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## **PERSPECTIVES ON DEVELOPMENT STUDIES**

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## Inhaltsverzeichnis

- 4      KARIN FISCHER, GERALD HÖDL  
Perspectives on Development Studies: A Short Introduction
- 12     HENRY BERNSTEIN  
The Antinomies of Development Studies
- 28     UMA KOTHARI  
Geographies and Histories of Development
- 45     FRANS J. SCHUURMAN  
Development Studies: Work in Progress
- 64     ARAM ZIAI  
The Meaning of 'Development': A Critical Poststructuralist  
Perspective
- 80     THOMAS LAWO, EDITHA LOEFFELHOLZ VON COLBERG  
Development Research: Quo vadis?
- 94     ADEBAYO OLUKOSHI, FRANCIS B. NYAMNJOH  
Rethinking African Development: Beyond Impasse, Towards  
Alternatives
- 105    Editors and Authors
- 109    Impressum

UMA KOTHARI

## **Geographies and Histories of Development**

### **1. Introduction**

What Development Studies is, has been subject to significant ongoing debate. In part, it is the multiple and contested theories, ideas and histories and their relationship to development policy and practice that makes the identity of development as a subject of study so complicated and disputed. However, as Smith (2007) writes, while Development Studies cannot be identified as a discrete academic discipline, there is a broad convergence amongst those in the 'community' around shared concerns and objectives. But, it is these collective and universalising goals that can also be problematic. With a development sensibility framed around a language of charity, empathy, humanitarianism and justice and developers seen primarily as having a positive role in alleviating poverty, it might appear irrefutable that motives are wholly noble. This assumption of noble intention and the overwhelming depiction of beneficence go a long way toward silencing a critical appraisal of development intervention and obscures relations of power. With its global institutions and 'experts', proclaimed commitments to universal justice and rights and concern for the distant 'other', the development industry might seem to exemplify cosmopolitanism but these representations conceal the power of the development industry to frame, translate, and represent others in a narrow repertoire of tropes supporting a broader neo-liberal project of capitalist modernity.

In this paper I present some thoughts on the ambivalences, contradictions and assumptions in Development Studies that raise a number of concerns I have with how the field writes and rehearses its history, and its future, and how we identify the object and subject of our study. In part, it is the use of foundational binaries, dichotomies and dualisms underpinning

development that reifies this history in a problematic way and constructs this subject. The paper examines the constraints, and possible ways forward, for creating a critical space to interrogate the ideologies and processes of globalisation and neo-liberalism that shape the context within which development now takes place and sustains global inequalities. I begin, as requested, with a personal note, which reflects some of the tensions within the field, on my involvement in Development Studies as a teacher and researcher.

## **2. A Personal History: The Early Days and After**

‘Every time I leave Dr. Kothari’s lectures, I have to rewrite my notes to take out the bias. I get the impression that she is a communist.’

‘We feel so proud to see an Indian teaching here at a British University – Dr Kothari, one of *our* people in such an important position.’

These quotes from students in my first year of teaching development highlight tensions around politics and identity within and surrounding the field of Development Studies. These revolve around the highly charged political issue of what constitutes knowledge and the related concern of who is regarded as the ‘expert’.

I have a certain ambivalence towards Development Studies, partly based on the recognition that it tends to confirm the centrality of Western knowledge and power, a legacy that is often reinforced in the Third World through the continued existence of colonial institutions and education systems. I remain uncomfortable with the persistent belief that Western academia has the answers for the rest of the world and only by gaining access to education in the West can people from the Third World understand their own histories, societies and economies. The majority of students that I teach are from developing societies and for many of them, when I first began teaching, I did not fulfil their expectations of a teacher in Britain. They had come to gain ‘expert knowledge’ in their particular field, and, almost by definition, many of them perceived expert knowledge as advanced and imparted by white males. As Crewe and Harrison (1998) argued so lucidly, a most obvious distinction persists between those who are thought to possess expertise and

knowledge and those to whom it should be imparted, one that is based on who you are and where you come from rather than what you know. This discomforting relationship between knowledge and expertise is evident in my own experiences of working as a development consultant when 'local' agencies have been visibly disappointed when they realised that their expatriate consultant was not white (see Kothari 2005). This is reflective of what Ngugi calls the 'colonization of the mind' (1986) whereby for some formerly colonised people whiteness becomes associated with high cultural values and the West with modernity and progress.

In an attempt to address some of these and other concerns, my research has been characterised by critical, theoretical engagement and ethnographic research. It has developed historical analyses of international development using social theories to interrogate mainstream approaches and has developed methodologies for collecting and analysing life history narratives. Much of this research challenges colonial representations of Third World peoples and places through an analysis of 'race' and racism, an issue that underpins the theory and practice of development but has been largely invisible. Although I am not immediately comfortable with presenting my own autobiography, my research, rather unfairly, involves collecting other people's life histories, asking them about their lives in an attempt to understand dynamics of inequalities and relations between people and institutions. It is through the experiences of individuals that I believe we can gain insights into the ways in which we embody, reproduce and attempt to disrupt wider historical and social processes. For example, I have carried out research on relations between former colonisers and their colonies after independence, and how these find expression within and against contemporary discourses of Third World development. I also have longstanding research interests in migration, culture and identity, most recently critiquing conventional understandings of cosmopolitanism by demonstrating how transnational migrants embody new kinds of cosmopolitan identities. This research is contextualised not only within dominant development agendas but, more broadly, in the context of contemporary global shifts and restructuring.

The development industry is undoubtedly more diverse now than when I first began teaching development and, as Crush demonstrates, has extensive global reach, encompassing a vast range of institutions and individuals throughout the world, including a 'plethora of development studies

programmes in institutes of learning worldwide' (1995: 6). Although, as Cowen and Shenton note, development is one of the 'central organising concepts of our time' (1995: 27), the present development agenda is very much a practical and technocratic one set out in the programmes of major multilateral and bilateral aid donors. There have been efforts to reconceptualise the field leading, arguably, to some shifts in perspective by practitioners in relation to, for example, participation, gender and environmental sustainability, but these represent only minor adjustments. While we concern ourselves with refining this or that policy, framework and methodology, keeping pace with the ever-changing fads and fashions and acquiring the new sets of language, tools and professionals that go with them, the neo-liberal restructuring of the global economy with all its attendant inequalities continues unabated. So, although the World Bank and other major development actors may appear to accommodate different views of what should constitute development, they give active support to a particular, capitalist-friendly, neo-liberal version.

Engendered by this neo-liberalism, development is becoming increasingly depoliticised, glossing over critical social divisions and inequalities and beset with contradictions over its goals and the means to achieve them (Bernstein 2005). Samir Amin highlighted some of these contradictions when he remarked at a conference in Oslo recently that government departments of international development are behaving irrationally and struggling ineffectively to alleviate poverty since they are part of, and play a role in sustaining, the same system that creates it. Herein lies a key problem of development and how we study it; that the contemporary development agenda can only be understood and realised within a global neo-liberal framework.

### **3. Interdisciplinarity and the Theory/Practice Divide**

An ongoing debate that has implications for how we understand and create spaces to challenge the neo-liberal development agenda, is how we strive towards interdisciplinarity within Development Studies and indeed whether or not this is a goal worth pursuing. There is a paradox here as there are dangers with, as well as advantages to, adopting interdisciplinarity. I have three academic degrees, each in a different discipline, ranging from

an undergraduate in Geography, a Masters in History and a PhD in Sociology. I teach Development Studies but there are practical and political limitations, as I show below, to critiquing and challenging the orthodoxy from within the field. For example, my research on the colonial legacy of development was theoretically grounded upon debates within postcolonial studies as Development Studies did not provide the relevant tools nor would it be possible to challenge the discipline's history from within. More recently, research with migrant street traders was analysed using literature on mobility, migration, identity and cosmopolitanism, as these were not as well developed in Development Studies as in other social science disciplines.

The intellectual conflicts that typify Development Studies, in part engendered by its multidisciplinaryity, can be useful in keeping critical debate alive and, importantly, ensuring that radical strands do not become subsumed within a discipline increasingly characterised by a neo-classical economics and neo-liberal agenda. There is already ample evidence that shows how critical, challenging and emancipatory discourses are co-opted into the mainstream, becoming enmeshed in a neo-liberal developmentalist frame in the process of their incorporation. For example, feminist discourses become technicalised and transmute into gender frameworks and planning tools, and thus lose their radical edge as they become part of the development orthodoxy. Interestingly, when in 1988 Leeson called for efforts to construct a more cohesive interdisciplinary perspective, he was minded to stress that the role played by Marxism in Development Studies should not 'cause nervous colleagues to have sleepless nights.' (41). The neo-liberal turn has shifted the politics of the debate, reframing it so that the antagonisms and conflicts within Development Studies today are understood less as those between Marxist and non-Marxist but are instead most evident in the economics/non-economics divide.

Development Studies is clearly a hybrid subject, producing texts that contribute to economic, political, sociological, anthropological and geographical analysis. In an attempt to distinguish the field by creating a separate academic discipline, Development Studies has been shaped around certain theoretical positions borrowed from other disciplines and placed along a historical time-line producing a trajectory that has become the means by which we define the subject. Perhaps it has been easier for Development Studies to develop planning and managing approaches for devel-

opment interventions and to create new practical frameworks that can be applied to concepts such as civil society and social capital, borrowed from other disciplines, rather than create new interdisciplinary theories.

Besides these discussions surrounding the extent and the benefits, or otherwise, of interdisciplinarity, the tension around the theory/practice divide remains unresolved in Development Studies. I suggest that the debate could more usefully be reframed to focus on the political relevance of Development Studies and the relationship between academic research and public engagement as a means of rethinking analyses of power relations. These are questions raised by Carey (1989), who argued that the struggle of the critical researcher is not only to make their scholarship meaningful and intelligible but also to assert its 'public significance'. He suggests that an important role of the critical intellectual is to contribute to the constant expansion of the field of reference of academic work, to contribute to an enlarged international interpretive community, and to the elaboration of a public/democratic discourse on the most important issues of historical and contemporary life. Within sociology, Burawoy (2004) explores this disciplinary division of labour and identifies four interdependent and complementary sociologies – policy, professional, critical and public. His matrix contrasts different audiences and different forms of knowledge and suggests that professional and policy work are primarily instrumental forms of knowledge while critical and public fields are reflexive forms of knowledge. Applying these analyses to Development Studies could provide a useful starting point for identifying and appreciating the interconnectedness of the diverse range of activities, and perspectives, that come under its rubric and foregrounding their political relevance.

#### **4. Distorted Histories and Foreclosed Futures**

'Essentially it [Colonial Studies] was concerned with the policy and practice of ruling subject peoples who were mainly of a darker colour and mostly lived in the tropics.' (Killingray 2000: 41)

'The past is rarely over and done with but haunts the present.' (Said 1993: 1)



While the multidisciplinary and theory/practice debates continue to unfold, a key issue for me is how Development Studies defines and sets the limits of its field. It was some of my colleagues in a Development Studies institute that raised concerns over how development constructs its history and field of study. Changes brought about by political independence in former colonies led many of those employed in the British Colonial Office to leave Africa and Asia and find employment back in the UK. Amongst those embarking on second careers were a group of individuals who found employment in the newly emerging and rapidly expanding international development industry in the UK where they are (or were until retirement) involved in teaching Development Studies, devising policies to address issues of Third World development and carrying out research and consultancy work for multi-lateral, bi-lateral and non-governmental organisations. I was now working amongst some of these former colonial officers, who clearly embodied continuities and changes over time, which led me to look into the colonial legacy of development and explore how it finds expression within contemporary policies and discourses of development.

Despite the recognition, in disciplines such as anthropology and geography, of an historical trajectory that links colonialism to development, understanding this interconnectedness is not a mainstream preoccupation within Development Studies. Instead, much research and teaching in Development Studies tends to pick out 1945 as the key year in which development was initiated with the establishment of the World Bank and other Bretton Woods institutions. With a few notable exceptions, such as Crush (1995) and Slater (1995), the history of development often rehearsed in research and teaching has tended towards a compartmentalisation of clearly bounded, successive periods characterised by specific theoretical hegemonies (see Hettne 1995; Preston 1996 for examples of this). Thus they begin with economic growth and modernisation theories, move on to discuss 'underdevelopment' theories, neo-liberalism and the (Post-)Washington Consensus and culminate in current thinking around globalisation and security. This epochal historicisation obscures both the colonial genealogies of development and historical continuities in the theory and practice of development.

Although there are ongoing critiques of development, this limited historical analysis in much orthodox Development Studies reveals the

largely unreflexive and future-oriented nature of the discipline, partly engendered through the imperative to achieve development goals and targets such as the Millennium Development Goals. Furthermore, there has been a perceived imperative within Development Studies to effectively distance development thought and practice from the contemporary negativity surrounding Britain's imperial history. This concealment of a colonial past creates and maintains a dichotomy between a colonialism that is 'bad', exploitative and oppressive and a development that is 'good', moralistic and humanitarian. In this way, development is cast as a universally 'good thing', although it is ridden with paradoxes. One former colonial administrator whom I interviewed indicates this social distancing from colonialism when he said, 'It was necessary to present oneself as a new kind of Brit, not like those gin guzzling, idle, red faced colonial chaps.'

The past in Development Studies is a contested historiography, but the future is also problematically framed. Development, a term used to both describe processes of change and to offer a normative framework to guide change, is an idea, an objective and an activity that provides a modernist vision of the future. Projections of where we are, where we should be going, and how we move from one set of circumstances to another are predetermined in ways that foreclose the future. The practice of development depends on notions of progress that assume universal trajectories of development in which certain people and places are left behind and have to be brought into modernity through development interventions (Ferguson 2006). Such assumptions are founded on Western epistemologies in philosophy and social theory that establish the categorical split between past, present and future as distinct kinds of time. The future then, is predictable, ordered and regulated; it is pre-empted and foreclosed through formal planning procedures that assume modernisation in various forms as the ultimate end point. It is exemplified through the targets and future scenarios of major development agencies that can be achieved through the adoption of a particular set of policy prescriptions and planning instruments that impose a predicted future within a short timeframe and with known outcomes. The World Bank's influential *Voices of the Poor* study (Narayan et al. 2000), reinforces this when it concludes that the poor need to change in order to fit in with a future which is already known and aspired to for them. Such perspectives, and the policies that stem from them, ignore the steps and strategies

that people use to imagine and realise their own futures or, as Appadurai puts it, their capacity to aspire (2004).

The implications of this way of thinking are profound, namely that universal history, and inclusion within it, is about progression towards the modern in the context of capitalist development.

## **5. Making the Field: The Time, Place and Subject of Development Studies**

So how does Development Studies mark out the boundaries that define and delimit its field of teaching and research? I suggest that the overarching framework within which this demarcation takes place, and that essentialises much development thinking, is based on spatial and temporal distinctions and distancing, between the ‘here and now’ of the West and the ‘there and then’ of the Third World.

If we take the geographical notion of ‘over there’, development is what happens in other distant places to other distant people. As Humble and Smith (2007) write, what counts as research in Development Studies is almost entirely defined in terms of working in and on the ‘South’, ‘developing’ or ‘Third World’, terms that act as a shorthand for global distinctions between people and places. The project of development is founded upon these politically charged identities and the industry, that is becoming increasingly professionalised, relies for its survival on setting up boundaries around its experts, organisations and approaches.

Development is premised on a complex and contested set of opposites and dualisms. Most significantly, the idea of development is based on the assumption that some people and places are less developed than others (Parpart 1995). Subsequently, at the outset, it depends upon the identification of a subject, the poor and marginalised recipients of interventions, as distinct from those who are developed and can legitimately bestow ideas about modernity, progress, morality and civility. It also demarcates their geographical location and the societies in which they live. Thus, dichotomies are foundational to relations of international aid, institutions of development and discourses of intervention, beginning with the pre-eminent distinctions between developed and underdeveloped and ‘First’ and

'Third' worlds. These are mapped onto other distinctions in which progress, for example, is conceived as a shift from the traditional to the modern, or as Shanin puts it, 'a movement from badness to goodness and from mindlessness to knowledge' (1997: 65). These spatial (first and third world) and ideological (modern and traditional) binaries provide the rationale and justification for the practice of some people intervening to develop others and thus also shape those who give assistance and those who must be grateful for it. In order to begin to understand these forms of global distinctions we need to ascertain how certain people and places came to exemplify cultural adaptability, political competency and modernity while other people in other places became the symbol of cultural inflexibility, political dysfunction and underdevelopment (see Grovogui 2001). Said (1978) addressed this need when he identified an ongoing dialectical process whereby the representations of other people and places shape not only how non-European societies came to be 'known' but how Europe constructs itself in contradistinction to them. Stuart Hall (1996) meanwhile, employs the 'West and the rest' idiom to reflect the power dynamics embedded within these divisions. It is through these processes that the Third World becomes analytically separate and isolated, as if disconnected from global processes.

So development takes place 'over there' but is also embedded in notions of temporality (contemporary and old; present and past) concerned as it is with transformation over time. A history of development is not simply about what events took place in the past, the charting of a historical trajectory of dominant ideas and approaches, but also how the past is imagined and mapped onto other places in the present. As Hartley (1953) famously wrote: 'the past is another country, they do things differently there'. This thinking is evident in representations of the Third World and those in, and of it as backward and traditional and thus existing in a relational past to the West's modern present. When framing the past time of the Third World the West is simultaneously constructing itself as in the present, thus providing Third World countries with an image of the kind of future to which they can aspire. Development Studies is implicated in this process of temporal distancing and Western development professionals become prophetic time travellers – confronting the past when they visit Third World countries but also able to see their future in the image of their own societies.

I do not wish to deny that there have been attempts to unsettle and challenge the boundaries and borders of development and the categories these construct, as well as to see other people as our contemporaries. But, while some of these do disrupt the centrality of the West and the power of the development professional, others have ambivalent and contradictory effects, appearing to break down global hierarchies but in so doing effectively concealing the workings of power. For example, participatory approaches to development are conventionally represented as emerging out of the recognition of the shortcomings of top-down development approaches and the hierarchical distinction between local and expert knowledge. To address these and the ineffectiveness of externally imposed and expert-oriented forms of research and planning, participatory approaches encourage greater beneficiary involvement in shaping decisions that affect them. Ironically, however, these approaches can confirm, rather than challenge, power relations. Their public and consensus-building nature offers opportunities for dominant groups or people in authority to influence public opinion as their private interests become 'officialised' by incorporation in the 'community consensus', and for development agencies to gain support for predetermined agendas as they continue to influence the outcomes of participatory research, primarily through their control over the finances. Another example of how binaries have been dismantled with contradictory results is evident in changing terminologies. Through a moral and politically correct lens, the label 'Third World' now appears derogatory and is being replaced by the apparently more neutral and acceptable 'South' as distinct from the 'North'. Of course global hierarchies are not transformed nor do they simply disappear by changing appellations despite this attempt to conceal, mute and blur these and to enable middle class Europeans to feel better about themselves.

While I have argued against establishing dichotomies and boundaries that reinforce inequalities, there are distinctions that need to be brought into sharper focus but are very rarely invoked in development. Most obviously in Development Studies, though also in other disciplines, we rarely investigate and explain the interconnectedness of wealth creation and capital accumulation, and the causes of poverty and its dynamics. Instead, we focus on 'the poor' as the problem, positioned in abstraction from the rich, as though the causes, dynamics and consequences of their poverty take place outside of structural inequalities. In Development Studies we need

to consider more centrally how poverty and the experiences of the poor and marginalised can be understood in the context of capital accumulation and global restructuring and the extent to which economic growth and inequality may be incompatible goals of development. In Development Studies we cannot properly investigate the interplay between the powerful and the powerless without instating a crucial binary – that between, put simply, the rich and the poor.

Postcolonial approaches are useful in understanding global power and privilege over time, as they critically engage with, and resist, the variety of ways in which the West produces knowledge about other people in other places. Postcolonial studies are more central to discussions within literary criticism, history and art and are beginning to be taken more seriously in sociology, cultural studies and geography but have only recently, and partially, been identified in the development literature (see Sylvester 1999). These studies interrogate the hegemonic understandings of space, history, subjectivities and progress that continue to be played out in various ways in international development and thus can take us some way to addressing the issues identified above (see Slater and Bell 2002).

## **6. Moving On**

I am aware that the discussion above may appear to be overwhelmingly negative, pessimistic and universalising. There are of course multiple and conflicting political positions within development and important ongoing discursive critiques within, and outside of, the field, as well as grounded empirical research that identifies the various distorted effects of globalisation generally and development interventions more specifically. Effective though these can be, they tend to be limited to offering solutions to prescribed development problems for predetermined groups of non-modern people in other places. Confined to the realm of acceptable critique, they tinker around at the edges, refining this or that tool, technique or policy, resulting in limited methodological revisionism rather than a wholesale questioning of what has become acceptable in an increasingly rigid and all encompassing neo-liberalism. These critiques keep within the limits of the discourse as it is currently framed, thus confirming and supporting the continuation of

the neo-liberal project. As I wrote in an article for a special issue of *Antipode* on 'Working the Spaces of Neo-Liberalism', in part, it is the increasing professionalisation of the development industry that has exacerbated the depoliticisation of development and the atheoretical perspective of much development discourse. Development is now primarily limited to a technical process of intervention that maintains the legitimacy of a nonlinear notion of modernising progress and limits the effectiveness of critical voices and contesting discourses through their conscription into neo-liberal practices (Kothari 2005a).

Those of us in Development Studies who are critical of mainstream development and its complicity with the neo-liberal project need to uncover ways in which critical voices can be more effective in creating spaces to challenge the orthodoxy. One way perhaps is to engage more with discussions and debates that are pertinent to development but tend to take place outside the discourse, such as David Harvey's 'accumulation through dispossession' (2005). Clearly, neo-liberal policies are not only economic but extend to and effect social, cultural and political processes, including access to rights and justice and individual and collective dispossession. What does development have to say about these and other politically charged issues, such as processes of dispossession and the experiences of the dispossessed, the relationship between structural causes of poverty and wealth creation and racist immigration laws that increasingly restrict the mobility of some while encouraging that of others? At an empirical level, we need to extend our understanding and analysis of the actions, networks and relations of those whose everyday lives reflect global inequalities, those who are dispossessed and their attempts to rework the spaces of their marginality and vulnerability, and who imagine and work to realise futures other than those prescribed.

Critical spaces to address the dilemmas of representations of other people and places identified above could also be encouraged through challenging the assumed moral sensibility and superiority of many within the development industry. The development industry has an assumed cosmopolitanism inherent in its North-South connections and redistributive ethos of care for distant strangers. Many development practitioners assume that they are classic cosmopolitans in being able to observe and translate between cultures and contexts as they travel to many places and confront different

kinds of people. Yet, this does not necessarily mean that they possess a set of skills that allows them to negotiate and understand diversity, nor does it engender an understanding of how difference is commodified within a discourse obsessed with labelling to differentiate between different places and peoples. Indeed, the increasing professionalisation of agents of development intervention produces a kind of techno-cosmopolitan, one who has greater allegiance and commitment to their profession and its institutions than to other people in other places. Relatedly, the façade of 'goodness' masks the political economy of the 'intellectual-financial complex' of development research in which research funding is unevenly distributed to centres and individuals who deliver acceptable policy advice. While 'we' all pull together for global social justice, behind the scenes are the usual academic (and extra-academic) tensions, subterfuges and struggles over funding, which demonstrate that we are anything but 'universal' or 'good'. This highlights a further challenge for those of us who teach Development Studies to consider more carefully what forms of knowledge constitute worldliness (Clifford 1997) and importantly, to learn from other kinds of knowledge, particularly academic and non-academic accounts that emerge from non-Western contexts. These have been significant in my own teaching and research in shaping understanding, enriching analysis and providing tools to investigate and challenge the various effects of global processes.

At an individual level, we may not feel implicated by the attitudes and practices alluded to above. However, irrespective of our individual sensibilities we cannot absolve ourselves from the machinations of the (neo-liberal) project as a whole. We could do worse than encourage a form of worldliness that acknowledges how capitalist modernity shapes the global playing field in which we operate and to take an overt ethical and political position about what is and what is *not* acceptable.

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## Abstracts

This paper presents some thoughts on the ambivalences, contradictions and assumptions in Development Studies and raises concerns about how the field writes and rehearses its history and future, and how it identifies its field of study. It foregrounds the problems associated with foundational dichotomies and distinctions within development and examines the constraints, and possible ways forward, for creating a critical space for development to interrogate the ideologies, processes and practices of globalisation and neo-liberalism.

Der Aufsatz beschäftigt sich mit den Grundannahmen, Ambivalenzen und Widersprüchen der Entwicklungsforschung und problematisiert dabei ihr Verhältnis zur Vergangenheit und Zukunft, aber auch die Art und Weise, wie sie ihren Wissenschaftsbereich definiert. Besondere Aufmerksamkeit wird jenen Dichotomien und Merkmalen zuteil, die dem Forschungsfeld

Entwicklung zugrunde liegen. Außerdem widmet sich der Beitrag der Frage, welchen Hindernissen eine kritische Auseinandersetzung mit den Ideologien, Prozessen und Praktiken der Globalisierung und des Neoliberalismus gegenübersteht und welche Auswege es gibt.

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