embedded networks raise the costs of ‘exit’ for individuals – as networks carry latent effects which benefit individuals in a shared community. Thus it stands to reason that, if, following development efforts communication is made to strengthen social networks, this will lead to a better chance of community recovery. There is a second reason why social capital is a constituent factor for community resilience and development renewal and that is because it enables the mobilisation of information and resources at critical moments.
Postcolonialism and development studies: a dialectical exchange

It is time for both postcolonialism and development studies to stop ignoring each other’s dialogue. On the one hand, postcolonial studies is concerned with tracing the patterns of colonial retreat and in examining the cultural legacy of its aftermath. On the other, it risks, as Rajan suggests, ignoring the political and socio-economic realities of the postcolonial nations from which it has retreated – including issues of ‘poverty, resource distribution, state violence, human-rights violations, urban sanitation, development’.

Development studies has both ‘theory’ and the power of the ‘Western purse out in the “Third World”, as Sylvester has put it, with which to construct its agentive discourse. Yet there are potentially shared areas of convergence. Both postcolonial and development studies are concerned with political and cultural transformation, which may be registered as social, economic and cultural shifts in identity and relationships specific to geographies and ethnicities over time. In this context it may seem unfair to claim that postcolonialism is something that only happens when basic needs are met – the paradigm is more aware of developing voices than that. In fact many of theoretical and cultural reformulations are driven by the urgency of disproportionate resourcing (providing that these voices have something worthwhile to say). It may, however, be that the convergence between the fields has led to a rethinking of the dichotomy of mainstream and alternative development to include ‘human development and structural adjustment’ as Sylvester puts it.

Whatever form such integration takes it has to be acknowledged that the Third World of postcolonial studies shares with development studies a desire to ‘insert the periphery, the marginal, the non-expert into their own destinies’. The debates over theoretical and methodological ideologies are closer than is widely known. Similarly, as Kumar suggests, ‘heterogeneous, hybrid and locally negotiated syncretic practices that constitute people’s lived perceptions of development’ are seen as ‘emblematic of the coming together of (post) development and postcolonialism’. The major difference, from a discursive perspective, is rather the understanding of and orientation towards history. In the former it is a tendency to be backward looking, hence the ‘post’ in postcolonial studies (perhaps akin to many indigenous communities’ view of time); in comparison development studies tends to look forwards. Such forward looking must encompass plans for settlement and regeneration but also needs to be mindful of strategies for resilience and sustainability.

Notes on Contributor

Luke Strongman is Senior Lecturer in communication at the Open Polytechnic in New Zealand. He has published on diverse topics, including postcolonialism, anthropological interpretation of archaeological artefacts, distance education, and humanities and engineering.

Notes

1. Nandy, The Intimate Enemy.
2. See, for example, Bhabha 1994; Spivak 1990; and Spivak 1998.
8. Ibid., 2.
10. McLean and McLean, “If We can’t Define HRD in One Country,” 322.
13. Ibid., 697.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
18. Wacquant, Urban Outcasts, 25.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid., 701.
23. Ibid., 356.
24. Ibid., 361.
25. Ibid., 359.
26. Ibid., 359.
27. Ibid., 362.
28. Ibid., 356.
29. Ibid., 348.
34. Ibid., 3.
36. Ibid., 1605.
37. Ibid.
38. Ibid
40. Ibid., para 13.
41. Leighton et al., “There is no Substitute for Media Training,” 138–139
43. Quintanilla, “Disaster Communications,” para 5.
44. Somasundaram and Sivayokan, “Rebuilding Community Resilience,” 2.
45. Norris et al., “60,000 Disaster Victims Speak,” 216–217.
47. Ibid., 4.
52. Dynes, Community Social Capital.
55. Ibid., 709.
56. Ibid., 712.

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