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**The contribution of discourse analysis to  
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**Aram Ziai**

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## **Abstract**

Reviewing the contribution of discourse analysis in development studies, the paper first engages with the critique of the approach that has been voiced repeatedly. In this regard, it discusses the reproaches of losing sight of materiality, homogenizing different perspectives in development studies, denying the agency of subjects and being unable to provide political alternatives. By using different examples, the paper shows that these points of criticism are no inherent features of discourse analysis in development studies. Proceeding to systematically analyse the contribution of these approaches to the discipline, the paper then outlines six specific features of development discourse: its naturalizations, problematizations, legitimizations, hierarchizations, depoliticizations and appropriations. It concludes that discourse analysis successfully highlights relations of power so far unnoticed and is most convincing when combined with the analysis of institutional necessities and material interests.

## The contribution of discourse analysis to development studies

The research on discourse in development studies is relatively novel. It has (except for a few early starters) emerged during the 1990s (see e.g. Escobar 1985 and 1995; Ferguson 1994; Nederveen Pieterse 1991; Manzo 1991; Sachs 1990 and 1992; Moore/Schmitz 1995; Crush 1995; Apthorpe/Gasper 1996; Cooper/Packard 1997a; Grillo/Stirrat 1997) and has continued to draw attention in the 2000s (Abrahamsen 2000; Biccum 2002 and 2006; Stein 2004; Oommen 2004; Karagiannis 2004; Groves/Hinton 2005; Mosse/Lewis 2005; Eriksson Baaz 2005; Smith 2006; Li 2007; Duffield 2007a and 2014; Greenstein 2009; Griffiths 2010; Cornwall/Eade 2010). However, there were numerous books on the history of development theory and the idea of development in earlier decades (e.g. Alcalde 1987, Arndt 1987, Nisbet 1969) without using the term 'discourse' which became popular only in the – often somewhat superficial – reception of the works of Michel Foucault.

While a relatively recent article claims that 'the study of discourses about underdevelopment appears to have been neglected by discourse analysts' and that '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' (della Faille 2011: 215f), a closer look casts doubt on this claim. This doubt not only rests on the number of works listed above, but also on their presence in academic debates. While development agencies on the one hand and established scholars in development theory have usually not at all been keen to take these new approaches serious, the quotes in google scholar certainly cannot testify a marginalisation: while both Jeffrey Sachs' *The End of Poverty* and William Easterly's *The White Man's Burden* – two of the best-selling and oft-quoted books in development studies during the last decade – have been quoted a little under 3000 times, Escobar's *Encountering Development* has (in February 2015) over 7000 quotes.<sup>1</sup>

So, judging from this admittedly narrow evidence, discourse analysis in development studies seems at least to inspire debate. While this strand of research is too vast to be comprehensively paraphrased and evaluated here, this working paper will nevertheless try to deal with the contribution of discourse analysis to development studies. It will do so by 1) summing up and discussing frequent points of criticism towards discourse analysis in development studies, 2) highlighting important points of selected texts of this research and articulating their contribution in the light of this critique and 3) specifying what the preceding chapters have to add to the state of the research.

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<sup>1</sup> So in this respect, Nederveen Pieterse (2011) is right in rejecting della Faille's marginalization hypothesis. Yet when he supports his counter-claim that development studies has experienced the linguistic turn and that 'all critical development scholars use discourse analysis, except for quantitative scholars and empiricists and policy specialists' (2011: 237), he is excluding three substantial groups plus all 'non-critical' scholars – which might together well add up to a majority. Empirical studies of this question may be helpful.

# 1. The critique of discourse analysis in development studies

*'The critical point is not to make the easy claim that poststructural critics [i.e. discourse analysts] of development theory overstate their position, but to argue that the analysis of discourse, with its linking oppositional theoretical traditions because they 'share the same discursive space' (i.e. oppose one another!) is prone to this kind of overgeneralization because it diverts attention away from the 'international and class relations' and material contexts expressed in discourses, hence merging conflicting positions (PAR and World Bank) into a single developmental discourse, or condemning modernity as a whole rather than, for example, capitalist versions of modern consumptive life.'* (Peet 1999: 156)

Peet is probably among the most outspoken critics of discourse analysis in development studies, but similar concerns have been raised as well by numerous writers from different perspectives (Gasper/Apthorpe 1997: 4, Kiely 1999: 36 and 41f, Blaikie 2000: 1034, Nederveen Pieterse 2010: 115f and 2011: 239, to name but a few, see also Peet 1999: 154-56). Their main arguments can be summed up in the following points:

1. The focus on discourse risks losing sight of materiality. By concerning itself primarily with questions of representation, language and identity, discourse analysis neglects material questions of poverty and survival in capitalism. And these material relations are what counts (or should count) in development studies.
2. The critique of development discourse in the singular homogenizes different, even opposing discourses into a single monolithic entity. This ignores crucial political differences.
3. Foucauldian approaches to discourse analysis construct a pervasive and all-powerful discourse, thereby losing track of questions of agency. Subjects are reduced to 'cogs in the machine'.
4. Therefore, the critique of discourse is unable to provide political alternatives. Sometimes, the issue of epistemological relativism (all discourses are equally valid on their own terms, one cannot distinguish between true and false discourses) is raised, which would also lead to political inertia.

In order to evaluate the contribution of discourse analysis to development studies, these four points have to be examined more closely.

## 1.1 Losing sight of materiality

As a first step, it has to be conceded that discourse analysis in development studies is concerned primarily with issues of representation, but with the representation of material inequality and of the attempts to ameliorate it. So unless one assumes that the representational practices (development discourse) and the material practices (development policy) are entirely unrelated, there is obviously some degree of relevance of the former for the latter. By proponents of discourse analysis in development studies, this degree is assumed to be considerable. Escobar claims that:

*'As a discourse, development is thus a very real historical formation, albeit articulated around a fictitious construct (underdevelopment) and upon a certain materiality (the conditions baptized as*

*underdevelopment), which must be conceptualized in different ways if the power of development discourse is to be challenged or displaced. To be sure, there is a situation of economic exploitation that must be recognized and dealt with. ... There is also a certain materiality of life conditions that is extremely preoccupying and that requires effort and attention. ... Changing the order of discourse is a political question that entails the collective practice of social actors and the restructuring of existing political economies of truth.'* (Escobar 1995: 53, 216)

In this perspective, a different conceptualization of the material situations now described as underdevelopment is a necessary precondition for its change. An improvement for those exploited is desired but seen possible only if material *and* discursive transformations take place. So it is not the case, to use the words of Christine Sylvester, that discourse analysis in development studies 'does not tend to concern itself with whether the subaltern is eating' (1999: 703), but that the problem is seen as a larger complex of power relations in representational and material practices which can only be transformed together. But although they differ regarding the importance of representation, the concern for material inequality is as present in the writings of discourse analysts like Escobar as it is in the warnings not to lose sight of materiality.

However, and this is the second step, a closer look reveals that the examination of material inequality in some of the best-known examples of discourse analysis in development studies is superficial at best. A much-criticized passage of Escobar's introduction reads:

*'[I]nstead of the kingdom of abundance promised by theorists and politicians in the 1950s, the discourse and strategy of development produced its opposite: massive underdevelopment and impoverishment, untold exploitation and oppression. The debt crisis, the Sahelian famine, increasing poverty, malnutrition and violence are only the most pathetic signs of the failure of forty years of development. ... most people's conditions not only did not improve but deteriorated [during the era of development]'* (Escobar 1995: 4f)

Here we observe again that Escobar sees discursive and material practices as closely interlinked in 'development'. But the sweeping statements about impoverishment and increasing malnutrition etc. are in no way supported up by empirical evidence or more detailed analysis of the role of development discourse in the debt crisis or the Sahelian famine. And they ignore, as numerous critics have pointed out (e.g. Kiely 1999: 37), the rise in living standards on average at least regarding standard indicators like life expectancy and school enrolment, which has taken place during the 'era of development' in the Third World. According to UN figures, average life expectancy at birth rose in 'less developed countries' rose between 1960 and 1996 from 46 to 62 years (Thomas 2000: 7).<sup>2</sup> A critical position may now investigate the distribution of this progress in the richer and poorer segments of these countries, examine in how far this progress is linked to interventions in the market mechanism, or even dispute that life expectancy should be seen as a crucial indicator of a good life, arguing that a shorter life as a happy and self-reliant subsistence farmer lived in communal solidarity and dignity is closer to this ideal than a longer life as an unhappy wage labourer living in competition to others and constant fear of unemployment and deprivation. But to talk about deteriorating

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<sup>2</sup> The rise is even more impressive regarding the time span from 1950 and 2010: from 42 to 67 years (UN 2012: 4)

conditions without engaging these questions can be seen as an inadequate treatment of issues of material inequality.

Nevertheless, there are also analyses of development discourse which have been based on thorough empirical studies not only of discursive but also of material practices, and it is no coincidence that these are often the most interesting because they illuminate the specific interrelation between the two. This is the case when Ferguson (1994) contrasts the discursive construction of Lesotho by the World Bank as a rural subsistence economy with the reality of many of the designated 'farmers' being in fact migrant wage labourers in South African mines – a fact which he explains with the institutional necessities of constructing the problem of Lesotho's poverty in such a way that development projects improving agricultural productivity actually make sense. A more realistic agenda for improving living standards of the poor in Lesotho, namely supporting workers' struggles in South Africa, was inconceivable for organisations involved in 'development'. Another example is provided by Mitchell (1995) who shows that USAID constructs itself as a rational consciousness outside of Egypt while in fact being a powerful actor in the country working to channel heavily subsidized grain from US producers to the country which allowed higher meat consumption of more prosperous classes while at the same time demanding an end to subsidies of the national state. Despite acting as an interested party for international and national classes, the agency engaged in necessary self-deception on the level of discourse which enabled it to maintain its material practices. So, and this is the last step of the argument, the combination of the analysis of discursive and material practices which some authors engage in has not only produced original and convincing research but has also demonstrated that a focus on discourse need not lead to losing sight of materiality.

## **1.2 Homogenization and overgeneralization**

A common critique is that already talking about development discourse in the singular unduly homogenizes a very diverse field of statements and vastly different concepts – simply put, it even ignores the differences between 'capitalist development' and 'socialist development'. In general, one can reply that it may well be worthwhile to explore (differences notwithstanding) the striking commonalities of even these two discourses: the emphasis on technological progress, economic growth and the privileging of modern, scientific forms of knowledge – as was done by Ivan Illich, whose critique could be applied to both kinds of modern societies. Yet we have to be more specific than that.

Probably the most sophisticated critique of this point is provided by Gasper who argues that 'a plurality of practices [in 'development'] requires a plurality of concepts' (1996: 170). Taking the examples of Ferguson and Escobar, who both argue that 'bureaucratic control is an essential component of the deployment of development' (Escobar 1995: 145, see also Ferguson 1994: 255), Gasper correctly points out that '[t]his 'development' then seems to exclude free-marketeers and important approaches prominent in the 1980s and 1990s' (Gasper 1996: 169). Indeed one central point in what Toye (1987) has called the 'counter-revolution in development theory and policy' of neoliberalism was to dismantle the developmental state and its bureaucracy. One could, however, argue that these neoliberal policies in fact constitute a significant departure from development discourse (Ziai 2010). Yet Gasper has a point when he writes that 'these and other authors ... give to an ideal type of one part of development discourse (often a different ideal type per author) the



status of a description of the whole', leading to 'oversimplification and misrepresentation of complex discursive fields' (Gasper 1996: 169). In this context, he points to Moore (1995) whose identification of equity, democracy and sustainability as the core concepts of development discourse might have been plausible for the 1990s (and even then not all would agree – what about the market?), but certainly not for the 1960s.<sup>3</sup>

Gasper also takes issue with Ferguson's (and others') hypothesis that depoliticization (see section 2) was a central element of development discourse and argues that these descriptions 'do not fit the language of political conditionality or human rights', trying to make the point that the heterogeneity of development discourse is ignored, in particular the discourse of good governance. Obviously the discourse of good governance which rose to prominence during the 1990s (after the end of the Cold War!) addresses political issues and at first sight does not seem compatible with the hypothesis. Yet if good governance is defined as 'sound development management' (World Bank 1992: 1) or as 'the manner in which power is exercised in the management of a country's economic and social resources for development' (World Bank 1992: 3), politics is reduced to a technical matter:

*'...what the tethering of politics to governance does is to marginalize questions about authentic degrees of democratization within both government and society, in favour of issues of functional utility related to development performance. The effect, ultimately, is to de-politicize policy debates while still casting them within a normative framework which subordinates democracy to development.'* (Schmitz 1995: 74f)

So following Schmitz (1995) as well as Abrahamsen (2000) and Mkandawire (2010), one could see good governance (at least the way it was deployed in development policy since the 1990s in the context of structural adjustment) precisely as a depoliticized version of politics.<sup>4</sup> Therefore in this case Gasper's point is not a convincing rejection of the attempt to generalize about development discourse.

So Gasper is right about warning of overgeneralization if one writes about the discourse of 'development' in the singular. Yet overgeneralization is not a necessary feature of such writing. Of course there is a bewildering array of different historical, geographical and thematic contexts and one should always be aware of that. But generalization is the stuff that theory is made of, the element that sets it apart from mere description or history. And I would argue it is not only possible, but even necessary to reflect which discursive structures Truman's point 4, World Bank reports of the 1980s and current reports on the Sustainable Development Goals have in common (Ziai 2015).

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<sup>3</sup> He also points to Manzo's (1991) argument that the idea of the modern West as a model of achievement which would allegedly be disproven by non-Western ('counter-modernist') models of development. This is not quite convincing: trying to catch up with and overtake the West (Gasper mentions Japan and South Korea) does imply adopting the model and one would have to look closely in which aspects another path (he also mentions Mugabe and Nyerere) has been taken

<sup>4</sup> 'Good governance thus simply became one more instrument for ensuring the implementation of adjustment programmes. Because macro-economic policies were sacrosanct, it was important that the democratic institutions that might come with good governance were not used to undermine economic policy. This was ensured by introducing institutional reform that effectively compromised the authority of elected bodies through the insulation of policy technocrats and the creation of 'autonomous' authorities.' (Mkandawire 2010: 267)

### 1.3 Questions of agency

It is true that theoretical works based on Foucault are conventionally strong on structures and weak on agency. However, not all studies of discourse in development studies belong to this camp.<sup>5</sup> The frequent reference to Truman's inaugural address as the starting point of development discourse (e.g. in the works of Escobar, Sachs or Esteva) already implies an emphasis on individual agency which is difficult to reconcile with Foucault's earlier very structuralist writings. Further, for those analyses belonging to the camp of Post-Development, it can be observed that by pointing to the rejection of development discourse and resistance to development projects in social movements and indigenous communities in the South, they do attribute agency to those often seen as the passive objects of this discourse.

Yet regarding the fact that these people are sometimes seen as manipulated by the 'ideology of development' if they do not resist (e.g. Rahnema 1997), one might point to the fact that this is a rather narrow conceptualisation of agency: either being manipulated by a discourse or explicitly resisting it. James Scott (1985, 1990) has shown that poor people's agency often takes other and more subtle forms than outright resistance – the latter being a dangerous option for the weak. In development studies, few people have analysed the transformations and appropriations of development discourse by subjects in the South. If these are taken into account, 'development' does no longer *merely* look like a technocratic discourse allowing to uphold the colonial division of labour, but as a discourse which *also* enables unions, parties and anticolonial movements in the South (and later the heads of state of the independent states) to pose demands and make claims regarding social and economic progress which could not be dismissed out of hand by colonial officials and Northern politicians (Ziai 2015, ch. 6 and Cooper 1997: 84).

One interesting example of an indigenous engagement with development discourse is provided by Wainwright (2008) who examines the Maya in Belize's Toledo district and the discourse of Mayanism describing them and constructing their identity as non-modern since colonial times and legitimizing interventions in their way of life. He focuses in particular on the Maya atlas, an attempt at counter-mapping in which the Maya portray their land and their culture, opposing attempts to assimilate and settle them. Wainwright shows, however, that this atlas includes discursive elements from nationalism, international law and sustainable development, and how their self-representation blanks out ambivalences and hybridities – in fact, is even shaped by a romantic Mayanism. External influences visible in everyday life of Maya communities such as rice, wage labour, chain saws and Christianity, do not appear in the atlas. 'The meaning of what constitutes 'Maya' space in the Atlas is produced through a set of exclusions' (Wainwright 2008: 257), also concerning gender relations and marital violence. Thus even in explicitly resisting the discourse of those who define their way of life as less developed, the Maya atlas betrays the influence of these discourses of colonialism and development, excluding all that they have actually appropriated from the Western modernizers in terms of discursive and material practices and attempting to conform to the image of the noble savages. Here, discourse analysis in development reveals an exertion of agency in the South which simultaneously denies its own agency.

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<sup>5</sup> In an earlier work (Ziai 2004) I have shown that while Post-Development approaches are often seen as exemplars of discourse analysis inspired by Foucault, their theoretical approaches are closer to a traditional critique of ideology.

## 1.4 Political alternatives

The greater part of analyses of discourse in development studies is visibly concerned with a critique of relations of power and often also with the promotion of political alternatives. These alternatives take different shapes. While Escobar outlined the 'defence and promotion of localized, pluralistic grassroots movements' (1995: 215), Rist, when answering the question 'What is to be done?', broadened the range of possibilities to 'self-organization', 'finding new ways of social linkage' and collectively 'secure [one's] existence' (1997: 243), but also considered constructive and deconstructive criticism of the existing order as legitimate alternatives (242-248).

The most interesting and thoughtful answer to the same question was in my view given by Ferguson:

*"What is to be done?" demands first of all an answer to the question, 'By whom?' Often, the question was put to me in the form 'What should they do?' ... The 'they' here is an imaginary collective subject... Such a 'they' clearly needs to be broken up. The inhabitants of Lesotho do not share the same interests or the same circumstances, and they do not act as a single unit. ... the interests represented by governmental elites ... are not congruent with those of the governed... There is not one question – 'what is to be done' – but hundreds: what should the mineworkers do, what should the abandoned old women do, what should the unemployed do, and so on. It seems, at the least, presumptuous to offer prescriptions here. The toiling miners and the abandoned old women know the tactics proper to their own situation far better than any expert does. Indeed, the only general answer to the question, 'What should they do?' is: 'They are doing it!' ... A second, and apparently less arrogant, form of the question is to ask ... 'what should we do?' But once again, the crucial question is, which 'we'? ... What should we scholars and intellectuals working in or concerned about the Third World do? ... One of the most important forms of engagement is simply the political participation in one's own society that is appropriate to any citizen. This is perhaps particularly true for citizens of a country like the United States, where – thanks to an imperialistic power projected across the globe – national politics powerfully impacts upon the rest of the world.' (Ferguson 1994: 280f, 282, 285f)*

In this section, Ferguson does not only suggest 'counter-hegemonic' alternative points of engagement, he also soothes those worried about the neglect of class (and gender!) by pointing to the relations of oppression concealed by a national collective and at the same time reveals the presumptuousness of outside experts on 'development' advising poor people around the world what they should be doing. So discourse analysis in development studies does seem capable of reflecting upon and providing political alternatives.

While all the arguments listed in this section should not be interpreted to refute the points of criticism for any and all contributions to discourse analysis in development studies (far from it), the general point to be made here is that if they occur it has nothing to do with the approach itself – contrary to what Peet claims in the quote at the beginning.

## 2. Significant arguments of discourse analysis in development studies

Having dealt with the criticisms voiced against it, we now attempt to assess the contribution of discourse analysis in development studies. In order to do so, I will reiterate the arguments of some key works in this section which I deem significant. I maintain that these approaches have yielded

crucial insights for development studies in regard to the following features of at least orthodox development discourse as articulated by most development agencies and mainstream scholars:

- 1) Naturalization
- 2) Othering
- 3) Legitimization
- 4) Hierarchization
- 5) Depoliticization
- 6) Appropriation

## **2.1 Naturalization and the universal scale**

The first and maybe most fundamental achievement of discourse analysis in development studies provides is the insight that the categories and strategies of ‘development’ imply a certain perspective which is contingent – in contrast to being the natural and normal way of seeing things. That societies can be compared according to their ‘level of development’, that there are ‘developed’ and ‘less developed’ countries, and that the latter can be found in Africa, Asia and Latin America and are in need of ‘development’, development experts, development projects and development aid provided by the former, are assumptions that are by no means self-evident, but which are naturalized in the discourse of ‘development’. Discourse analysis has shown that they belong to a certain historical and geopolitical context – the aftermath of World War II and the beginning Cold War, although of course there are predecessors in colonial development (Hodge et al. 2014) and 19<sup>th</sup> century social policy and post-Enlightenment social engineering (Cowen/Shenton 1996). As Ferguson describes it:

*‘Like ‘civilization’ in the 19th century, ‘development’ is the name not only for a value, but also for a dominant problematic or interpretative grid through which the impoverished regions of the world are known to us. Within this interpretative grid, a host of everyday observations are rendered intelligible and meaningful. The images of the ragged poor of Asia thus become legible as markers of a stage of development ... Within this problematic, it appears self-evident that debtor Third-World nation states and starving peasants share a common ‘problem’, that both lack a single ‘thing’: ‘development’.’ (Ferguson 1994: xiii)*

Escobar agrees that the discourse of development has ‘created a space in which only certain things could be said and even imagined’ (1995: 39) and goes on to point out ‘even today most people in the West (and many parts of the Third World) have great difficulty thinking about Third World situations and people in terms other than those provided by the development discourse’ (1995: 12), terms like poverty, malnutrition, illiteracy, etc. Now the point of discourse analysis is not to claim that these terms are pure fantasy and have no empirical referent in these regions, the point is that other terms which also have empirical referents do not form part of the discourse, the representation of reality is partial and structured according to certain stereotypes, excluding those parts which do not fit. The question which stereotypes we are talking about, will be answered in the sub-section 2.2. But regardless of their content, there is already a problematic implication in any talk about ‘development’, about more and less ‘developed’ countries. According to Esteva, ‘it is a comparative

adjective, whose base support is the assumption, very Western but unacceptable and undemonstrable, of the oneness, homogeneity and linear evolution of the world', using one fragment of the world 'as a general point of reference' (1992: 11f). Thus the discourse of 'development' assumes a consensus on what is seen as 'developed', progressive and desirable. If one were to take serious the talk that 'people have to decide for themselves what they see as development' (a phrase frequently encountered in development cooperation since the 1990s, see Ziai 2014), this universal scale would disappear and we could not compare societies unless they had explicitly agreed to one scale.

Now to what extent the discourse of 'development' really limits what can be said and establishes a universal scale of measurement for all societies, cannot be examined here empirically. But that this question can be posed at all is an achievement of discourse analysis in development studies. It introduced the linguistic turn into the thinking about global inequality and North-South relations, enabling us to question the very basic categories of our discipline instead of reproducing and naturalizing them.

## **2.2 Othering and the problematization of deviance**

The naturalization of the Self enables the problematization of the Other. The universal scale allows to measure and compare according to a certain norm. In development discourse, this is no neutral endeavour, but inextricably linked with the construction of the Self as superior, as the norm, and of the Other as inferior, as deviant. Based on this Eurocentric scale, the majority of humanity was defined as 'underdeveloped' through development discourse: 'they ceased being what they were, in all their diversity' and were burdened with the challenge to 'escape from the undignified condition called underdevelopment' (Esteva 1992: 7).<sup>6</sup> As we have seen in chapter 3, the discourse of 'development' evolved out of colonial discourse, but employed similar binaries describing 'us' and 'them'. And yet it is not quite correct to reduce the shift from the 'civilized/barbarian dichotomy' to that of 'development/underdevelopment' (Duffield 2007b: 228) to a 'shift in vocabulary' (Biccum 2002: 49) – the recognition of the sovereignty of formerly colonized peoples is not a trifle. We are faced with the 'emergence of an international discourse that reproduces the dualism of the colonial relationship without its explicit racism and without its reliance on the direct exercise of political power by an imperial government' (Cooper 1997: 83f). However, in both discourses, the Other is seen not only as inferior, but as a backward version of the Self. Nandy identified this discursive operation as the 'transformation of geo-cultural difference into historical stages' (Nandy 1992: 146). Consequently, our own 'modern' society, in the words of Manzo, 'was placed in hierarchical opposition to other areas of the globe which remained "traditional," that is, less cosmopolitan, less scientific, less secular, less rational, less individualist, and less democratic. They were defined solely in relation to the West, the foundational source of "development," as an inferior or derivative form.' (Manzo 1991: 10)

Escobar has described this process of Othering as an 'infantilization of the Third World' (1995: 30) in analogy to the view that these backward peoples need tutelage and education, and as a 'medicalization of the political gaze' (1995: 30) as they were, in the new discourse, perceived not as biologically inferior but as stricken by disease, malnutrition, and so on. He contends that

<sup>6</sup> See also Shreshta (1995) for a first-hand experience of being deprived of dignity through development discourse.

'development' 'proceeded by creating 'abnormalities' (such as the 'illiterate', the 'underdeveloped', the 'malnourished'... which it would later treat and reform' (1995: 41). This latter activity will be dealt with later, here we are mainly concerned with the problematization, which also according to Li takes place through 'identifying deficiencies' (Li 2007: 7). All of this of course implies that the problem lies with the deviance from the norm in the non-West (the lack of capital, technology and modern values, see Escobar 1995: 162), not with the norm, i.e. the West itself: that the West may have had something to do with the problems in the South, is ruled out in this problematization. This is in part due to a methodological nationalism in liberal development discourse<sup>7</sup> which sees each country as a kind of container unrelated to others – 'a free-standing entity, rather than a particular position within a larger arrangement of transnational economic and political forces' (Mitchell 1995: 147) – and in part due to 'an elision of colonial relations of power' (Biccum 2002: 44), neglecting the historical entanglements which allowed Europe's rise.

It has to be mentioned again that what has been described here are dominant structures, but not an accurate description of anything that has been said and written in development policy, let alone theory. Nevertheless, even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century we find processes of Othering in development discourse which are remarkably similar to earlier, colonial representations of the South. Examples for this are provided by Eriksson Baaz's analysis of interviews with white development aid workers in Tanzania, who consistently characterize 'the Africans' as unreliable, passive, irrational and 'situated at a different stage of development and Enlightenment' (2005: 167) or Bendix' (2013) critique of the racist imagery used in poster campaigns of the German ministry for development cooperation.

### **2.3 Legitimization and the promise of betterment**

One central function of development discourse is legitimization through the promise of betterment, but the object of legitimization varies depending on the specific discourse. In the discourse of immanent development (according to Cowen and Shenton (1996) concerned with the evolution of capitalist society), the issue is the legitimization of capitalism and private enterprise; in the discourse of intentional development (concerned with planned interventions), the issue is the legitimization of these interventions and the development apparatus, and in both cases the secondary object is the existing political and economic order on the national or international level.

In both liberal and interventionist development discourse, the legitimization works via the promise to improve the lives of 'less developed' people, to solve the problem of poverty and ameliorate the deficiencies identified in the diagnosis, either through investments and the market or through projects and planned interventions in the market (economic growth, technological progress and modern values feature in both versions). In both cases, criticisms concerning the failure of the promise to deliver in the past are repelled by a mechanism which can be called the shifting of signifiers. It builds on the polysemy of the term 'development' (see Ziai 2009): on the one hand, the term refers to a transformation towards a modern, capitalist, industrial economy, on the other, to an improvement in living standards and reducing poverty. By shifting between the two meanings, it can now be argued that the remedy to poverty is a transformation towards a capitalist economy even though this transformation might cause or contribute to the impoverishment of some part of the population: they are poor (i.e. lack 'development' in the second sense) so they need to be integrated

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<sup>7</sup> Of course, the great achievement of dependency and world-system approaches in development theory has been to overcome this methodological nationalism.

into the capitalist world market (i.e. 'development' in the first sense) (Ferguson 1994: 15, 55).<sup>8</sup> This shift also allows for what Gasper (1996: 150) calls the 'beyond criticism gambit': 'Negative experiences of industrialization or capitalism or whatever then become excused as not real examples, not 'real development'; and the concept of 'development' can live on as at the same time a definite programme and an untarnishable promise.' (Gasper 1996: 149) The actions of development organizations by definition bring 'development' and if they do not, then something went wrong in the implementation, but the policy or programme itself is 'not to blame' (150).<sup>9</sup>

Together with the legitimacy provided by expert knowledge (see 2.4), the polysemy of development enables the reformulation of the promise even after obvious failure. The meaning of the term can be shifted to include new aspects. After the Pearson report had shown clearly that development policy's growth strategy had not reduced poverty and inequality during the 1960s, the World Bank 'discovered' the rural poor as a new target group and redefined 'development' as 'rural development', adding new 'integrated rural development projects' to its standard infrastructure projects. In the words of Sachs:

*'The logic of this conceptual operation is obvious enough: the idea of development was not abandoned; indeed, its field of application was enlarged. Similarly, in rapid succession, ... the eradication of poverty, basic needs, women, and, finally, the environment, were swiftly turned into problems and became the object of special strategies. The meaning of development exploded, increasingly covering a host of contradictory practices. ... So, development has become a shapeless, amoeba-like word. ... Development thus has no content, but it does possess a function: it allows any intervention to be sanctified in the name of a higher, evolutionary goal.'* (Sachs 1990: 6, see also Escobar 1995: 58, Esteva 1985 and 1992)

Here, the legitimizing function of the promise is spelled out clearly. The reformulation and renewal of the promise of betterment by the apparatus of 'development' has been described by Duffield as an 'institutional 'Groundhog day' in which every decade or two similar pronouncements are repackaged by a new generation of aid administrators and presented afresh as the way forward' (2007: 227). While Duffield describes this promise as a decidedly 'liberal strategization of power' (231, 227), Berger (1974) has shown already in the 1970s that such a painting of a bright future to legitimate the negative sides of the current political and economic order has been a feature of both capitalist and socialist regimes in the South.

For the development apparatus of the West, the promise requires that the solutions offered match the problematization in order to be credible: 'The West possesses the expertise, technology and management skills that the non-West is lacking. This lack is what has caused the problems of the non-West.' (Mitchell 1995: 156) Thus the promise is dependent on a privileged type of knowledge, and this brings us to the next point.

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<sup>8</sup> Already Rostow's modernization theory implicitly employed this discursive mechanism by defining poor countries as traditional, i.e. pre-capitalist, excluding the possibility that poverty may be a result of an inclusion into the capitalist world-system on subordinate terms.

<sup>9</sup> The World Bank's defence of structural adjustment is a good example of this (see also chapter 9).

## 2.4 Hierarchization and the expert knowledge of trustees

While the problematization has identified deficiencies in 'less developed' societies (2.2) and the promise has announced their remedy (2.3), the claim to be able to do so is based on expert knowledge on how to achieve 'development'. This in turn requires a hierarchization of different types of knowledge (and sometimes also cultures and values), with one type (universally applicable expert knowledge) being privileged and the other (local, 'unscientific' knowledge) denigrated (DuBois 1991: 7). Taking up the category of trusteeship (Cowen and Shenton 1996: ix, 25, 31), Li argues that development experts and aid workers 'occupy the position of trustees, a position defined by the claim to know how others should live' (2007: 4f) – of course not with the intent to dominate them, but to 'develop' them, to enhance their capacities and improve their lives. Escobar also contends that within the discourse, development professionals should be entrusted with the management of social life identified as 'underdeveloped' because their 'specialized knowledge allegedly qualified them for this task' (1995: 52). This power entrusted to them relies on this knowledge which consists in the ability of the development professionals to ascertain procedures for diagnosis and treatment of the 'underdeveloped' (Apthorpe 1996: 20).

Yet while this knowledge about 'development' presents itself as technical and neutral (see 2.5), Cooper and Packard (1997b: 19) remind us that 'development is fundamentally about changing how people conduct their lives, and the very claim to technical knowledge is in itself a political act.' Assuming that 'development' is about improvement and a good life, Berger (1974: 35, 45) concurs: 'People who speak of development should frankly admit that they are engaged in the business of ethics and, at least potentially, of politics. ... Development is not something to be decided by experts, simply because there are no experts on the desirable goals of human life.'

But what if experts rightly claim that their knowledge leads to an improvement in the lives of their beneficiaries? And the latter willingly accept the advice of the experts? Here, the characteristic (and controversial) position of Foucauldian discourse analysis is illustrated by DuBois (1991): after the lifestyles of the beneficiaries have become transparent, experts proscribe 'safer', 'more efficient', 'healthier' and generally better ways of doing things (1991: 21). As a result of these disciplinary techniques at the micro-level,

*'an accompanying and unspoken hierarchization is produced between the ways, in general, of performing tasks in the two cultures as these introductions multiply. The hierarchization of cultures that characterizes the categorization of 'developed' and 'developing' nations is not imposed from the top down but is the sum (effect) of a multiplicity of localized hierarchizations or judgments regarding economic, political, social, and cultural aspects. Finally, even though many of the norms erected by relations of disciplinary power in the context of development are based not on the discourse of the human sciences but on that of the natural sciences (and therefore 'really are true') - boiling drinking water to kill bacteria, using fertilizer to increase yields, and so on – the effects mentioned above are still produced.'* (DuBois 1991: 22)

So even if the knowledge is correct, a hierarchization takes place. This hierarchization is the result of the general structure of development discourse that the problems of 'underdevelopment' are located in the South, while the North possesses the knowledge to solve these problems – experts are sent only in one direction and development cooperation is not designed as intercultural exchange,



although one can think of indicators and social problems where the latter might well make sense for the North: suicide rates, drug abuse, treatment of the elderly, etc. (DuBois 1991: 25).

Now one may perfectly well adopt the ethical position that engendering power relations and subordinating local knowledge and culture is legitimate if the introduction of scientific practices can save lives – but at least one should be aware of these effects and implications, in particular for the production of ‘developed’ identities supposedly part of a superior culture as well as ‘less developed’ identities supposedly part of an inferior culture (1991: 25). These effects are what leads Escobar to the hypothesis that the institutionalization of development discourse in agencies producing and circulating knowledge about the Third World ‘has been able to integrate, manage, and control countries and populations in increasingly detailed and encompassing ways’ (Escobar 1995: 47) and DuBois to the statement that ‘one may understand the process of development as the increased governance of the Third World’ (1991: 28). However, what both seem to neglect somewhat is the question of agency already mentioned in 1.3. Therefore, processes of appropriation and hybridization need to be discussed as well (see 2.6). But before that, we have to turn to the political consequence of the claim that the knowledge about ‘development’ is merely technical: the depoliticization of conflicts.

## **2.5 Depoliticization and the common interest**

The discourse of ‘development’, at least the one employed by most development agencies, assumes that ‘development’ is something that benefits everyone and therefore no one can object to, something removed from conflicts over political and economic questions. Simply put, this discourse wants to help the poor without hurting the rich (on a national and international level). It has to do so in order to gain support and legitimacy, but in doing so neglects an analysis of the structural causes of poverty and depoliticizes the conflicts and divisions in society. The most explicit articulation of this insight comes from Ferguson, who explains the distortions he finds in development discourse’s representation of Lesotho through institutional necessities:

*‘An academic analysis is of no use to a ‘development’ agency unless it provides a place for the agency to plug itself in, unless it provides a charter for the sort of intervention that the agency is set up to do. An analysis which suggests that the causes of poverty in Lesotho are political and structural (not technical and geographical), that the national government is part of the problem (not a neutral instrument for its solution), and that meaningful change can only come through revolutionary social transformation in South Africa has no place in ‘development’ discourse simply because ‘development’ agencies are not in the business of promoting political realignments or supporting revolutionary struggles. ... For an analysis to meet the needs of ‘development’ institutions, it must do what academic discourse inevitably fails to do; it must make Lesotho out to be an enormously promising candidate for the only sort of intervention a ‘development’ agency is capable of launching: the apolitical, technical ‘development’ intervention.’ (Ferguson 1994: 68f)*

Ferguson goes on to argue that ‘[b]y uncompromisingly reducing poverty to a technical problem, and by promising technical solutions to the sufferings of the powerless and oppressed people’, the discourse of ‘development’ was ‘the principal means through which the question of poverty is depoliticized in the world today’ (256). And although development projects are always concerned with the transfer of resources and social restructuring which benefits some groups more than others and

thus with political questions, the development apparatus denies its political role and functions as an 'anti-politics machine' (256).

This argument is supported by numerous other analyses of development discourse. Mitchell, in his analysis of USAID in Egypt, finds that the organization is 'a central element in configurations of power within the country' but 'must imagine itself as a rational consciousness standing outside the country' – a necessary self-deception to maintain its role as a neutral provider of technical knowledge (Mitchell 1995: 149). Mitchell investigates the exclusions and silences in USAID's analyses and concludes: 'Questions of power or inequality, whether on the global level of international grain markets, state subsidies, and the arms trade, or the more local level of landholding, food supplies and income distribution, will nowhere be discussed.' (156) These exclusions illustrate 'the necessary limits of development discourse' (ibid.).

A more recent study by Li (2007) of development projects in Central Sulawesi in Indonesia confirms Ferguson's and Mitchell's findings. The project documents neglected political-economic causes of poverty and reframed social and environmental problems 'in terms amenable to a technical solution' (2007: 126). And even when police and army collaborated with illegal practices of timber extraction, sabotaging the sustainability objectives of the project, the development agencies were not interested: 'refractory findings suggesting that 'the government' is not dedicated to the public good cannot be processed by the development machine' (134). Li empirically identifies three limitations of development agency discourse, all contributing to depoliticization: the assumption that the state apparatus can be made to work in the public interest, the ignorance of experts to the power relation implicit in their positioning and the credo that capitalist enterprise and the search for profit can only be a solution to poverty, not a cause (267, 275).

Escobar agrees that development discourse (by what he calls 'professionalization') 'remove[s] problems from the political and cultural realms to the more neutral realm of science' (1995: 45) and similarly concludes that 'the problem [of rural poverty] is thought to be characterized by exclusion from markets and state policy, not by exploitation within the market and the state' (150). In the words of Rist (1997: 78), the discourse 'presented 'development' as a set of technical measures outside the realm of political debate (utilization of scientific knowledge, growth of productivity, expansion of international trade)' serving the 'common good'. Moore (1995: 22) stresses that 'development' usually functions as a catch-all phrase capturing goals and aspirations of all parties and Gasper remarks that the discourse works through the 'concealment of divisive issues' (Gasper 1996: 151). 'Development' thus is, since Truman, in everyone's interest: 'we' as donors (or investors) can help the poor and at the same time pursue our economic or geopolitical interest. Rist identifies the 'yoking together of solidarity and self-interest' as 'one of the basic elements in 'development' discourse, as a way of convincing both those who emphasized the 'humanitarian imperative' and those who focused on national interest' (1997: 91). If the argument is not based on investment and markets, it is based on the crises in the South which have to be prevented or contained through development aid before 'we' in the North are affected negatively by drugs, migrants or terrorism: 'In fostering 'their' development, we improve 'our' security' (Duffield 2007: 225, see also Sachs 1999: 20-23). The argument about the enlightened self-interest sounds familiar: 'development' benefits everyone and no one can object to it, it manifests the common good. That is why the transfer of resources to 'Village Development Committees' made up of members of the ruling party in the

Thaba-Tseka development project in Lesotho and the ensuing theft and sabotage elicited contradictory reactions: while a chief remarked that 'development has many enemies here', an oppositional informant commented 'politics is nowadays nicknamed development' (quoted in Ferguson 1994: 247).

Against such an 'amoeba word' that 'denotes nothing while claims the best of intentions' (Sachs 1990: 6), discourse analysis can be a useful tool, as Cornwall has pointed out, if we apply what Cornwall calls 'constructive deconstruction': 'the taking apart of the different meanings that these words have acquired ... in development discourse. ... this process can bring into view dissonance between these meanings. If the use of buzzwords as fuzzwords conceals ideological differences, the process of constructive deconstruction reveals them.' (Cornwall 2010: 14)

## **2.6 Appropriation and the hybridization of development discourse**

The last feature of development discourse to be discussed here is one that is often neglected in the analyses cited above and one which corresponds to the critical comments on the question of agency (1.3). It concerns the transformation of the discourse through 1) its appropriation through actors in the South and 2) the effects of the critique articulated by discourse analysis in development studies.

Regarding the appropriation, it can be observed that although the discourse of 'development' was initiated by Western actors concerned about access to raw materials and markets in the South, it would be myopic to assume that all Southern actors employing this discourse were manipulated and pursuing someone else's interest. Analysing colonial development in Africa in the 1940s and 50s, Cooper (1997: 84f) has shown that although the discourse of 'development' 'was originally supposed to sustain empire', it 'did not simply spring from the brow of colonial leaders, but was to a significant extent forced upon them, by the collective actions of workers'. Once it was articulated,

*'developmentalist arguments ... were something trade union and political leaders in Africa could engage with, appropriate, and turn back. The framework allowed them to pose demands in forms that could be understood in London and Paris, that could not be dismissed as 'primitive'. Political parties could assert that true development required sovereign control over a development apparatus... Much as one can read the universalism of development discourse as a form of European particularism imposed abroad, it could also be read ... as a rejection of the fundamental premises of colonial rule, a firm assertion of people of all races to participate in global politics and lay claim to a globally defined standard of living.'* (Cooper 1997: 84)

So, and this is important to note regarding the contribution of discourse analysis to development studies, development discourse did *not only* function as a discourse of hierarchization and depoliticization, but it *also* worked as a discourse of claims and rights for those who were designated as deficient and inadequate by it. Ferguson (2006: 186) has remarked that many people pointing to a lack of 'development' or 'modernity' in their context are referring to inadequate socioeconomic conditions or a low standard of living. Here, we can conclude, development discourse provides a language to criticize material inequality and articulate 'expectations of modernity' (Ferguson 1999). Abandoning the promise of 'development' as in neoliberal discourse leaves them without a prospect of material improvement and a 'de-developmentalized' global hierarchy (Ferguson 2006: 189, see also Ziai 2010).

This insight may also shed new light on the possibility of re-signifying the term 'development'. Cornwall argues that Laclau's notion of chains of equivalences between signifiers may prove to be useful here:

*'Used in a chain of equivalence with good governance, accountability, results-based management, reform and security, ... words like democracy and empowerment come to mean something altogether different from their use in conjunction with citizenship, participation, solidarity, rights, and social justice. ... Thinking of words in constellations rather than in the singular opens up further strategies for reclaiming 'lost' words, as well as salvaging some of the meanings that were never completely submerged.'* (Cornwall 2010: 15)

So would it be a strategy for reclaiming 'development' to use it in a constellation with *hospitality, degrowth, sharing, autonomy and commons*? I have no answer here, but remain doubtful.

A second point has to be made, and this concerns the transformations in development discourse which came about as a result of its critique. Often linked with postcolonial and post-development approaches, discourse analysis in development studies has become somewhat influential in academia (not policy) during the past two decades. As a consequence, almost every introduction to the field of development studies at least mentions and often engages with its critique. A striking example to me is the new edition of the Development Reader (Chari/Corbridge 2008). While in the first edition (Corbridge 1995), one out of 27 texts came from one of the three mentioned approaches, in the new edition there are nine out of 54 – a more than fourfold increase. As mentioned in the beginning, the work of Escobar is a top contender for the highest number of quotes in development studies. And still discourse analysis perceives itself as marginalized (della Faille 2011) – why? Eriksson Baaz (2005) gives the following answer. Of course the critics have been influential and even the development industry does not remain entirely unperturbed by their arguments, but at the same time this means that a decisive critique is more difficult to maintain if one has to admit that the establishment has adopted some of the critique. So it is easier for the critics to portray themselves as marginalized in order not to compromise the severity and appropriateness of their critique of the development apparatus:

*'[B]y placing the critics of development [solely] outside the development industry [they] tend to neglect the workings and influence of their own critique. ... any influential, successful critique adopted by the mainstream Other will destabilize the opposing identity (as an alternative inherently different from the mainstream). The neglect of influence and simplistic representations of development practitioners can thus be seen as, partly, reflecting a destabilized, threatened identity, which feeds a need to distance the alternative, critical Self further from the mainstream Other.'* (Eriksson Baaz 2005: 169f)

So while it does make a lot of sense for discourse analysis in development studies to examine how institutions like the World Bank have adopted once oppositional concepts like sustainability and empowerment, robbing them of their critical edge, an equally useful task is to investigate how critical concepts managed to unsettle and change institutional practice. What is decried as co-optation by the establishment can from another perspective be seen as a first step in the struggle for change, as changing the terrain of discourse to one's advantage (Cornwall 2010: 13).

### **3. Conclusions**

Regarding the contribution of discourse analysis to development studies, my opinion is that it has beyond doubt convincingly pointed out the relations of power implicit in the discourse in general and the six features outlined above (naturalization, othering, legitimization, hierarchization, depoliticization and appropriation) in particular. At its best (Ferguson 1994, Mitchell 1995, Li 2007, Wainwright 2008), discourse analysis has shown the entanglement of capitalism, state, the development apparatus and development discourse; the limitations of the discourse caused by institutional necessities and material interests as well as the limitations of the practice caused by discursive boundaries.

Yet to the critics of discourse analysis, one point must be conceded: We must not stop at deconstruction and provide alternatives. Even if the current discourse of 'development' includes Eurocentric, depoliticizing and authoritarian features, it is the most influential discourse in which claims to material improvements for the poorer classes can be articulated today. The challenge remains to construct the problem of global economic inequality in a way that is devoid of these features, in a way that offers more political and more progressive possibilities of engaging the problem. For if theory does not serve to overthrow all those conditions in which humans are abased, enslaved, abandoned, contemptible beings (Marx 1844: 18) and to contribute to building more humane conditions – how can we justify it in a world like this?

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