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COMMENTARY ARTICLE

Discourse analysis in international development studies

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Dimitri della Faille argues that ‘the study of discourses about underdevelopment appears to have been neglected by discourse analysts’ (p. 1), but cites a number of discourse analysis scholars who have scrutinized development discourses. According to the author, ‘analysis that examines dynamics of power through the study of speech, text and images has not broken through into mainstream development studies and remains a marginal field of analysis in critical IDS’, but he cites works in this field which by his account have been influential.

Discourse analysis has been assimilated in IDS since the 1990s and has since been part of the toolbox of critical IDS. Just as other social sciences, IDS has experienced the linguistic turn and the cultural turn and just as in other social sciences these contributions have enriched the field. Discourse analysis is central to standard development texts such as *Discourses of development* (Grillo & Stirrat 1997), *Arguing development policy: frames and discourses* (Apthorpe & Gasper 1996) and to critical development studies generally (e.g. Munck & O’Hearn 1999). Discourse analysis is also standard fare in critical development education (which I should know because I did it for 11 years at Europe’s largest development studies school). In short, all critical development scholars use discourse analysis, except for quantitative scholars and empiricists and policy specialists (who ‘don’t do theory’ generally).

The idea that scholars such as Escobar ‘are marginalized in their own field’ is contradicted by the author’s observation that ‘more than fifteen years after publication, it [Encountering Development] remains ... probably the most cited critical analysis of development discourse’. Discourse analysis is a major component of the post-development approach, which has been so influential that until fairly recently for a young generation of students it was often the *only* development texts they knew. Post-development works such as Wolfgang Sachs’s *Dictionary of Development* have been bestsellers, a Zed Books’ bestseller for many years.

Of the four authors the article focuses on (Arturo Escobar, James Scott, James Ferguson and Gilbert Rist), the latter three use discourse analysis but it isn’t particularly central to their work (Scott’s work is rural sociology, Ferguson does anthropology of development and Rist uses ideology critique rather than discourse analysis). That is only the case with Escobar who has explicitly sought to apply Foucault to development studies in a similar fashion as Edward Said applied it to Orientalism. In my view he has done so less skillfully and his work is marred by exaggerated claims.

To assess the author's contribution a few nuances need to be established. First, there are two strands of discourse analysis generally and in IDS. One strand serves as an analytical and interpretive tool. As an interpretative tool in a problem- and policy-oriented field it is generally used and uncontroversial but its role is not dominant. Another strand is not just a methodology but an ideology (which I criticize as 'discursivism'; Nederveen Pieterse 2010). As such, with authors such as Escobar it is associated with development agnosticism and has been criticized (Corbridge 1998, Nederveen Pieterse 2000). There has been no response to these criticisms. The influence of this type of discourse analysis has tapered off since the nineties. Because post-development offers no alternatives and no policy perspectives its contribution shrinks. Nevertheless, because it resonates with profound development skepticism and dismay this sensibility will not go away, and rightly so.

The second distinction to make is between development studies and development policy. According to the author, 'there is a general epistemological resistance to discourse analysis in international development studies', which is simply wrong, as noted above. The author further notes that 'international development as it is practiced by government agencies and private organizations has not internalized these criticisms'; this is true but is an open door. The development policy field is receptive to applied criticisms but usually keeps its distance from high theory critique, including, for instance, neo-Marxist political economy. International development policy remains to a large extent an exercise of hegemony, and resistance to discourse analysis isn't merely epistemological but a matter of fields and relations of power. Thus, the author targets IDS but substantiates his criticism by considering official development policy, which is an entirely different animal. 'At the practical level, we may contend that the criticism presented here is too radical and requires important structural changes to be implemented'; which is true but a dead horse.

According to the author, 'IDS remains very European and North American-centered'. This is a half-truth at best. It is true for western foreign aid and for the Washington institutions, the IMF and World Bank, and a bit obvious. It isn't true for the development field in general. Major approaches, notably dependency theory, alternative development and human development, have been shaped in the global South and have been influenced by nonwestern perspectives (dependency theory in Latin America; alternative development in local initiatives throughout the global South; and human development has been shaped by East Asian experiences).

According to the author, 'Currently, there seems to be no real room for culturally different models of development in IDS'. Again this is incorrect and I note the following. First, the 'Asian drivers' of development and the 'Beijing consensus' are widely discussed. Second, the East Asian Tiger economies have functioned as development role models for decades. Third, the 'culture and development' theme and approach have been standard fare in IDS for over 20 years. Note for instance Unesco's Decade of Development that was devoted to this theme. Fourth, the alternative development and endogenous development approaches have long privileged 'culturally different models of development', as in Hettne's work.

According to the author, 'post-colonial studies . . . unfortunately, currently have close to no following in mainstream nor even in critical IDS other than the work of Chandra Mohanty and Arturo Escobar'. This ignores the widely influential

Subaltern Studies school and ignores development studies in India and Asia generally which have been permeated with postcolonial studies.

In closing, what can we learn from this exercise? The author's assertion that 'IDS remains very hermetic to counter-discourses and cultural studies, and the scholars presented in this article represent the only breakthrough', is imprecise at best. Judgment is often a matter of assessing magnitudes or degrees, and in this discussion some claims are not entirely wrong but the magnitudes are off.

Perhaps this exercise is instructive in helping to reflect on the role and contribution of discourse analysis. First, discourse analysis is a good tool for criticism but not for policy. Second, it is most apt for a particular kind of criticism; it is most appropriate for critiquing hegemonic discourses and exposing its silences, omissions and double talk. This includes the scrutiny of development policy, official texts and development thinking, and here discourse analysis is extensively applied (e.g. Rew 1997, Tucker 1999). However, to be effective this must be combined with adequate knowledge of the field, beyond generalities. To give an example, to understand the double dealing of European development aid it helps to know that 'total EU foreign aid in 2005 was €8 billion, but it spent €49 billion on agricultural subsidies, nullifying virtually all the beneficial effects of its foreign aid' (Mahbubani 2008: 130). In other words, political economy may be more important as a critical tool than discourse analysis, and besides, discourse analysis is not likely to be effective without political economy. Thus, overreliance on discourse analysis as a tool may be counterproductive. The general methodological lesson then is to use critical instruments judiciously. It is a matter, so to speak, of using appropriate technology.

Notes on contributor

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