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What is Development Studies?

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This article is concerned with some initial reflections on the distinctive features of Development Studies (DS). The aim is to trigger further debate, rather than attempt 'closure'. Discussion of the nature of DS is timely because of the expansion of taught courses at various levels during the previous decade; because of sustained critiques of DS in recent years; and because DS has entered a period of introspection – illustrated by several journal special issues and events – to identify its defining characteristics. The author argues that DS is a worthwhile endeavour (how could a concern with reducing global poverty not be?), but the field of enquiry needs to think about how it addresses heterogeneity in the 'Third World(s)' and how it opens space for alternative 'voices'.

Introduction

This article presents some initial reflections on the distinctive features of Development Studies (DS).[1] The aim is to trigger discussion rather than attempt 'closure'. Indeed, given the diversity of the subject matter, any such 'ring fencing' or attempts at uniformity are likely to be doomed.

Discussion of the nature of DS is timely for three reasons. First, over the last 10–15 years there has been an expansion of taught courses at various levels, certainly in the UK (Harriss 2005: 36).[2] Second, DS has faced a series of sustained critiques in recent years, with accusations that it is the source of many problems in developing countries (Corbridge 2005:1). Finally, and arguably related to the above, DS has entered a period of introspection to identify its defining characteristics, not only to address criticisms, but also to differentiate itself from Area Studies, which is popular in the USA.[3]

This article focuses on the questions: *What are the distinctive features of DS? And how is it different from other areas of enquiry?* The following sections review the history and genealogy of DS and describe its distinctive features. The article goes on to offer a brief review of the critiques of DS, and then closes with reflections on its future.

A brief history of DS

DS is a relatively young field of academic study. The term 'Development Studies' did not come into use until after World War II (Einsiedel and Parmar 2004), and many DS journals date from the early 1950s to the early 1970s.[4]

Many have argued that DS was born out of the decolonisation process in the 1950s and 1960s, as newly independent states sought policy prescriptions to 'catch up' economically with

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industrialised nations (Bernstein 2005; Shaw 2004). If we accept that DS is largely a post-World War II phenomenon, then the dominance of economic thinking in the 'early years' of DS is virtually beyond question (Harriss 1999; Sylvester 1999). Contextual factors shaping DS at this time were certainly economic. There was the influence of Marshall Plan ideas, and the well-cited 1949 Truman Declaration of 'a bold new programme... [to] make the benefits of industrial progress ... ... available for the improvement and growth of under-developed areas' (cited in Esteva 1992: 6). It can even be argued that DS emerged from 'a lower-ranking caste' within what Leijonhufvud labelled '*the Econ*' – the economics profession. The '*Devlops*' – or Development Economists – were viewed with suspicion by the Econ for 'endangering the moral fibre' of the tribe by non-enforcement of the strict taboo against association with Polscics, Sociogs, and other tribes (Leijonhufvud 2000: 5). It might, however, also be argued that the genealogy of DS can be linked back to eighteenth-century anthropology.[5] However, economics was dominant in DS during the 1950s and 1960s, and even today in the age of multi-dimensional development the relationship between DS and economics remains controversial (Harriss 2002; Kanbur 2002; Loxley 2004). Indeed, economics stands accused of imperialist tendencies, not only in DS but across the social sciences (Fine 2002). That said, it is worth emphasising that some of the fundamental changes over the last 20 years that have shaped the evolution of DS into multi-disciplinarity and away from purely economic approaches have been led by development economists such as Amartya K. Sen, Paul Streeten, and Ravi Kanbur, to name but a few.

What is DS?

So what are the distinctive features of DS? And how is it different from other areas of enquiry? Several can be identified (drawing on DSA 2004, 2005; Harriss 2002; Loxley 2004).

The rationale for DS

DS has a normative point of departure – to improve people's lives – and thus a shared commitment to the practical or policy relevance of teaching and research. There is also a growing interest among DS teachers and thinkers in the importance of addressing local and global inequality, particularly gender inequality – to which DS has been more responsive than have some of its component disciplines. This is perhaps one reason why feminist economists, anthropologists, geographers, political scientists, and so on have been drawn to DS.

The subject matter of DS

DS has a shared interest in 'less developed countries', or 'developing countries', or 'the South', or 'post-colonial societies', formerly known as 'the Third World', and comparative analysis therein.

Teaching and research in DS increasingly emphasises heterogeneity and diversity in the subject matter of what was perceived as a homogeneous 'Third World' in the 1950s and 1960s – and today is certainly not so perceived (compare Ghana and South Korea in the 1950s and now, for example). Increasingly DS is also recognising context-specific matters and moving away from universal laws (see discussion in Sumner 2005). The connecting theme is, in general, post-colonial countries, or the 'Global South', and standards of living within them. One might add the transition countries of eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, and perhaps DS even has something to say about OECD countries. How DS deals with such a heterogeneous subject matter is an important area for future discussion.

The boundaries of DS

DS has a shared interest in 'multi-disciplinarity *sans frontières*' as an approach to understanding 'multi-dimensional development', the basis of which is that the sum of the disciplines will be greater than their components.

Teaching and research since the late 1970s, and in particular since the 1990 launch of the annual UNDP *Human Development Report*, has emphasised the wide range of disciplinary perspectives to approaching development issues, theories, and epistemologies across economics, sociology, politics, geography, and so on (see also Hulme and Toye 2005; Grindle and Hilderbrand 1999; Tribe and Sumner 2005). How DS moves from 'additive' inter- or multi-disciplinarity to 'integrative' trans-disciplinarity is an important area for future discussion (Molteberg and Bergstrom 2002).

So, how is DS different from Area Studies, its closest competitor? Although Area Studies shares some common basis with DS (multidisciplinary features, for example), the distinguishing characteristic of DS is its comparative focus: DS is not related to specific global regions or areas. The existence of a (contested) body of 'development theory' and the normative point of departure of DS further differentiate it from Area Studies.

The critics of Development Studies

Recent years have seen numerous attacks on DS, of which three stand out.

- The first might be called a 'delivery' critique: that DS is irrelevant, since much of the 'Third World' is no better off than in 1950s or even before.
- The second is the 'neo-colonial' or post-development critique: that DS is a neo-colonial discourse which frames, shapes, and controls the 'Third World'.
- The third is the 'depoliticisation critique': that DS is apolitical, or even that it is a vehicle for depoliticisation, through the expansion of DS as a politically neutral technocratic application.[6]

The first critique relates closely to the neo-liberal critique and is based on the argument that DS (read: Development Economics) is predicated on 'bad economics' (state-led development, import substitution, infant-industry protection, etc.) and has led to bad consequences, as has been argued by economists such as Milton Friedman, Anne Krueger, and Deepak Lal, among others. The problem was the *economics* of DS.

The second critique relates to Michel Foucault's notions of knowledge and power in the context of post-development. This posited DS as an imperialist discourse which sought to impose a Western view of 'development' as modernity on the 'Third World' (a position sustained by writers such as Arturo Escobar, Gustavo Esteva, and Wolfgang Sachs, among many others). DS was *in itself* the problem.

The third relates to the extended power of the state and 'technification' of development as a set of concepts and techniques to be applied through the planning state. This problem resonates with Foucault's political technologies: political problems rephrased in politically neutral, technocratic language, while state functionaries or development professionals are typically the 'experts' (as writers such as Robert Chambers, James Ferguson, and John Harriss have argued).

In reply to the 'effectiveness' critique, a large part of the 'Third World' – notably East Asia and China – has seen some kind of positive transformation, albeit with doubts about the qualitative nature and extent or distribution of social progress. One might also note success (again with caveats) in India and Vietnam, to name but two countries, and the improvements in global data – UNDP's annual Human Development 'score-card'. Of course many other parts

of the world have not seen any great progress since the inception of DS in the 1950s; one might single out much of sub-Saharan Africa, for example. However, that should not detract from the significant changes that have taken place, particularly in Asia. What should be noted, however, is that these contemporary successes have been brought about by countries that have followed the *opposite* of orthodox development strategies. Indeed, it is orthodox economics that has failed to deliver.

In reply to the 'neo-colonial discourse' critique, it should be recognised that DS is not a homogeneous body of knowledge. Like any other body of knowledge, it is subject to a significant degree of internal contestation. The post-development critique, for instance, cannot be applied to much of what constitutes 'alternative' or non-orthodox development. It is impossible to argue that Marxist and non-Marxist Structuralism and Dependency theory, for example, were imperialist discourses, especially given the input of Latin American contributors to these lines of thought. The critique does, though, beg a further question: why is DS perceived as a peculiarly western European phenomenon? DS is well established as undergraduate and postgraduate courses across certain parts of Europe, such as the UK and Scandinavia, as well as the Commonwealth link – Australia, Canada, and New Zealand; but there is no equivalent in the USA. There the issues are embedded in a range of disciplines and types of university that do not even exist in Europe. In addition, many developing countries (much of East Africa, for example) do have DS programmes – but perhaps these are colonial legacies? What is arguably more important is that if DS is the training ground for aspiring aid-agency personnel, within and outside government, then its paradigms will shape future policy and practice. It therefore matters which texts and which authors are viewed as'authoritative'. Adebayo Olukoshi, the Executive Secretary of CODESRIA, has drawn attention to the absence from World Bank or UNDP reports of any intellectual input from Africans. As he says, Africans end up in the textboxes of books written by outsiders about Africa.[7] DS need not be neo-colonial, but its genealogy and evolution are shaped by history and the context of its birth – the period of much decolonisation.

In reply to the 'depoliticisation critique', it could be argued that the normative point of departure of DS is in itself a political statement on global poverty and inequality, although it is worth repeating that DS is not a homogeneous body. While some strands of thought may be guilty, if anything much of DS is now firmly focusing on the 'politics': take, for example, the Commission for Africa, or the analysis of the PRSP process. In addition, many of the non-government actors are involved in advocacy as well as service delivery. Or look at the involvement of academics in Central American political movements: why was it that six Jesuit professors were assassinated in El Salvador?

The future of DS

Development Studies is a worthwhile endeavour. How could a concern with reducing global poverty not be such? However, the field of enquiry needs to think about how it addresses heterogeneity in the 'Third World(s)' and opens more space for alternative 'voices'. Many of the questions raised above relate to the nature of the subject matter. At the inception of DS, the 'Third World' may have been a relatively homogeneous bloc, but it is no longer so. How DS deals with this heterogeneity seems to be a crucial issue. Is one approach to think of grouping similar countries together? There is already UNCTAD's cluster of 'Least Less Developed Countries'. Other groups might be countries with high prevalence of HIV/AIDS, or countries in a state of conflict or post-conflict.

A trend towards questioning universal laws in DS is emerging too (for example in the work of Charles Kenny and David Williams, David Lindauer and Lant Pritchett, Martin Ravallion,

Deepayan Basu Ray, and Howard White). Arguably what really matters is to analyse those countries that have claimed some success in development. This might include China, India, and Vietnam, for example. What would be interesting is to take the success as the point of departure and work backwards to identify policies, local factors, caveats, replicability, and transmission mechanisms. Much work says *'this is the policy, and this is its outcome'*, rather than *'this is the successful outcome, and this is the policy that led to it'*.

One avenue that has been relatively unexplored in DS is knowledge–policy linkages, in particular how policy is shaped by the political infrastructure. As Beeson and Islam (2005:197) note:

> *The contest of ideas in economic policy making can evolve independently of their intellectual merit and empirical credibility. Political interests shape and mediate the process within which policy debate unfolds.*

The assumption of much DS work so far is that knowledge is not contestable, and that policy makers operate as rational, politically neutral arbitrators of different 'evidence' (an assumption long since deconstructed by Foucault). If this is challenged, the question then follows: *Upon which knowledge is policy formulated, and why do some knowledge(s) have a privileged position?* The limited number of existing case studies suggests that policy makers value research undertaken by the international financial institutions more highly than any form of local research or indigenous knowledge (Keeley and Scoones 1999; McGee and Brock 2001). This has some resonance with the post-development critique of DS, although accepting the validity of this point does not necessarily mean that all DS is a neo-colonial discourse.

What is the outlook for Development Studies? Good, it would seem. There has been increased interest in teaching and research, perhaps partly due to the 2005 'year of development' and the global focus on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Additionally, there has been a large growth in development employment (and resources) in donor agencies and in NGOs. What are the likely future directions? It depends on development practice: a positive outlook might be triggered by development successes such as poverty reduction and economic growth in India and China, and success in achieving some of the MDGs. However, failure to provide answers to reduce global poverty might well have the opposite effect. We shall see after Year Zero in 2015.

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Notes

1. DS is also known as 'International Development Studies', 'Third World Studies', 'International Development', 'Third World Development', 'World Development', 'Global Perspectives', and 'International Studies' and combinations of all of these. In this document it is referred to as 'DS' for the sake of consistency rather than as a judgement that this is the 'right' name.
2. In the UK alone, there are 16 UK universities with dedicated departments, schools, or centres, and a further 33 with significant capacity. The Development Studies Association (DSA) lists 150 courses and an estimated 700 academic staff. For further details see www.devstud.org.uk/guides.htm
3. For examples of such introspection, see the special issues of *World Development* (30(12), 2002); the *Canadian Journal of Development Studies* (25(1), 2004); *European Journal of Development Research* (15(1), 2003); Edwards (2002).

4. *Economic Development and Cultural Change* (1952), *Development* (1957), *Journal of Development Studies* (1965), *Development and Change* (1970), *World Development* (1973).
5. For example, one could note the Colonial Development and Welfare Act, and anthropological (and other) studies financed from British government (and colonies') funds. In the economic sphere there were a number of very influential economic studies in East Africa (for example Peacock and Dosser (1958) on National Income Accounting).
6. This section draws on Corbridge (2005), whose paper goes into far greater detail, in addition to reflecting other critiques.
7. Comments made in his presentation at the 40th Anniversary Conference of the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) 'Social Knowledge and International Policy Making: Exploring the Linkages', Geneva, 20–21 April 2004.

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