

Can the Subaltern be Heard?

Knowledge Production, Representation, and Responsibility in International Development

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Abstract: What are the limitations of representation in the production of international development knowledge? This paper argues that by engaging in the practice of defining the needs, priorities, and collective goals and ambitions of the recipients of development projects in the global South, development experts and knowledge producers in the global North have contributed to the further marginalization of subaltern voices and knowledges. Moreover, this asymmetrical power relationship in knowledge production has led to the deeper entrenchment of the hegemonic Eurocentric, capitalist, and neoliberal norms and practices in international development. Drawing on works of critical scholarship that emphasize indigenous voices and bodies of knowledge, a case is made that for subaltern voices to be heard privileged experts and knowledge producers have a responsibility to disoccupy the discursive space in which development norms, objectives, and strategies are defined.

Introduction

By the end of the twentieth century, the international development regime, sustained through a vast and complex network of international financial institutions (IFIs), national aid agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and their private sector partners, had come to be seen as the continuation of the colonial project and as a means of "draining resources away from those who [need] them most" (Shiva, 1989: 2). Critics also drew attention to what they described as the struggles of marginalized groups (including women, peasants, and the poor) in the global South against "development," and their similarities with the earlier struggles "for liberation from colonialism" (ibid.). Despite these and many other serious challenges to the prevailing developmentalist norms and practices, Western dominated international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB), as well as national aid agencies including the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the UK's Department for International Development (DFID), continue to play a dominant role in short and long term development projects across the global South. Within this context, development experts and scholars in the global North continue to occupy a discursive space in which development knowledges, objectives, and strategies are defined and subsequently adopted by major national and international development agencies.

The present article deals with two distinct, yet interconnected issues of development (as a function of states and IFIs), and representation (as a function of experts and knowledge producers). Central to this inquiry is the question of the responsibility of privileged intellectuals in the global North with regard to the presumed recipients of development projects in the global South. A number of other questions are also raised. For instance, precisely who is in a position to

define development and determine its objectives and strategies? To what extent have the voices of the poor and the marginalized been present in mainstream development literature? What are the limits of representation in knowledge production relating to international development? And finally, under what circumstances can subaltern voices be heard? This paper argues that by engaging in the practice of defining the needs, priorities, and collective goals and ambitions of the recipients of development projects in the global South, development experts and knowledge producers in the global North have contributed to the further marginalization of subaltern voices and knowledges. Moreover, this asymmetrical power relationship in knowledge production has led to a deeper entrenchment of the hegemonic Eurocentric, capitalist, and neoliberal norms and practices in international development. Drawing on a body of critical scholarship that emphasizes indigenous voices and knowledges, a case is made that for subaltern voices to be heard privileged experts and knowledge producers have a responsibility to disoccupy the discursive space in which development norms, objectives, and strategies are defined.

Development and Hegemonic Knowledge Production Regime

In the post-World War II period, and with the rapid independence of former European colonies, theories of modernization emerged in the global North (primarily in the United States) with the declared objective of turning the newly independent states into modern and developed societies (Higgott, 1980: 29). The subdiscipline of comparative politics was conceived within the American academy in order to construct coherent, cumulative, and universally applicable theories of progress (Eckstein, 1998: 511). Metanarratives of social and political change (including theories of modernization and economic growth) were produced, and it was assumed not only that modernization was always "desirable and possible," but also that it would occur along a linear and predictable trajectory (Chilcote, 1974: 20). For modernization theorists, a change in norms, behaviors, and cultures of social actors was inevitably followed by a higher level of order and a sequence of foreseeable and manageable stages leading to development and progress (Nabudere, 1997: 205; Bernstein, 1979: 149).

The oft-repeated claim was that progress would be possible through reliance on science, positivism, and empiricism. Scientific reason and empirical research, it was maintained, would facilitate the sociocultural transformation of societies from traditional to modern. Social sciences were brought in to identify social and cultural barriers to economic growth, and to theorize about the conditions needed for achieving higher economic output. In various accounts of modernization theory, non-European cultures and traditions came to be seen as hindrances to modernity and development.¹ The *modus operandi* of these theorizations was the reproduction of the Weberian tradition/modernity binary. The monolithic and static ideal type of traditional society was constructed negatively in relation to the complex and dynamic ideal type of modern society, and tradition (often understood to mean non-Western cultures and customs) came to be seen as an obstacle to be overcome on the path to development (Bernstein, 1979: 146).

Agents of modernization in the then newly labelled Third World societies also included native intellectuals and scholars, some of whom occupied critical positions in post-independence regimes and were considered by political leaders as "partners of development" (Moore-Sieray, 1996: 30). As Moore-Sieray argues, however, what passed at the time as Third World scholarship was for the most part "a mere extension of Western scholarship and interests," and Eurocentrism was a key trait of many of these intellectual productions (*ibid*, 41). For many Western-educated or Western-oriented development experts in the global South, the intellectual project of defining the goals of development consisted, on the one hand, of universalizing otherwise parochial Western histories, cultural values, and development paths, and on the other hand, disregarding local

narratives, indigenous sources of knowledge, and social, historical, and cultural particularities of their own societies. Abstracted from the historical experience of the emergence and the expansion of industrial capitalism in Western Europe and North America, these Eurocentric accounts sought to show the universal path to development "to which the colonial people could be steered by a process of guidance and diffusion" (Nabudere, 1997: 209).

In the late 1960s, the persistence of the conditions of poverty, hunger, and disease in various parts of the global South, and the surfacing of new problems such as the mushrooming of urban slums, led to a radical questioning of economic growth and modernization models. Endorsed by the World Bank (WB), the basic needs approach called for the realization of the essential needs "of the poorest sectors as a precondition to industrialization and growth" (Bergeron, 2004: 61). The new approach shared the presuppositions of the previous approaches regarding the possibility of a top-down development strategy based on predictable and manageable stages, and it did not depart from the conventional conceptualization of development as a progressive course of industrialization and urbanization of society. Nevertheless it problematized modernization and growth theories' "consumeristic notion of the good life," and called for increased attention to qualitative concerns such as "empowerment and participation" (ibid). Soon after, however, the WB abandoned the new approach and economic growth once again topped the agenda. According to Suzanne Bergeron this sudden shift was partially aimed at containing the growing discontent with hegemonic development practices to which the inequality concerns raised by basic needs had given voice. Another important factor was the looming debt crisis, and the arguments in favor of a "return to fundamentals," which meant a renewed commitment to economic growth. Budget deficits and IMF's conditional loans also forced cutbacks in social spending and redistributive measures (ibid, 64-65).

In the late 1970s globalization emerged as a dominant discourse in international development and a major challenger to the state-centric focus of modernization and basic needs. With the advent of globalization also came structural adjustment programs (SAPs), and by the 1980s the IMF and the WB were actively promoting SAPs particularly in Africa and Latin America (Peet and Hartwick, 1999: 55-57). An emphasis on "liberalization and market efficiency" replaced the previous decade's agenda of developing national industries, meeting basic needs, and achieving order and stability.² SAPs were also informed by assumptions about the "economic rationality" of individual agents, the possibility of achieving development through utilizing this economic rationality, and - similar to previous approaches - "the ability of Western development experts to engineer and control this process" (ibid, 93). The implementation of SAPs, hence, was carried out in a non-participatory and top-down (indeed forceful) fashion, with the IMF and the WB attaching strict conditionalities to development loans made to recipients in the global South. In the age of SAPs, the conceptualization and implementation of development strategies was once again in the monopoly of major International Financial Institutions (IFIs) and Western development agencies, and the voices and knowledges of those at the receiving ends of these policies were effectively excluded. Despite the predictions that SAPs would increase economic efficiency and reduce fiscal imbalances, within a decade of their introduction evidence began to emerge about their "negative impact on the poor, especially women" (Parpart, 2000: 44).

Beginning in the late 1990s, and responding to criticisms about the top-down and exclusionary nature of mainstream development norms and practices, many IFIs and aid agencies adopted the language of participation and inclusion. The IMF and the WB, widely recognized as the major proponents and brokers of global neoliberal economics, now endorse Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) with an emphasis on the role of indigenous knowledge and local participation. This apparent shift, however, is observed with much skepticism. John Briggs, for instance, argues that the WB's attention to indigenous knowledge is not "to offer a fundamental challenge to development, but simply to offer the opportunity for some technical, place-specific solutions where

indigenous knowledge can hopefully be integrated into World Bank-supported programmes” (2008: 108).

Noting continuities in the various development approaches in place since the 1950s, and their inability to achieve their stated objectives, a number of other critics have radically questioned the basic tenets and institutional mechanisms of the international development regime. Marnia Lazreg, among others, argues that development experts and knowledge producers benefit from “the very production and maintenance” of the said regime, whose major success, according to her, has been the expansion and reinforcement of global capitalism (2002: 134). While the radical rejection of development has not always been coupled with concrete alternatives for addressing the existing problems of poverty, hunger, disease, and uneven distribution of resources, it has nevertheless provided important insights about future possibilities. Extending on Samir Amin’s concept of economic delinking, for instance, Stefan Andreasson makes a case for de-growth and progressive change outside of the framework of development (2005: 979). Furthermore, a range of postdevelopment theorists have articulated pro-poor and pro-planet visions of change in terms of “communities combining elements of ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ culture, regaining control in the fields of politics, economics and knowledge,” in resistance against the modern nation-state, global capitalism, and scientific positivism (Ziai, 2004: 1045).

Exclusion of Subaltern Speech

The particular accounts of modernity and progress that have informed the dominant modes of knowledge production in the post-WWII international development regime find their roots in the Enlightenment notions of rationalism, empiricism, and the mastery of man over nature. As such, development studies, not unlike many other modern disciplines, has, for the most part, maintained a strong Eurocentric core, excluding a host of other (non-European) traditions of knowledge. Nevertheless, the post-war era has also witnessed the inception and evolution of an alternative line of thinking which problematizes the continuation of asymmetrical power relations between the former colonial powers and former colonies. This new thinking has further drawn attention to the challenges of setting a new path and implementing a new agenda for lessening human suffering and increasing the quality of life in what we now regard as the global South.

One such challenge, as identified by a number of critical thinkers in the global South, has been that of intellectual dependency and the hegemony of Eurocentric assumptions and research methods in various areas of knowledge production, including development studies.³ Much like political, economic, and technological forms of dependency, intellectual dependency emerged in the context of colonialism and imperialism. Its enabling mechanisms, during the colonial era, often included direct control of schools, universities, and publishing houses, by colonial administrations, and the coming to power of a new class of (mostly Western-educated) comprador elites and technocrats who sought to design and build their societies anew in the image of Western modernity. Mindful of the consequences of the prevailing state of intellectual dependence in their societies, in the mid-twentieth century a number of leading intellectuals in the global South, including Orlando Fals Borda, Lloyd Best, Syed Hussein Alatas, and Ali Shariati called for the decolonization of knowledge production particularly in social sciences and the humanities.

Despite the efforts to decolonize knowledge production intellectual dependency, in its varied manifestations, remains in place today in much of the global South. As Syed Farid Alatas points out, though the institutions of knowledge production in the global South are no longer under the direct control and influence of foreign powers, social science disciplines in many of these countries are conditioned by the development and growth of social sciences in the countries of the global North with whom the former countries remain in a center/periphery type of relationship (2003:

602). Alatas further argues that while intellectual dependency takes many forms (i.e. dependence on education technology, research investment, global North demand for particular skills, etc.), its most devastating - and yet most prevalent - manifestation is conceptual dependency. According to him, even the countries of the semi-periphery are dependent upon the core for basic social sciences concepts. Surveying a number of leading social sciences journals, Alatas concludes that whereas scholars in the global South often conduct empirical research, their share of theoretical and conceptual work is minimal (ibid, 604-7).

In critiquing the dominant modes and mechanisms of knowledge production in international development, and in examining the challenges of conceptualizing either alternative developments or alternatives to development, a number of critical scholars have given attention to the processes through which subaltern voices are silenced and alternative frameworks are excluded. One such mechanism, which is the subject of critical inquiry in the scholarships of Abdallah Laroui and Edward Said, is reductive repetition.⁴ As Andreasson observes, in the course of European colonialism in Africa, this mechanism served the important function of reducing diverse African societies to a single cultural, economic, and political entity, inferior to the West, backwards, and in need of "external solutions" for "internal deficiencies" (2005: 972). The imposition of external measures and the exclusion of local knowledges and indigenous voices have continued in the postcolonial period, albeit this time, under the disguise of modernizing the productive sector and implementing reforms and structural adjustments. As noted above, even the recent adoption of the language of inclusion and participation by major IFIs and national aid and development agencies has not brought about a meaningful inclusion of local knowledges and the genuine participation of those who remain the recipients of development programs. The question thus remains: who gets to define development and speak for those who are today on the receiving end of an array of development programs?

In her highly-influential essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak problematizes the representations of "the third-world subject" within "the Western discourse" (1988: 271). The exclusion - or absence - of a subaltern voice, for Spivak, results from the undermining of subaltern agency by and within the dominant power relations that create the very condition of subalternity in the first place. Focusing on the debates around the tradition of sati (bride burning) in colonial India, she makes a case that the absence of female voice in these debates is due to colonial as well as indigenous manipulations of female agency. According to one commentator, Spivak's conclusion appears to suggest that subalternity is *ipso facto* the condition of voicelessness, making the answer to the question posed by the title of her essay a resounding no (Davidson, 2001: 169). Other commentators, however, have proposed that the question may be understood somewhat differently. For Michèle Barrett, for instance, a more appropriate way of reading Spivak's question of can the subaltern speak? is to ask if the hegemonic ear can hear anything (2004: 359). Tina Davidson, too, holds that the subaltern can indeed speak, and that "subaltern voices can be heard and recognized through careful attentiveness to surviving documentation" (2001: 172). But if we assume, as Barrett and Davidson do, that the subaltern is not voiceless, precisely what does it mean for the hegemonic ear to hear the subaltern voice? In other words, what are the conditions under which the subaltern voice may be recognized as such despite and within the existing asymmetrical power relations and structures? And, as it concerns international development, what exactly does it mean to include the voices and knowledges of those who suffer from the malaise of under- and maldevelopment, within the existing context of the divide between the global North and the global South? What are the limitations of producing development knowledge in the global North for implementation and consumption in the global South?

Disoccupying the Discursive Space

In an essay titled, "The Problem of Speaking for Others," Linda Martín Alcoff recounts the true story of an encounter between a group of indigenous Canadian writers and Anne Cameron, a renowned white Canadian author who has written several novels giving first person accounts of indigenous women. At the 1998 International Feminist Book Fair in Montreal, the group of indigenous writers "asks Cameron to, in their words, 'move over' on the grounds that her writings are disempowering for indigenous authors" (1996: 97). In the same essay, Alcoff also tells the story of a male scholar who is invited to speak "on the political problems of post-modernism" to an audience of "many white women and people of oppressed minorities and races." He refuses to lecture on the topic on the grounds that "as a white male he does not feel that he can speak for the feminist and post-colonial perspectives which have launched the critical interrogation of postmodernism's politics." He, instead, gives a lecture on architecture (ibid).

These two stories are decidedly revelatory not only with regard to the limitations of representation, but also with respect to the responsibilities inferred by a privileged status, such as that of a white settler novelist, or a white male scholar. While a privileged status enables one to both speak and be heard, a critical engagement with the nature of privilege, and the asymmetrical power relations of which privilege is a product, is necessary for understanding relations of domination and subordination within (and often concealed by) the very act of speech. It has been noted that in conducting social science research, an important distinction is to be made between speaking for and speaking with (Pelias, 2008: 191). To speak for, Alcoff explains, is to represent "the other's needs, goals, situation, and in fact, who they are based on [one's] own situated interpretation" (1995: 100). Extending on this distinction, Daniel Mato proposes that the focus of research in social sciences and humanities ought to change "from studying the other [...] to studying with that other" (2000: 481).

Mato's proposed shift entails the implicit assumption that the subaltern has a voice, and that subaltern voice can in fact be heard in a dialogical engagement. He is, nevertheless, also attentive to the difficulty of hearing subaltern speech in the existing context of asymmetrical power relations that shape and influence our modes of knowledge production. In an essay, titled "Not 'Studying the Subaltern,' but Studying with 'Subaltern' Social Groups, or, at Least, Studying the Hegemonic Articulations of Power," he shows that the discipline of subaltern studies, which emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s, was itself rooted in and informed by power relations in the hegemonic regime of knowledge production. In particular, he points out that the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group (LASSG), founded in 1992 by John Beverley and Ileana Rodríguez, emerged not from the Latin American academy, but instead from within the U.S. academy, with the goal of studying "cases in a particular 'region' or 'area' of the world outside the United States: Latin America" (ibid, 480).

It is in response to the LASSG's call in its founding statement for "studying the subaltern," that Mato makes a case for studying with as an alternative approach to research and knowledge production. However, as Mato acknowledges himself, although studying with the subaltern is ethically, politically, and epistemologically preferable to studying the subaltern, it is only rarely feasible, not in the least because the subaltern subject has very little to gain from such a research collaboration (ibid, 487). Thus, he arrives at the conclusion that where studying with the subaltern is not possible, privileged experts and knowledge producers can turn their attention to critiquing "the practices of global agents, such as the World Bank or the United States Agency for International Development, and the articulations of power that connect them to hegemonic domestic/local agents." Such a shift in research focus, Mato asserts, "may produce knowledge that helps concerned social groups learn about global-local articulations of power, hegemonic global and domestic agents' practices, and how these practices may impact their lives" (ibid, 481).

The call for studying with the subaltern has been restated in recent years by a number of scholars who are committed to the decolonization of the social sciences and humanities.⁵ Though this call clearly represents an attempt to move past the Eurocentric modes of knowledge production that privilege Western experts and institutions, there remains various complex challenges and questions to which the proponents of this emerging discourse are yet to provide satisfactory answers. Mato aptly articulates one of these questions, namely that of feasibility. Another challenge concerns the conditions under which the subaltern voice can be heard within the existing context of power asymmetries that create the condition of subalternity and undermine the agency of the subaltern subject. Even if Spivak's question is to be understood as one about the ability of the hegemonic ear to hear, her insight about the manipulation of subaltern agency and voice serves as an important reminder that the audibility of subaltern speech requires more than merely conceiving of the subaltern other as a participant in a dialogue (which is itself initiated by privileged experts and knowledge producers, often residing in the global North) rather than an object to be studied.

To return here to the two stories recounted by Alcoff, a case might be made that an important prerequisite for the audibility of subaltern speech is the moving over of privileged experts and knowledge producers as an act of disoccupying the discursive space about the various manifestations of subalternity, including the condition of under- or maldevelopment. Because the concept of moving over is rooted in an awareness of asymmetrical and unjust power relations it necessarily entails (and would in fact be rendered meaningless without) a simultaneous theoretical and political resistance against hegemony, and, more concretely (for the purpose of the present discussion), the development agenda advanced by the IMF and WB. Yet this concept also gives recognition to the limitations that the very status of privilege imposes on the audibility of subaltern speech. The request to move over is not axiomatically an invitation to study with. It calls into question and aims to unsettle the white author's position of privilege in relation to indigenous writers. As Alcoff pertinently notes, without acknowledging the prevailing relations of power and privilege in which identity and social position are constructed, the conversation (concerning the condition of subalternity) will not be one between us and the other, but rather, between us and us (1995: 98). Equally important, engaging in a genuine dialogue with the subaltern other requires abandoning (Eurocentric) metanarratives, acknowledging the particularity of each narrative and experience, and recognizing that far from being objective, reality is composed of a plurality of subjective perceptions (Stengers, 2008: 91).

Conclusion

Underlying both notions of studying with the subaltern and disoccupying the discursive space in which knowledge concerning the subaltern is produced is a recognition that the knowledge producer is not an objective observer, but always a subjective agent who engages in the construction of reality and whose engagement is determined by the particularities of her/his embeddedness in power structures. The subaltern does speak. Certain voices, however, find no place - and thus are lost (not accidentally) - in the hegemonic modes of knowledge production.

Unsettling the prevailing knowledge production regime requires a conscious effort to allow the subaltern voice to be heard. Yet in this effort, a number of complex questions and challenges ought to be taken into account. For one, how do we know when the subaltern is speaking? To put the question differently, how do we know when the voice being heard is in fact that of the subaltern? The voice of the intellectual classes or the comprador elites of the global South cannot be taken as the voice, and the true interest, of all the subaltern groups (i.e. women, indigenous peoples, the poor, etc.). Indeed, Spivak and others have drawn attention to the role of "native informants,"

who are regarded by intellectuals in the global North as representative of "the voices of the other" (1988: 284). Mato, has further problematized voice, representation, and subalternity, by asking whether intellectuals in the global North who wish to engage and study with the subaltern groups in the global South should also make "a similar commitment to 'subaltern' social groups," in the global North itself (2000: 482). Another challenge, as Alcoff reminds us, is that "the speech of the oppressed will not necessarily be either liberatory or reflective of their 'true interest', if such exists" (1995: 110).

In this paper I have problematized the embeddedness of knowledge producers in the global North within a global power structure that produces the very condition of under- or maldevelopment. I have argued for the moving over of these privileged development researchers and experts as an act (in solidarity) of making space for the marginalized others who fight to make their voices heard. Admittedly, I do not yet have satisfactory answers to all of the above-stated questions and challenges. Nevertheless, the call on privileged experts and knowledge producers in the global North to disoccupy the discursive space in which development knowledge regarding the global South is produced is informed by Spivak's other important insight, that "to ignore or invade the subaltern today is, willy-nilly, to continue the imperialist project; in the name of modernization, in the interest of globalization" (1999: 290).

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Notes

¹Similar assumptions informed works concerning the latecomers to capitalist modernity within Europe as well. For instance, it has been noted that for decades, and building on Max Weber's theory of protestant ethics and the spirit of capitalism, the literature on the causes and conditions of under/development in Spain and its colonies was characterized by a focus on a presumed incompatibility between religion (Catholicism in this case) and development. See: Robin Grier (1997): "The Effect of Religion on Economic Development: A Cross National Study of 63 Former Colonies," *Kyklos: International Review of Social Sciences* 50:1, pp. 47-62.

²Throughout the 1960s the idea of order and stability as a prerequisite for development and progress gained currently among development policy circles. In 1968 Samuel P. Huntington published *Political Order in Changing Societies*, which was regarded at the time as a serious critique of modernization and economic growth theories. Huntington challenged the assumption that economic growth would inevitably lead to political development and suggested instead that by giving rise to demands for sociopolitical change, socioeconomic modernization could in fact lead to the breakdown of political order. The alternative approach offered by Huntington involved an increased support by the United States and other Western countries for the creation of strong military, bureaucratic, and political institutions in developing countries, capable of handling and containing change at social and political levels.

³See: Tukufo Zuberi, and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, eds. (2008): *White Logic, White Methods Racism and Methodology*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

⁴See: Abdallah Laroui (1976): *The Crisis of the Arab Intellectual: Traditionalism or Historicism?*, trans Diarmid Cammell, Berkeley: University of California Press; Edward Said (1978): *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books.

⁵See: Denzil Chetty, Tennyson Mgutshini, and Sunette Pienaar (2014), "Towards Contextually Relevant Epistemology of Knowledge Production in Teaching and Learning in the Humanities," *Alternation* 21:2, pp. 223-247; Anika Meckesheimer (2013), "Decolonization of Social Research Practice in Latin America. What can we Learn for German Social Sciences?," *Transcience* 4:2, pp. 79-98.