
Aram Ziai (2015)

Development Discourse and Global History: From Colonialism to the Sustainable Development Goals

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Post-development researchers advocate the end of international development because they understand it as a tool of domination of the Global North over the Global South. How do they arrive to this Manichaeic assessment? Generally, researchers in this tradition employ discourse analysis to unveil power relations implied in concepts frequently used in the development industry, such as sustainable development. At first sight, these concepts are quite broad and positive. However, post-development researchers assert that, upon closer scrutiny, other not-so-Samaritan patterns emerge.

Aram Ziai's book is part of this tradition as it examines the changes in development discourse, by means of a Foucauldian discourse analysis, in order to unveil its structure, aims and implicit power relations. The book has 15 conceptually clear, engaging and well-written chapters, where the author argues in favor of discourse analysis for development research in response to criticism that has challenged the previous sloppy application of the approach (Pieterse 2011). Ziai is well

suited for the task; he is a Professor of Development and Postcolonial Studies at the University of Kassel, in Germany.

Compared to previous post-development works, Ziai skillfully adapts and applies concepts from Foucault's discourse analysis, offering historical and more nuanced statements about development discourse. In effect, in chapter 2 Ziai describes his post-structuralist approach to discourse analysis, which considers discourses infinite, unstable and dynamic in time.

Within this framework, the aim of the book is to analyze the discourse of international development organizations by studying their reports and projects from two Foucauldian-inspired perspectives: archeology and genealogy. Archeology refers to the systematic study of regularities in discourse production. In chapters 3-6, Ziai claims that development broke with the colonial discourse in several ways. For instance, it focuses on nation states and no longer overtly speaks of racism. Nevertheless, it also

presented several continuities, such as the assumption that the Global North is superior to the Global South, imposing its own values and models of a good society and accepting that these models can be achieved thanks to objective and apolitical experts that have the know-how needed to develop the underdeveloped. However, Ziai asserts that these models and knowledge hide the unequal global structures that might produce the problems development industry aims to solve.

For these reasons, Ziai describes development as Eurocentric, authoritarian and depoliticizing, which leads him to firmly believe that the concept should be abandoned. In chapters seven to 14, Ziai conducts a genealogical analysis of development discourse in order to reveal its historical changes and the associated dynamics of knowledge-power relations. Throughout the chapters, Ziai shows the continuity of the authoritarian, Eurocentric and depoliticizing features of the original version of the discourse.

However, he recognizes some tension around new concepts, such as “participation” or “climate change”, which cause interference with the rules of formation of the initial development discourse created after World War II. For example, in chapter 14, Ziai argues that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) have elements beyond the original structure of development discourse. On one hand, they embrace globalization – understood

as economic liberalization – with an inherently positive view on free trade, disregarding its consequences. On the other hand, they include issues previously ignored, such as inequality and climate change.

Perhaps to compensate for the overall pessimistic perspective of development, Ziai recognizes that development discourse can be adapted and may be transformed by Global South elites in progressive ways contrary to the interests of those who created it. Nonetheless, Ziai prefers the contestation of the discourse instead of appropriations in order to overcome the structural limits he detects in development. However, it is fair to say that the space for these is minimal in the book.

Overall, Ziai makes a strong argument in favor of discourse analysis in order to reveal the assumptions taken for granted by development organizations and experts who continuously claim to hold the truth to achieve the good life in countries which, in many cases, they might barely know. This is important for researchers working in Latin America, where the influence of such objective and apolitical organizations and experts is still quite present. Therefore, the approach could be useful to examine the features of discourses and its local adaptations in the region. Likewise, it can be employed to study discourses that contest development, for example, the *Buen Vivir* in Bolivia and Ecuador.

Despite its theoretical lucidity, the book is less clear on the methods of analysis employed. There are few methodological notes or references to literature explaining how discursive structures were analyzed, which would have helped the reader to extend the analysis to other organizations and discourses. Additionally, the conclusions of most chapters seem to neglect evidence that might contradict its arguments. Simply selectively using documents from international organizations is a reductionist strategy to analyze and assess the work of these organizations, which makes many of the conclusions of the book not empirically convincing.

Moreover, it is true that discourse analysis based on ethnographic research can deal with the critique of losing sight of materiality, but it is certainly not the case of this book. For example, Ziai claims that progressive change can only take place if we change discursive structures, which in his view would involve replacing development with global social policy or social change.

However, this proposal seems unrealistic even within Ziai's theoretical framework, because a change in names neither directly alters the practices of powerful actors, nor of all the institutions dedicated to profit, and replicate the contradictions of development that the book so well describes. Therefore, discourse analysis of the way of speaking is important, but it is definitely not enough to analyze the geopolitical and geoeconomic power

imbalances that sustain development discourse, let alone change them. Accordingly, other types of research methods – such as case studies or ethnographic research, which are more sensitive to the effects of other material factors – would have further strengthened (or disproved) much of the arguments of the book (Pieterse 2011). Such strategies are indispensable because what organizations say they will do does not always align with what they ultimately implement in practice.

Nonetheless, I would still recommend the book to researchers, activists and readers interested in learning about critical discourse analysis of international development organizations of the USA and Europe, who could get inspired for conducting more empirically grounded research.

Bibliography

Pieterse, Jan Nederveen. 2011. "Discourse Analysis in International Development Studies", in: *Journal of Multicultural Discourses*, 6(3), 237-240.