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Theorising Postdevelopment

Aram Ziai

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Theorising Postdevelopment

Aram Ziai

Abstract

The paper seeks to define and situate postdevelopment (PD) theory within the social sciences by discussing its relation to other theoretical approaches. It concludes that PD can be seen to a rather limited extent as a development theory, but rather as a sociology of knowledge of this discipline and a critique of its foundation. PD shares the critique of capitalism with Marxism but also has a more negative view of industrial modernity, its relation to nature, economic growth and productivity. For some, PD is characterized by a spirituality alien to western modernity, although this does not seem to be necessary to subscribe to the approach. Although PD's critique is intimately related to ecofeminist thinking (and ecofeminist authors), many of its male protagonists seem unaware of this proximity. PD is clearly a postcolonial (or decolonial) critique of colonial and neocolonial relations of power which can be found also in knowledge production, in particular in the division between the 'developed' Self (Europe and European settler colonies and other societies emulating them) and the 'backward' Other. And PD, at the least skeptical PD, is based on a post-anarchist perspective of ontological equality, oriented towards self-determination in the pluriverse and rearguard theories.

Keywords: Post-development; Post-Colonialism; Marxism; Spiritualism; Anarchism.

1 Introduction

Since its prominent publications in the 1990s (Sachs 1992a, Escobar 1995, Rahnema with Bawtree 1997), a lot has been written about the Post-Development, or rather postdevelopment¹ (PD) school of thought in development theory (for an overview of the debate see Matthews 2010, Sidaway 2014, Ziai 2018). Why would we need another contribution focusing on postdevelopment theory? Because, this is my possibly presumptuous claim, there has been no coherent and systematic endeavour to position postdevelopment within social theory. This paper attempts to close this gap.

To this end, the paper will discuss PD in relation to different approaches, to development theory, postcolonial studies, Marxism, spirituality, feminism, cultural relativism and anarchism. To do this in a meaningful manner, the first task is to define PD. Such definitions seem to be somewhat unfashionable these days, as they fix specific meanings and reduce the complexities of reality. Both is correct yet no valid reason against it, as the lack of a clear definition makes serious academic writing impossible because it is not clear what exactly people are talking about, and misunderstandings abound. I would like to apologize in advance for inappropriate generalizations: there might be works which have been referred to as PD but do not quite fit the definition.

Two of the three prominent works mentioned contain explicit definitions of PD. Rahnema (1997a: xif) describes PD works as “subversive” (adopting the perspective of the victims), “human-centred” and “radical” (going to the root of the problem). Clearly, this definition might also include approaches in criminology or psychology and is too broad to be useful in our context. Escobar, on the other hand (1995: 215) describes PD as

“relatively coherent body of work ... interested not in development alternatives but in alternatives to development, that is, the rejection of the entire paradigm altogether”, united by “an interest in local culture and knowledge; a critical stance with respect to established scientific discourses; and the defense and promotion of localized, pluralistic grassroots movements.”

¹A number of contributors to the debate have written Post-Development, the capital letters referring to a distinct school of thought. However, if we situate the theory within postcolonial studies, it makes sense to adjust the writing: while post-colonial refers to a historical period, postcolonial refers to a specific approach – one which does not see this period as merely a thing of the past, but as having numerous effects until today, which (and here a normative element enters the stage) should be overcome (see also Klein/Morreo, 2019, 8). Thus postcolonial theory qualifies as a critical theory which seeks not only to interpret the world, but also to change it. The same holds true for postdevelopment studies which seek to overcome the effects of the age of ‘development’. The quotation marks around ‘development’ seek to denaturalize and ‘make strange’ the concept which is most often used to describe global inequality and social change (see also Ferguson 1994).

This definition is far more precise and useful. However, it does not answer the crucial question, what “rejection of the entire paradigm” means exactly and how “alternatives to development” differ from “alternative development”. The answer can be inferred from the writings of the prominent PD authors though. If Sachs (1990: 3) argues that the concept of ‘development’ implies that “all the peoples of the earth were to move along the same track and aspire to one goal”; if Sachs (1992c: 4) and Latouche (1993: 230) describe this goal of ‘development’ as the “Westernization of the world”; if Esteva decries the “invention of underdevelopment” and the ensuing global campaign to ‘develop’ the south (1992: 6) and points out that “for two-thirds of the people on earth, this positive meaning of the word ‘development’ ... is a reminder of what they are not” (10); if Escobar (1995: 7) deconstructs “the process by which, in the history of the modern West, non-European areas have been organized into, and transformed according to, European constructs”; and if Rist (1997: 44) concurs

“What passes today for the truth of the history of humankind (that is, progressive access of every nation to the benefits of ‘development’) is actually based upon the way in which Western society ... has conceptualized its relationship to the past and to the future ... one society extends to all others the historically constructed values in which it believes”;

then a relatively simple answer can be found:² PD proponents reject the idea that there is a universal scale of ‘development’ with the West on top and that to advance on this scale, non-Western societies have to become like the West and adopt its models regarding economics, politics and knowledge. While alternative ‘development’ merely seeks alternative ways to achieve the objective of a ‘developed’ society,³ alternatives to ‘development’ can thus be found in all those practices which do not share this objective and go beyond these models.⁴

Now this means that PD is very skeptical or even hostile towards these attempts to ‘develop’ the supposedly ‘less developed’ societies, which is a crucial element of the paradigm of development theory or development studies, which in turn is the academic discipline of which PD is perceived to be a part of.

²For a more complex analysis of the paradigm of ‘development’, see Ziai 2004a and for a more complex analysis of what PD describes as ‘development’ see Ziai 2015a.

³Therefore PD approaches have been very critical of such approaches under the banners of participation and sustainability and so on (Esteva 1985 and 1991, Rahnama 1992a, Sachs 1992b, Geomez-Baggethun 2019).

⁴It has to be mentioned that these models historically have become hegemonic in the West before they were universalized, but that they have been contested in the West as well (see Santos 2009, 2015 ch.3) and are not inextricably linked to an unchanging Western culture. Santos is missing in the refs. Also, maybe briefly think about the politics of citation in light of recent allegations of sexual misconduct towards him?

2 Is Postdevelopment a theory of ‘development’?

Given this fundamental critique of the discipline, the question whether or to what extent PD can be seen as a theory of ‘development’ is pertinent. As usual, it depends on the definition. Building on the work of Cowen and Shenton (1996) who differentiate between immanent and intentional development, we can distinguish two different types of development theory: theories of social change (TSC) on the one hand and theories of political intervention (TPI) on the other hand (Ziai 2014a). While PD proponents would not object to an analysis of social change, it certainly would to a TPI pursuing the goal of transforming ‘less developed’ or ‘developing’ societies into ‘developed’ ones. However, more often than not, the analytical and normative dimensions are connected in development theory. Consider the following definition, which has been typical for large parts of development theory for a long time:

“I define development theory as statements with which ... we can reason why in the industrial societies of Western Europe, North America and East Asia there was economic growth, industrialisation, social differentiation and mobilisation, mental change, democratisation and redistribution (these processes are called development) respectively why in the remaining parts of the world these processes do not occur; their realisation remains incomplete or only a caricature of these processes can be observed” (Menzel 1993: 132).

Primarily, this definition is concerned with the analytical dimension of social change: how did it come about in these areas? Yet implicit is the idea to emulate these processes in other parts of the world because it is perceived as a problem that they have not or not fully occurred there. Therefore what we have is a TSC as a foundation for a TPI, one with a clearly normative agenda condemned as eurocentric by PD. Yet even the analytical dimension (the TSC) is problematic from a critical perspective because of its methodological nationalism: the actors are societies conceived of as independent nation states (as ‘islands’), which neglects the interconnectedness of the actors in a capitalist world system (Wallerstein 1974), the contribution of colonial plunder to the industrialisation of Western Europe and North America (Hickel et al. 2021) and the imperial mode of production and consumption (IMPC) of the supposedly successful ‘developed’ societies (Brand/Wissen 2013).

However, as a reaction to the critiques of authoritarianism or at least a top-down perspective voiced since the late 20th century, definitions of ‘development’ have become more and more influential in development studies which are still normative but more open and which lack these elements of eurocentrism and methodological nationalism. Here, ‘development’ is then simply defined as an improvement of people’s lives or, in the words of Amartya Sen (2000), as

‘freedom’ in the sense of an enlargement of people’s choices. However, there are still two problems with this type of definitions. The first is that these normative definitions usually do not articulate a contradiction with the widely accepted view that the industrialised, capitalist, high-income IMPC societies are the ‘developed’ ones. Failing to do that, they enable the fallacy, that becoming like the ‘developed’ societies – “a process of transition or transformation toward a modern, capitalist, industrial economy” will lead to an improvement in living conditions and a “reduction or amelioration of material want” (Ferguson 1994: 15) – a fallacy conflating the open with the eurocentric and methodologically nationalist definition.

The second point is that if ‘development’ is defined as an improvement, negative experiences with processes and projects of ‘development’ (in the sense of capitalist modernisation and industrialization) become excused as “not real development” (Gasper 1996: 149), leading to what has been called the “beyond criticism gambit” which allows ‘development’ to live on as “untarnishable promise” (Gasper 1996: 150, see also Ferguson 1994: xiv). Yet it should be noted that these problems arise not from the normative definitions themselves, but from their coexistence with a discourse of ‘development’ dominated by these conflation and accompanied by policies and agencies which carry the concept in their name but do not always lead to an improvement of the lives of the persons affected by their projects and programmes (Seabrook 1997, Ziai 2016).

Now one may object that the definition given here as an example was from the 1990s and therefore could be hopelessly outdated. Let us instead turn to a more contemporary one by prominent development theorist Andy Sumner. According to him, development studies is an interdisciplinary area of enquiry dealing with social change in developing countries with a normative orientation towards their real world problems (2022: 5f). While it is less openly Eurocentric, it reproduces the division between ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ countries (focusing on the latter) and does not help us to avoid the problems encountered in the engagement with the more classical definition: neither the conflation of positive social change with social change as it took place in the West nor the ‘beyond criticism gambit’. And although the author convincingly describes four approaches to development studies (classical, aid-dependent, critical and global, 13f), none of them answers the question ‘what is desirable social change?’ with the only answer acceptable to skeptical PD: that is for the people themselves to decide, not the theorist.

So where does this leave PD in relation to development theory? I think it is possible to make three claims:

1. PD is – just like normative development theory – concerned with improving people’s lives and can thus be seen as a TPI, but as a very specific one. Contrary to most development theory it does not believe this improvement can result from modernising or ‘developing’ societies diagnosed as ‘less developed’. If this belief is seen to lie at the core of development theory, PD is certainly not part of it. As a normative TPI, PD, at least in its skeptical variant (in contrast to neo-populist PD, see Ziai 2004b), is aware of the problem of normative undecidability in the light of heterogeneous values (who can define what has to be seen as an improvement?) and has a specific answer (only the people concerned) which will be discussed in a later section.

2. PD can also be seen as a TSC regarding its claim that industrial modernity (despite its promise of ‘development’) destroys traditional livelihoods but does not provide enough livelihoods in the modern sector for all those who lost theirs in the subsistence sector. According to PD authors, these marginalised sectors of the the population – Latouche calls them “the outcasts from the consumer society’s banquet”, “development’s castaways” (1993: 35, 33) – start “disengaging from the economic logic” of capitalism (or state socialism) and forge ties of solidarity, creating “new commons” in order to survive (Esteva 1992: 20f).

3. In the analysis of development aid and development theory arising from the historical context of decolonisation and the cold war as a program designed to legitimate the capitalist world order in the global South through the promise of affluence after the colonial order of North-South relations appeared increasingly illegitimate (Rahnema 1997b: 379, Esteva 1992: 6f, Alcalde 1987: 223, see also Truman 1949), PD can be seen as a sociology of knowledge of the discipline of development theory (Ziai 2014b): It reveals the specific political and historical perspective from which a certain construction or representation of the world – in this case: the perception of global inequality not as a result of colonial exploitation but of incomplete processes of ‘development’ – arises, and particularly its relationship between knowledge and power (Berger/Luckmann 1967, Foucault 1980, Ziai 2016).

3 Is PD a postcolonial theory?

In comparing development studies and postcolonial studies as two bodies of literature providing “disparate tales of the ‘Third World’”, Christine Sylvester (1999: 703) claims that “development studies does not tend to listen to subalterns and postcolonial studies does not tend to concern itself with whether the subaltern is eating”. PD is certainly more concerned with questions of knowledge and power than with questions of poverty and redistribution, although it believes both to be linked and sees a change in discourse as a prerequisite to a larger transformation (Escobar 1995: 216). Should PD therefore rather be seen as a postcolonial theory?

In fact, PD has at times been described as a postcolonial critique of ‘development’. Let us review the reasons for and against it. If postcolonial theory, in a simple definition, deals with the legacies and continuities of colonialism, PD clearly qualifies, pointing to how ‘development’ was a continuation of conquest and subordination with (usually) more peaceful means:

“Development... was an ideology that was born and refined in the North, mainly to meet the needs of the dominant powers in search of a more ‘appropriate’ tool for their economic and geopolitical expansion. ... the ideology helped a dying and obsolete colonialism to transform itself into an aggressive – even sometimes an attractive – instrument able to recapture new ground.” (Rahnema 1997b: 379)

Therefore we should take serious Truman’s (1949) telling assertion “The old imperialism ... has no place in our plans. What we envisage is a program of development based on the concepts of democratic fair-dealing” – the latter, however, giving rise to a new imperialism which could finally also extend itself to countries formerly in the claws of the British and French empires.

Yet what if we employ more sophisticated definitions and try to apply significant postcolonial definitions – can we still regard PD as postcolonial? Referring to the concept of Othering borrowed from Said and Hall, Williams and Chrisman describe postcolonial theory as a “critique... of the process of production of knowledge about the other” (1994: 8) – with the obvious political function of legitimising unequal rights and colonial exploitation. This corresponds to Escobar asserting that the “production of discourse under conditions of unequal power ... entails specific constructions of the ... Third World subject in/through discourse in ways that allow the exercise of power over it.” (1995: 9). Put much more simply: development discourse constructs non-European people as backward in order to legitimise inequality and interventions. Another eminent postcolonial theorist, Dipesh Chakrabarty, coined the term ‘provincialising Europe’. His starting point is the realisation that in history, but also in the other humanities “‘Europe’ remains the sovereign, theoretical subject” (2000: 27), which markedly influences the perspective of these disciplines. The discipline of development theory can be seen as a prime example of this according to PD (see especially Ferguson 1997). While sociology, economics and political science were dealing with the Western societies defined as the normal case, the respective development studies (development sociology, development economics, development policy) dealt with the deficient versions in the global South. The universal scale of ‘development’ is derived from the ideal norm of the Western European societies and their settler colonies in North America: they are ‘developed’ (and thus on top of

the scale) – just as in former times, they deemed themselves ‘civilised’ (and thus on top of the scale). The other societies merely appeared as deficient versions of this norm: as ‘less developed’, ‘underdeveloped’ or still ‘developing’.

Turning to eminent postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak (1988), one could likewise argue that Rahnama (1997b: 391) echoes her concerns about the subaltern being not immune to dominant discourses and thus unable to effectively articulate their interests when he says: “those at the bottom of the social ladder... have internalized the developers’ perception of what they need”. However, she would probably not share his conclusion that decisions should be entrusted to the wisest members of the community (388). Here, just like in Alvares (1992), differences of some PD works to postcolonial theory – which usually rejects references to authentic cultures and complicates the “clear lines ... between goodies and baddies” (Hall 1996: 244) – become visible. This is emphasized as well by Eriksson Baaz. Applying postcolonial theory to PD, she asserts that PD often neglects its own influence on the ‘development industry’ it criticises in an attempt to maintain the division between the critical Self and the mainstream Other (2005: 169). Thus some see at least parts of PD as engaging in binaries and resorting to ideas of the ‘noble savage’ (Kiely 1999). In this context, the differentiation between skeptical and neo-populist PD (Ziai 2004b, see also Hoogvelt 2001 and Simon 2006) seems useful, because the latter, characterized by a view of cultures as static, an uncritical valorization of non-Western cultures, the rejection of Western modernity altogether and the promotion of subsistence agriculture, indeed focus on the difference between West and non-West.⁵

Regarding Sylvester’s statement on development studies vs. postcolonial studies quoted above, it is fair to say that PD has certainly put more emphasis on questions of discourse, knowledge and representation but is not entirely oblivious of questions of hunger and exploitation. In this way, it is transcending but still related to development studies.

Yet overall we can conclude that PD certainly can be seen as a postcolonial theory, one with specific focus on the way the global South was constructed after the second World War – and on the relations of economic and epistemic dominance that this knowledge production perpetuated after the formal end of colonialism.

⁵In this, they are actually similar to decolonial theory which distances itself from postcolonial theory. This is a bit too sweeping maybe. Ref?

4 Is PD a Marxist theory?

That PD is at least also concerned with economic dominance and exploitation begs the question how it is related to the tradition of historical materialism and the dependency and world-system schools. A number of quotes suggest that PD implicitly builds on a dependency analysis of global capitalism, e.g. when Escobar writes: “the discourse and strategy of development produced its opposite: massive underdevelopment and impoverishment, untold exploitation and oppression” (1995: 4). He even seems to share the Marxist diagnosis of primitive accumulation:

“massive poverty in the modern sense appeared only when the spread of the market economy broke down community ties and deprived millions of people from the access to land, water, and other resources. With the consolidation of capitalism, systemic pauperization became inevitable” (1995: 22).

PD also criticizes the idea that economic growth provides a solution for the problem of poverty (Escobar 1995: 24), as well as the ideas that human beings have infinite needs for goods (‘scarcity’) and that they always maximize their utility (‘homo oeconomicus’) (Esteva 1992: 15f) and the imperative of commodification in general (Esteva 1992: 15, 19, Escobar 1995: 59, 163). The classical PD texts thus can clearly be seen as anticapitalist and heavily influenced by Marxist and dependency theory and Polanyi. However, at one point Escobar (and others) depart from this school of thought, arguing

“a theory explaining the mechanisms by which local cultural knowledge and economic resources are appropriated by larger forces is necessary. Theories of imperialism, unequal exchange, world systems, and peripheral capitalism have fallen short of this task, especially because they do not deal with the cultural dynamics of the incorporation of global forms by a global system of cultural and economic production.” (Escobar 1995: 98)

So PD accepts the critique of economic exploitation but seeks to complement it by investigating the cultural and discursive aspects of capitalism and modernity, providing a theory of cultural imperialism and mental colonisation after independence.

An example would be the effect of capitalism which Esteva calls ‘disvaluing’ whereby knowledge and skills and activities which are not sold on the market are deprived of value and relevance (Esteva 1992: 14f) and the subsequent production of addictive needs which can only be satisfied through goods produced within modern capitalist systems (Rahnema 1997c: 119).

And this cultural imperialism according to PD extends to the perception of non-industrial subsistence societies as poor, deficient and backwards. This perception which can see wealth

only as material wealth (not as social or spiritual wealth) and which does not differentiate between frugality (as inability to buy goods although basic needs are satisfied) and destitution (a situation where basic needs are not satisfied), and imposes its own standards as universal (Escobar 1995, ch.2, Esteva 1992, Sachs 1990, Rahnema 1992b and 1997c, Latouche 1993, Norberg-Hodge 1996). Insofar as Marxist theories share this perception, and insofar as state socialist regimes want to ‘develop’ backward indigenous people through authoritarian interventions, PD is sharply critical of both. From a PD perspective this perception can be seen as internalizing the colonizer’s perspective that non-industrial cultures and ways of life are inferior and as taking over the trusteeship and the mandate to civilize from the colonizers after independence.

This leads us to the most significant point of criticism which has been raised against PD by Marxist and other authors emphasizing the desire for material improvement (usually described as ‘development’) among the poorer and middle classes in the global South. The most eloquent and sophisticated proponent of this criticism is probably Sally Matthews, who argues that popular protest movements, such as those in the ‘service delivery’ protests in South Africa, do not demand local autonomy and a defence of their own culture and knowledge against Western imperialism, but electrification, sanitation, housing and employment to be delivered by the state, “goods typically associated with ‘development’” (Matthews 2017: 2652f, see also Cornier 2023 for an empirical study on black communities in Colombia). To react on such a desire with calls for a ‘decolonisation of the mind’ is highly problematic for her: “for those in the West to dismiss any apparent desire for development as evidence of mental colonisation entails assuming they know what is best for non-Western ‘others’ and prescribing, once again, to such ‘others’ how they ought to live” (2657). I fully agree: this amounts to a model of enlightened authoritarianism (Ziai 2004b: 1055), akin to predemocratic claims of rulership but also to the vanguardist claims of Marxist-Leninist parties.

However, while according to Rahnema people in the South have indeed been ‘brainwashed’ or infected by the virus of ‘development’ (1997c), skeptical PD authors seem aware of the problematic nature of these claims.⁶ Nevertheless, both sides are faced with what might be called Spivak’s dilemma, because it is one she faces in her prominent article (Spivak 1988). Against the dominant trend in the progressive left to ‘let the oppressed speak for themselves’ (because to speak for them would be to reproduce the idea that they are incapable of articulating their interests and assume the role of a trustee who knows better), Spivak insists (with Marx

⁶For the distinction between skeptical and neo-populist PD see Ziai 2004b.

and Gramsci) on the ‘problem of ideology’: the poor are not immune to dominant discourses and have to be educated and represented by organic intellectuals. The dilemma thus consists of *either* acknowledging the problem of manipulated minds which leads to assuming the role of the one who educates and represents *or* ignoring the problem and being forced to accept that what people say they want in fact is what they really want and need – no matter how they might have been manipulated, or how their minds might indeed have been colonised. Both positions are obviously problematic, and to steer a middle way between the two is challenging. Matthews’ proposal to deal with the dilemma in the PD context is worth quoting in full:

“Rather than insisting that those who desire development ought to decolonise their minds, perhaps our attention ought rather to be focused on other ways of loosening the association between dignity and the lifestyle of those in the industrialised West. As long as the powerful live in ‘European-style’ houses with flushing toilets, it ought to be regarded as utterly unsurprising that the disempowered might desire such houses and forms of sanitation. Instead of focusing on getting those in the South to decolonise their minds so that they reject development, we might push those in the North to recognise the catastrophic environmental implications of continued economic growth in the North and the need for redress and redistribution to address global inequality.” (2659)⁷

Yet not only the question of degrowth (Escobar 2015) hinted at here, but also the related questions of productivity and human-nature relations are a potential bone of contention between Marxism and PD. Some PD authors have argued that Marxism is located within European Enlightenment’s tradition of Cartesian rationality and a Baconian view of nature as something which should be exploited and dominated through science – and the idea that the increased and increasingly efficient production of goods is the marker of progress (Ziai 2004a: 87-89, Mies/Shiva 1993: 6-8 and *passim*, Visvanathan 1988: 265, Bajaj 1988, Apffel-Marglin 1990 and 1996 and in general Merchant 1990 and Federici 2004). In this context, Shiva asserts that these biases in perceiving the economy lead to a kind of worldview in which nature is seen as unproductive:

“it is assumed that ‘production’ takes place only when mediated by technologies for commodity production, even when such technologies destroy life. A stable and clean river is

⁷Wolfgang Sachs, although criticized by Matthews, arrives at similar conclusions: “Delinking the desire for equity from economic growth and relinking it to community- and culture-based notions of well-being will be the cornerstone of the post-development age. ... the quest for fairness in a finite world means in the first place changing the rich, not the poor. Poverty alleviation, in other words, cannot be separated from wealth alleviation.” (2010: xii, xiv)

not a productive resource in this view: it needs to be 'developed' with dams in order to become so.” (Shiva 1989: 3)

So despite a similar critique of capitalism, Marxism seems fully compatible with PD only when abandoning orthodox modern ideas about science, nature and the (always positive) ‘development of productive forces’. That PD challenges the foundations of European post-enlightenment thinking can be seen as a consequence of its spiritual and ecofeminist elements. Therefore both will be examined in the following sections.

5 Is PD a spiritualist theory?

It is no coincidence that Ivan Illich, the mentor or maybe godfather of PD was a theologian, just like Wolfgang Sachs, the editor of the first prominent PD publication. From a position that sees God’s creation as holy, a fundamental critique of modern industrial society seems more likely. In his text “In the absence of the sacred”, Mander (1993: 4f) asserts the view “that there is virtue in overpowering nature and native peoples” was probably the central assumption of this society – which corresponds to Bacon’s formula summarising modern science: “Natura parendi vincitur” – we study the laws of nature in order to command her (2022: 73). Descartes spells out the consequences of viewing non-human nature as dead matter when he engages in vivisection and compares the screams of the animals to the creaking of a wheel (quoted in Visvanathan 1988: 265).

Now while to protect ourselves from the storms, predators and diseases of nature does seem a good thing, the massive extinction of species and the destruction of the planet and the climate bear witness that humanity’s will to control and exploit nature at all costs knows no limit and has caused multiple crises. The editors of the Pluriverse (Kothari et al. 2019: xxii) argue that one of the causes of these crises was

“the ancient monotheistic premise that a father ‘God’ made the Earth for the benefit of ‘his’ human children. This attitude is known as anthropocentrism. At least in the West, it evolved into a philosophic habit of pitting humanity against nature, and gave rise to related dualisms such as the divide between subject versus object, mind versus body, rationality versus emotion, masculine versus feminine, civilized versus barbarian.”

To counter this, PD offers several alternatives. First of all, it asserts the rights of nature (Cullinan 2019) and in this respect is related to deep ecology which postulates that “The well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman life on earth have values in themselves ... These values

are independent of the usefulness of the nonhuman world for human purposes.” (Sessions/Naess 1986, see also Cox 2010 Ch. 6 and Dunlap et al. 2021: Introduction).

Secondly, it rejects the separation between mind and body, reason and emotion by utilizing the verb “sentipensar”, “thinkingfeeling” or “acting with the heart using the head” as an Afro-descendant fisherman in Colombia explained it to the sociologist Fals-Borda (Botero Gomez 2019: 302). The concept tries to escape the either-or-logic of modern dualisms. Escobar links sentipensar to a “relational ontology” (2018: 71) because it stems from the indigenous world view which stresses the relatedness of all beings and things – they do not exist prior to the interactions that constitute them. This relational ontology can also be observed in the PD concepts of *buen vivir* and especially *ubuntu*, according to which “a person is a person through other persons” (Le Grange 2019, see also Ziai 2015b).

For sociologist Peter Cox (2010: 138-40), PD’s questioning of modernity and its insistence on the rights of nature are crucial. He argues that nature and culture have been seen as an antithesis in the wake of colonialism which gave rise to an anti-human conservationism which could not imagine harmony between humans and nature as possible and therefore conceived of wilderness as a land in need of protection from human influence. This explains how modern environmentalism can operate against indigenous people. In Cox’ view, PD can be seen as a holistic, post-positivist Gandhian⁸ form of politics which includes elements usually seen as spirituality, providing a postmodern model of emancipation which transcends those of the classical left which were bound to these dualist separations – including that between religion and politics. It enables us to critically question the ideas of progress and universalism and promotes ideas of sufficiency and recycling and dissatisfaction with the status quo (2010: 172-174).

Does this make PD a spiritualist theory? I think it is possible share the ethical stance towards the rights of nature and the relatedness to non-human life, as well as to employ sentipensar and criticize some modernist dualist separations also on the basis of secularism – but maybe others would see this as a rather spiritual secularism.

⁸Gandhian can be understood here as a form of politics based on *satyagraha*, *swadeshi* and *swaraj*, loosely translated as truth-searching, self-reliance and village republics (Cox 2010, ch. 3).

6 Is PD a feminist theory?

It has been pointed out in many feminist writings that the rule over nature in Western modernity was also linked to the rule over those who are defined as being closer to nature: colonized or indigenous people, women and children (e.g. Mies/Shiva 1993, Peterson 2003: 36, Nandy 1992: 56-61). While in most PD texts few if any references to gender can be found, we can clearly identify an important feminist strand in PD (Shiva 1989 and 1992, Mies/Shiva 1993, Saunders 2002, Gibson-Graham 2005 and 2006, Harcourt/Escobar 2005, Salleh 2009a and 2017, Harcourt et al. 2023), which has, as a rule, not explicitly been labelled as PD (rather as ecofeminism or feminist political ecology or a feminist critique of political economy) and therefore often been neglected.

This body of work sharing PD's fundamental rejection of the paradigm of 'development' as well as its orientation towards practical alternatives offers a wealth of conceptual reflections and empirical examples. Its analyses highlight that the project of 'development' criticized by PD is indeed not only one of western imperialism, but equally also one of western patriarchy (Shiva 1989: 1): Shiva points to the blindness towards nature's productivity in post-Enlightenment industrial modernity (1989: 3). Gibson-Graham's perspective highlights the broad range of transactions, labour relations and enterprises ignored by patriarchal analyses of capitalism and thus outside the scope of 'development' cooperation (2005, 2006: xiii). Mies and Shiva show the parallels between the exploitation and colonization of women, non-European peoples, and nature (1993: 2f) and argue for decolonizing the North and a 'subsistence perspective' (1993, ch. 18 and 20). Harcourt and Escobar show how subaltern women engage in collective political struggles around the defense of places and bodies as a reaction to imperialist appropriations (2005: 3). Salleh calls for an embodied materialism grounded in reproductive labour and striving for eco-sufficiency and global justice (Salleh 2009b: 300). They all show that the rational subject in western modernity which controls nature and women and children and 'backward' peoples and also the emotional inner self is a masculine one.

Therefore although not all PD writers are necessarily feminists (see also the uncritical references to a gendered division of labour discussed in Ziai 2007: 231f) it could be argued that a PD perspective ignoring the gender dimension is somewhat incomplete. Especially the philosophical critique of the human-nature relations of western modernity described in the last section is so closely linked to a feminist critique that it seems hardly conceivable without it.

7 Is PD a cultural relativist theory?

Regarding this philosophical position of PD and its critique of ‘western’ universalism, PD has at times been accused of cultural relativism, which would lead to acceptance of misery and oppression (e.g. Kiely 1999: 47). After all, Esteva/Prakash have openly challenged the universality of human rights, for example (1998: 10f). At first glance this accusation of relativism does make sense because in the name of cultural difference, PD rejects the perception that Third World societies can be seen as less developed, as well as the idea of universal standards, according to which the progress of societies can be measured. However, a closer look reveals that PD does not call for an acceptance of misery, but merely for an acceptance of lifestyles that are not seen as inferior in the eyes of the people concerned. Here, the debate shifts onto the terrain of colonized minds and Spivak’s dilemma which we have discussed above. Are we to judge ‘from outside’ whose lives have to be improved? PD authors usually would negate the question, and here critics rightly point to the political danger of authoritarian leaders denying e.g. women’s rights by pointing to cultural differences and denouncing them as western.

Yet the danger is entirely dependent on the concept of culture: if cultures are seen as static (and if men in positions of power are granted the right to define the content of a particular culture), then cultural relativism becomes indeed an instrument of oppression. If cultures are defined as dynamic, and defined in a constructivist manner as the values and practices of a certain group, the danger is eliminated, because changing attitudes towards women’s rights or homosexuality or heavy metal among parts of the people would mean that there is no consensus anymore on what belongs to this culture – and the values and practices denounced as ‘foreign’ and ‘not part of our culture’ obviously have taken root. This is how different concepts of culture – static vs. dynamic – lead to different political consequences: reactionary and democratic ones.

Esteva and Prakash defend their rejection of the universality of human rights (one of the “sacred cows of modernity”, 1998: 10) as a rejection of the privileging of European culture:

“we recognized that our own cultures are neither superior nor unique in possessing moral concepts for correcting our inhumanities ... Cultural diversity means not giving one culture’s moral concept ... pre-eminence over others” (1998:118f).

Yet the idea that each group should live according to its own set of rules and values can only rest on a universal right of self-determination, and this means that even the critiques of a western universalism are at least implicitly based on a universalism of a higher level. To be fair, this type of universalism would of course be compatible with social groups who reject values of

democracy and equality and choose to live according to different rules. As long as they do not force others (including members of this group) to live according to rules they have not agreed upon, the higher-level universalism/dynamic culture relativism outlined here would have to accept that. Of course this does not preclude contact and dialogue, but it does preclude the moral superiority of those who know how others should live because they see their own values as universal ones – which is all too familiar from colonialism.

Regarding the UN Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, it is worth remembering that it was declared at a time when large parts of Africa and Asia were occupied by colonizers denying the rights of indigenous people to govern themselves, and that it came about only after a genocide had been committed in Europe (not after the numerous massacres, atrocities and genocides committed by Europeans outside Europe during colonialism, see Césaire 2000: 36). Nevertheless, it is also worth pointing out that to criticize a demand for universal human rights according to the UN by non-European peoples from the perspective of cultural relativism can only be made on the basis of static concept of culture – and thus from a reactionary position which also claims knowledge on how other people should live and precludes any kind of intercultural exchange or learning.

What becomes visible in this debate is that a PD approach not inclining towards this reactionary position (I have called this approach radically democratic) is clearly oriented towards self-determination in general, also in the areas of culture and knowledge, also against ‘development’ agencies, local or national or global elites. And this leads us to our last question.

8 Is PD an anarchist theory?

Early on in the academic debate about PD, Nederveen Pieterse in his critique of the approach had remarked in passing: “Through post-development runs an anti-authoritarian sensibility, an aversion to control and perhaps an anarchist streak” (2001: 105, 2000: 182). Literally hundreds of other papers and books also discussed PD, but to my limited knowledge only three authors actually followed up on this remark: Navé Wald (2015), Christoph Neusiedl (2019, 2021) and Julia Schöneberg (2021). They unanimously answer the question posed above in the affirmative.

Wald argues that the three pillars of anarchism can be found in PD: the struggle against domination, a commitment to direct action and prefigurative politics, as well as one to diversity and open-endedness (2015: 626f). Especially what he calls post-anarchism would be close to PD because it transcends a universalizing discourse of science and human nature found in

earlier versions of anarchism through engagement with post-structuralism (626). Neusiedl similarly identifies key elements of contemporary anarchism: the rejection of all forms of domination, and again a commitment to direct action and prefigurative politics (2019: 653). Schöneberg agrees and observes three intersections between PD and anarchism: the rejection of the nation-state and the demand for autonomy, the replacement of binaries with heterogeneous connected multiplicities, and a new conceptualization of radical politics rejecting the idea of representing others (2021: 13). She specifies that the post-anarchist theoretical grounding supports and substantiates demands of skeptical PD (12). This differentiation is important, as the neo-populist variant of PD is prone to a rule of wise leaders and (as envisioned by Rahnema 1997b) and thus not opposed to “all forms of domination” (Neusiedl 2019: 653), merely to those modern forms employed by the West in the name of ‘development’.

However, if people do not want to be subjected to interventions against their will which take place in the name of ‘development’ (as PD argues) or the ‘greater common good’ (Roy 1999), then they are rejecting the principle of trusteeship (Cowen/Shenton 1996) that legitimises ‘development’ experts to devise such interventions on the basis of their superior knowledge. Yet this principle of trusteeship is by no means limited to countries of the global South: it is a central characteristic of the modern state (Nandy 1988) and interventions against the will of the people also take place in the global North – usually not in the name of ‘development’, but in the name of ‘employment’, ‘growth’ ‘energy security’ or simply ‘progress’, as the conflicts around the Dakota Access Pipeline in the USA or around coal mining in Hambacher Forst in Germany demonstrate. The claim to know what is best for the people, to represent their interest and pursue the common good, is one asserted by all states, be it the nearly extinct species of (supposedly) communist dictatorships or the flourishing (supposedly) liberal democracies. They answer Spivak’s dilemma by unabashedly claiming to represent others, ignoring what has been called the normative undecidability above. Regardless of the heterogeneous ideas about how a good society looks like, they claim that experts can still find a universal answer.

The opposite claim, asserted by PD as well as anarchism, is that the people themselves (or rather specific groups, often divided by race, class, gender, etc.) know best what they need and how their lives can improve. This is eloquently explained by Ferguson in his response to the question: what is to be done (to achieve ‘development’ and help the poor people)? Evading the pitfall of formulating proposals which can be implemented by a benign and omnipotent state, and pointing to the heterogeneous interests of said groups, he writes:

“It seems, at the least, presumptuous to offer prescriptions here. The toiling miners and the abandoned old women know the tactics proper to their situation far better than any expert does. Indeed, the only general answer to the question ‘What should they do?’ is: ‘They are doing it!’” (1994: 281).⁹

Again, Nederveen Pieterse was insightful enough to notice this positioning, but assesses it more negatively: “In the end post-development offers no politics besides the self-organising capacity of the poor, which actually lets the development responsibility of states and international institutions off the hook.” (Nederveen Pieterse 2000: 187) While a liberal democratic position hopes for the states and international institutions to implement policies beneficial to the poor (e.g. delivering services), the anarchist position would entrust this task to the poor themselves – and support their struggles. This difference has been theorised by Neusiedl as an “ontological politics” of inequality or equality, the latter (anarchist) position assuming that all people are able to lead their life without interventions based on expert knowledge organized by the state telling them what to do (2021: 5, 29).

And here we are coming full circle: PD’s origin is not a revolutionary academic idea, but the theorization of ongoing practices and struggles of communities and movements (Esteva 1992: 20). And this is – ideally – what prevents at least skeptical PD from the critique that it was patronising towards the poor (Kiely 1999, Matthews 2017). Therefore PD embodies what Santos has described as a rearguard theory in the preface to the *Epistemologies of the South* (2014: ix): the theory follows the struggles of the marginalized instead of prescribing them like a vanguard theory does.

However, one important caveat is necessary: At the beginning of *Two Cheers for Anarchism* (Scott 2012: ii) there is a photograph of a fenced wall with the graffiti “Spread Anarchy” which has been crossed out and complemented by another graffiti saying “Don’t tell me what to do!”. The criticism of paternalism (towards anarchism or towards PD) is far from absurd. An anarchism worth its salt (and true to the idea of prefigurative politics) cannot order people to be anarchists. PD theory which diagnoses industrial societies to be sick and prescribes the return to vernacular subsistence communities (Rahnema 1997c) uses a maybe more sympathetic universal scale to measure and diagnose but occupies the very subject position of the ‘development’ expert, the social doctor who knows how others should live.

⁹Of course, they are often impeded by relations of power, and this is where privileged others can use any means available to support their struggles.

This is why the Zapatista idea of the ‘world in which many worlds fit’, the pluriverse, is central to PD thought. To relinquish the idea of a blueprint for a better society and the claim to know how we all should live in favour of self-determined little worlds in which the peoples themselves decide how to live is the very basis of PD (and contemporary anarchism) because it is the only way to avoid a reiteration of earlier progressive vanguards unaware or oblivious of the relations of power and the authoritarian element implicit in the claim to such knowledge.

So should all people simply be allowed to live the way they want? Yes and no – a simple yes would be the other too easy solution of Spivak’s dilemma. Yes, because to prescribe a single way of life as the best or ‘developed’ would amount to “cognitive imperialism” (Berger 1974: 128), but there are a number of limitations and conditions. The first limitation arises from the universalist premise that one’s way of life must not harm others. The imperial mode of production and consumption (IMPC, Brand/Wissen 2013) which relies on the appropriation of cheap labour and cheap resources in other parts of the world, is therefore not a legitimate way of living. Of course this begs the question which prices or wages are fair, but there is ample evidence that those determined by the market are not – and from an anarchist perspective it is difficult to see why some people should have or earn more than others anyway. Equally illegitimate would be ways of life in which some members are harmed or do not enjoy equal rights and disagree with this (!), the latter condition being necessary to prevent paternalism. It is another question, how and to what extent non-human living beings can also be seen as members harmed by ways of life such as eating meat. Here we enter the vast debate about rights of nature and deep ecology (see e.g. Cox 2010 Ch. 6, Dunlap et al. 2021, 2023). Another condition would be equal opportunities to influence the rules of the group in which one lives, which given the unequal conditions of today’s world require a massive effort to ‘level the playing field’ (for an interesting proposal of such an anarchist society consisting of “free cooperations” see Spehr 2003).

Therefore, it is very fitting that two of the most significant recent PD publications include the “Pluriverse” already in the title (Escobar 2020, Kothari et al. 2019), as a counter-concept to the universe of one model which fits all. However, if the editors of the latter write that

“There are many paths towards a bio-civilization, but we envisage societies that encompass the following values and more: diversity and pluriversality; autonomy and self-reliance; solidarity and reciprocity; commons and collective ethics; oneness with and rights of nature; interdependence; simplicity and enoughness; inclusiveness and dignity; justice and equity;

non-hierarchy; dignity of labour; rights and responsibilities; ecological sustainability; non-violence and peace” (Kothari et al 2019: xxix),

we should be careful not to read this as a statement how the many worlds of the pluriverse have to look like, but merely as one vision among many. It would be certainly a vision I wholeheartedly agree with, but from a post-anarchist/skeptical PD perspective it would be contradictory to not allow others to settle their conflicts violently or take decisions based on hierarchies if they agree to. Otherwise it would be a case of “Plurality is fine as long as all agree on the (universal) platform” (Cox 2010: 146).

A practical example of this dilemma is being faced by the Democratic Confederalism in Rojava, in the Kurdish controlled parts of Syria, where some of the Muslim communities (liberated from the rule of the Islamic State) did not agree to the view that women should enjoy equal rights with men, which is one of the central pillars of its political system. Instead of forcing the communities to abide by the new rules, they chose to try to convince the patriarchal communities through dialogue and example.¹⁰

9 Conclusion

So where does this leave us? To summarise the findings in a brief or even simplified manner: According to the analysis above, PD can be seen to a rather limited extent as a development theory, but rather as a sociology of knowledge of this discipline and a critique of its foundation. PD shares the critique of capitalism with Marxism but also has a more negative view of industrial modernity, its relation to nature, economic growth and productivity. For some, PD is characterized by a spirituality alien to western modernity, although this does not seem to be necessary to subscribe to the approach. Although PD’s critique is intimately related to ecofeminist thinking (and ecofeminist authors), many of its male protagonists seem unaware of this proximity. PD is clearly a postcolonial (or decolonial) critique of colonial and neocolonial relations of power which can be found also in knowledge production, in particular in the division between the ‘developed’ Self (Europe and European settler colonies and other societies emulating them) and the ‘backward’ Other. And PD, at the least skeptical PD, is based on a post-anarchist perspective of ontological equality, oriented towards self-determination in the pluriverse and rearguard theories.

¹⁰This experience was shared by Müslüm Örtülü from his fieldwork in Rojava. For a systematic overview on the political philosophy of Democratic Confederalism (based on the writings of imprisoned PKK leader Öcalan who has been heavily influenced by the anarchism of Murray Bookchin) and its implementation in Rojava see Örtülü 2023.

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