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Conclusions – engaging critical perspectives in development policy and implementation

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This symposium began with a broad question: can critical perspectives exist in development policy and implementation? These contributions force us to think about this question in ways that are considerably more complex and, we would argue, considerably more interesting. Taken as a whole, this symposium illustrates Bebbington's challenge to stop assuming that critical thought and approaches only exist on one side of a supposed academic–implementer divide, thus undermining the unspoken assumption at the heart of our initial question.

We argue that these contributions also call into question who we should be thinking critically about. Critical development studies have taken both 'the developing' (however problematic that term may be) and 'developers' (again, a contested and problematic term), as well as 'development' itself (in both its senses as noun/state and immanent process) as its objects. These studies do not, however, turn the critical lens on the role of critical thought and theory as a part of the very development machine that academics purport to critique. If we cannot assume that critical thought is the exclusive purview of one group, we must then turn a critical lens on academic practice. Relatively little work in development studies has done this,[1] and even this body of work has engaged debates within academia, as opposed to thinking about how development academics construct themselves in relation to their object.[2]

When we turn the critical lens on critical development studies, important lessons emerge. The first of these is that critical development studies has, for too long, treated bilateral donors and implementing organisations as backward, uneducated, venal and foolish, in need of the salvation of critical scholarship if they are ever to find their way forward in the world. Long after critical development scholars rejected those terms and assumptions for the communities and peoples with which they worked, they have allowed them to persist, usually rather uncritically, in assessments of development studies' other object, the donor or implementer. As many of the contributions to this symposium illustrate, donors and implementers are far from the monolithic objects of much critical development work. In these contributions we hear individuals employed by

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a bilateral donor asking academics for help in defining the cases to make to policy makers, the story of an employee of a private donor effectively sneaking a complex, qualitative, critical project into an otherwise technically focused, solution-framed portfolio, and a former multilateral agency employee describing the complex everyday practices into which she had to weave critical interventions. These are not stories of critical scholars somehow changing the actions of an uncritical other but, instead, examples of critical thought emerging unbidden from the donors and implementers, from those long seen as an object of analysis. If critical thought, and the agency to act on it, exist among the ranks of the donors and implementers, critical development studies must fundamentally rethink its engagement with the policy and implementation side of development. The contributions to this symposium suggest a few points at which such re-engagement might take shape.

First, as many of the contributions to this symposium suggest, critical development studies often misunderstands the failures of engagement that mark the history of academic development studies and the practices of donors and implementers. Much work in development studies offhandedly addresses such failed engagements through unsubstantiated, monolithic readings of donor motivations, when in fact critical interventions may well have failed to engage productively the very real processes that enable and constrain the actions of those employed by these organisations. Critical interventions are not uniformly useful or productive. For example, as Brent McCusker, and Jonathan Cook and Natalie Elwell point out, the timing of such engagement in relation to the project/programme cycle often dictates whether such input is considered or ignored, not because donors and implementers want to ignore it, but because the time period in which they could have acted has passed.

Second, critical scholars of development must think carefully about their own constructions of and explanations for project, programme and policy failure. Here, perhaps more than anywhere, we see the representation of donors and implementers in pejorative, even infantilising terms that dismiss the utility of donor or implementer engagement even as they purport to explain why certain designs, implementations or outcomes have occurred. Almost never do such accounts actually engage with the reality of institutional processes that enable and constrain things like project design. As Sultana, and Cook and Ellwell note, the world of development donors and implementers is one of minutiae that can take a long time for even the employees of such an organisation to understand, just as they must attend to changing politically driven policy imperatives. In his scathing review of compliance and monitoring practices at USAID, former USAID administrator Andrew Natsios convincingly demonstrates that Agency employees, and even the appointees who ostensibly run the organisation, are greatly constrained by processes beyond their control, and beyond their responsibility.[3] In short, projects that miss their targets, or fail outright, may not be the product of uninformed, venal donors or implementers, but the problematic outcomes of good projects and people pushed through a disastrous system. Finding ways to work with these people and projects is paramount to our success.

This leads to the third point of engagement – the responsibility of the critical scholar to the policy and implementation of development. As Sultana observes, many critical development scholars are tenured and reside in institutions where

critical thought and risk-taking are usually privileged. Whereas those who work for donors may find their ability to speak or provide evidence against particular policies, programmes, or projects limited, academics are often rewarded for such behaviour. Here, we argue that critical development scholars, by virtue of their privileged, protected position in non-totalitarian societies, have a responsibility to use that position to engage with those critical thinkers in donor and implementing organisations to facilitate their thinking, and where possible to make the arguments they cannot. This responsibility may be as simple as producing clearly written summaries of the state of current knowledge on particular subjects to help donor and implementer colleagues without access to the academic literature make arguments for policies and programmes that reflect the current state of knowledge. Or it may be as complicated as developing long-term relationships with colleagues in other institutional settings that inform new understandings of how to negotiate the complexities of institutional practice, or to press for institutional change where necessary.

It is too simple to argue that this symposium answers its framing question with a resounding 'yes'. Instead, it fundamentally undermines the assumptions that enabled this framing question, and which indeed stand at the heart of the supposed distance between the critical academic and the donor or implementer. If there is no basis for this distance, its maintenance is unfortunate and uninformed – the very sort of thing critical thinking is meant to overcome.

Notes on Contributors

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Notes

1. See, for example, Blaikie, "Development, Post-, Anti- and Populist"; Nederveen Pieterse, "My Paradigm or Yours?"; Nederveen Pieterse, "After Post-development"; Simon, "Rethinking Postmodernism, Postcolonialism and Posttraditionalism"; and Simon, "Beyond Antidevelopment."
2. Cf. Carr's contribution in Simon et al., "Geographers and/in Development."
3. Natsios, "The Clash of the Counter-bureaucracy and Development."

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