

“DEVELOPMENT DISCOURSE AND GLOBAL HISTORY: FROM COLONIALISM TO THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS” BY ARAM ZIAIⁱ

BAIDY WANE¹ 

I. WHAT IS DEVELOPMENT?

Development is a widely used term when investigating North-South relations. Supposedly aiming to fight poverty, inequality, hunger and many more *lacks*, the so-called *underdeveloped* countries are believed to be able to *catch up* with the *developed* nations through the latter's financial and technical aid. The term has, however, been characterised by such a wide popularity that it has lost its meaning and is considered an *amoeba-like concept* (Esteve, 1985). This is exactly where Aram Ziai – head of the department ‘Development Policy & Postcolonial Studies’ at the University of Kassel, Germany – comes in with his book. It explores the meaning of the term *development*, with a particular interest in how the meaning has shifted during the second half of the 20th century. While there are various and sometimes contradictory currents within the academic field of development studies, Ziai (2016) argues that they share most of the same core assumptions and can, hence, be regrouped within the development discourse.

The book is a continuation of his PhD thesis (Ziai, 2004) in which he analysed the classical paradigm of development as well as the Post-Development Critique. By focusing on discourse, the theoretical foundations of the book can be situated within a poststructuralist perspective, which implies a post-positivist stance and rejects the principles of objectivity. The analysis is not concerned with reality as it is, but rather with the way reality is being constructed and represented through systems of representation – in that case the development discourse.

Ziai states that despite the large literature the perspective taken in the book “can contribute to our knowledge of the topic by highlighting aspects so far unnoticed” (2016, p. 3). Namely the strong focus on the transformation of the discourse and the comparison with different subsets of the discourse, such as the comparison to the globalisation discourse, might deliver new insights which have, according to the author, so far been neglected.

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¹ Department of Geography, University of Bonn, Meckenheimer Allee, 166, 53115, Bonn, Germany. E-mail: baidywane@gmail.com

II. STRUCTURE

The book consists of fifteen chapters which are grouped in four parts: Theory, Archaeology, Genealogy and Conclusion.

In the first part the theoretical and conceptual foundations of structuralism and poststructuralism as well as the two main analytical categories of Foucault's approach – discourse and power – are discussed. The two Foucauldian methods used are Archaeology and Genealogy according to which the book is structured.

In the second part, Archaeology, Ziai explores how the discourse of development has been constituted, systematically describes its regularities, and explores its origins in social evolutionism and social technology. After World War II, the newly constituted development discourse emerged from the previous colonial discourse. While Ziai points out to the anticolonial character that the development discourse may have, especially on an international level through the strategical appropriation by Third World Leaders, he still provides an argument for abandoning the concept because it has Eurocentric, depoliticizing, and authoritarian implications.

The third part, Genealogy, investigates the historical change of the discursive formation of *development* at the end of the 20th century by looking at different subsets of the discourse. Transformations have occurred with the introduction of new concepts such as participation, sustainability, and heterogeneity, that indeed challenge some of the underlying assumptions and lead to inconsistencies and incoherencies. Consistencies remain, however, in terms of universalism (social evolutionism) and technical expert knowledge (social technology). In short, he argues that these new concepts simply diagnose ever new deficits within the underdeveloped countries, that need ever new technical solutions provided by Western experts with the promise of betterment. When these new solutions fail, a new lack is identified and the so called *diagnostic cycle of development promise* begins again. This helps to understand how development discourse has shifted over the years while retaining *central discursive structures*.

In the Conclusion he summarizes the book and presents an argument about how discourse analysis has made and continues to make an important contribution to development studies, while considering the shortcomings of Post-Development Critiques.

III. CRITIQUE

Aram Ziai skilfully analysed the meaning of the term *development* and its discursive formation over the course of the 20th century. The very precise and clear way the book is written allows the reader to get a better understanding of what is being criticized and why some researchers reject the concept. The accessible and detailed discussion of poststructuralism clarifies specific terms for people that are not so familiar with it and provide the book's strong theoretical and conceptual foundation. This is further supplemented with empirical evidence from interviews with professionals in the development industry, official documents, and specific development projects.

Some parts of the book are repetitive. For example, he explains the theoretical foundations of discourse in chapter 4 and 5, although they have already been presented in an elaborate discussion on poststructuralism and discourse in Chapter 2. This does, however, not affect the quality of the book but rather allows to read chapters individually.

Ziai remarkably maintains a general critical orientation, in which he expresses his scepticism towards the contemporary neoliberalisation of the development discourse, while not embracing traditional Marxist responses to neoliberalism. Rather, he points to the universalist implications of Marxism,

acknowledges the anti-colonial character of the development discourse, and questions the radical stop of all development projects demanded by some Post-Development theorists. This makes his analyses differentiated and complex, considering positive and negative consequences of the development discourse, while stating, however, that the negative consequences are often overshadowed by the normative assumption that development brings something good.

By critically acknowledging the shortcomings of previous poststructuralist analyses of the development discourse, he is making an important and critical contribution, proving self-reflexivity. While, however, one of the shortcomings refers to the inadequate formulation of political alternatives, his discussion about these may be considered too weak. He refutes the criticism that discourse analysis does not offer political alternatives and concludes that it is very much capable of reflecting upon and offering political alternatives, referring to proposed solutions by Escobar, Rist, and Ferguson. Additionally, Ziai pleads that questions of justice be considered regarding the three following areas that have largely been ignored in development policy: reparations for colonialism, ecological justice, and a cosmopolitan world order. This is reminiscent of conceptions based on solidarity expressed by Reclus and Kropotkin, and of aspirations towards a 'global world', which are considered idealistic or even utopian by some scholars. However, if we consider that after more than 70 years of technical development, we are still facing problems of poverty and even increasing inequality (Lawson *et al.*, 2019), the rational, technical and universalist assumptions of the development discourse seem to be utopian too. Also, in a way Ziai is being coherent in not discussing more specific political alternatives. As the poststructuralist perspective is rejecting universalisms, it would go beyond the scope of the book to offer specific political alternatives for respective geographical units.

IV. RELEVANCE FOR GEOGRAPHY

As an interdisciplinary subject geography is informed and to a certain extent relies on research conducted in neighbouring disciplines. The same applies to the field of development studies. And so, it is stated in the preface that the book is aimed at an interdisciplinary audience. By explicitly specifying geographers as a target group, its relevance for geography is self-evident.

Furthermore, we as geographers need to acknowledge, that geography was a key tool for enabling and legitimating colonial endeavours. The production of knowledge was embedded within the colonial discourse, out of which the development discourse emerged. As Ziai states, "Truth claims on the objects are usually based on the knowledge production of these experts and institutions" (2016, p. 43). Geographers are, hence, constructing and representing the objects of the development discourse in a way that enables and legitimates "certain practices, while rendering others unthinkable" (2016, p. 56).

Apart from that, I argue that the development discourse as such is geographical for two reasons. First, its object are geographical units: *underdeveloped* countries. Other than in the colonial discourse, the object is not conceived in terms of biology (racial inferiority), but in terms of economic geography. There is still an assumption of cultural inferiority, which is used to explain the (economic) difference between *developed* and *underdeveloped* countries. This dualism is used to demarcate world regions based on their levels of development, which allows interventions exactly in these *underdeveloped* regions. The analysis could, hence, benefit from a spatial approach, exploring what Sidaway (2007) calls *spaces of postdevelopment* and their variegated manifestations.

Second, development is geopolitical. In the aftermath of World War II and in the Cold War era *development* is explained as a geopolitical strategy of the USA expanding its global economic and political influence. Hence, there are certain geopolitical components that made interventions in the name of development possible.

Although Ziai highlights several times that the problems of poverty are neither technical nor geographical, geographical perspectives could contribute to the analysis by further exploring the spatial construction of the object and the geopolitical implications of the discourse, while not losing sight of political and structural causes of poverty and inequality. Still, there is much to take from the interdisciplinary approach of the book, bringing together discourse analysis and development studies, and providing articulate arguments for why we should be sceptical about the whole development project.

ORCID ID

Baidy Wane  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0029-8540>

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¹ Primeiro prémio, no ano de 2022, do concurso “Livros que contam: descobre um livro e dá-o a conhecer” – parceria entre a Biblioteca do CEG-IGOT (ULisboa) e a *Finisterra – Revista Portuguesa de Geografia*, visando estimular a escrita de sínteses de obras científicas, contribuindo para o reforço do conhecimento, da curiosidade e da criatividade dos estudantes do Instituto de Geografia e Ordenamento do Território (IGOT-ULisboa) e entidades parceiras.