Introduction: New Perspectives on Development

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Introduction

This thematic issue, *New Perspectives on Development*, aims to critically interrogate the continued resonance and relevance of ideas about development and how these can be elucidated through bringing into dialogue a range of theoretical, thematic and regional perspectives. We highlight the continued relevance of development in the light of pressing and deepening challenges including the climate crisis; environmental degradation; conflict and displacement; and persistent and worsening global inequalities. Recognising that the interdisciplinary and applied nature of Development Studies has always been a significant strength, we argue that bringing together distinct disciplinary and/or theoretical perspectives is especially timely in the current era of growing global instability and conflict. Our aim is to promote a deeper and more diverse conversation around the topic’s theoretical underpinnings and normative commitments. Through contributions from a range of theoretical,
geographical, and disciplinary standpoints, this special issue explores some of the historical and contemporary tensions and challenges embedded in the concept and practice of development, and considers whether and how ‘development’ as a set of practices and ideas can respond to contemporary global challenges in ways that avoid perpetuating damaging colonial hierarchies and inequalities, and indeed can help to dismantle these.

Keywords Development • development studies • global inequalities • conflict and displacement • climate crisis

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A critical mass of scholarship now emerging underlines the urgency of decolonising development theory and practice, raising questions around the ways in which we think about, practice and ‘do’ development, and several contributions to the special issue foreground this concern with where and by whom development knowledges and theoretical frameworks are developed, and how these can make a difference to the lives of people living in conditions of inequality and precarity in the global South.

The contributions to this special issue evidence the breadth of contemporary scholarship on development-related concerns, tackling key themes including resistance, extractivism, livelihoods, race and coloniality, and labour processes, as they play out in global South contexts in Latin America, Asia and Africa, as well as bringing critical attention to knowledge production about ‘development’ in both the global South and North.

Ronaldo Munck (2024a) reviews the complex history of Marxism’s engagement with development starting with Marx’s own shift from a somewhat unilinear (even Eurocentric) notion of development to one that was more open-ended following his engagement with Russia and the prospects for revolution there that would not need to follow the Western stagist development model. Much later, following World War 2 a distinct neo-Marxist theory of under-development was forged based on the notion that the global South was not following the ‘normal’ development path towards self-sustaining growth. What we might take from this deconstruction of Marxism and development is an understanding that even within a body of thought such as Marxism there are widely different definitions and understandings of development.

Veltmeyer (2024b) responds by stressing an alternative deconstruction of the development discourse that posits two alternative readings, one as a strategy to improve the social position of a given population and another focused on the structural forces and ‘objective’ conditions that impact on the development of capitalism. His option is for the
structuralist conception of the development of the forces of production and the resistance to this generated by the workings of the system.

Adam Fishwick (2024) turns next to the central role of labour in the development process, both analytically and politically. The global changes caused by globalisation in terms of value chains and changing labour processes are central to this new understanding of development. The process of working-class composition and decomposition shows how important labour is in relation to the changing political economy of development. This analysis is cast in terms of a case study of the textile industry in Chile and the metal working industry in Argentina during the phase of import substitution industrialisation period. This analysis is an example of how the experience of the global South can add to the new global labour studies that too often assume the global North is the norm.

Ruth Felder and Viviana Patroni (2024) comment on Fishwick’s (2024) analysis and take it forward as well. They show the divide between labour studies and development studies that has hindered this dialogue or dialectic of understanding the work and development relationship. They seek to enhance the analysis presented and show how complex it is, advocating for a more long-term analysis. Likewise, they stress the role of the state in terms of organizing and disorganizing labour.

Henry Veltmeyer (2024) then turns to the way in which the globalising dynamics of the world capitalist system have led to a return of extractivsim as a main plank of capital accumulation in the global South. He argues that the capitalist development of the forces of production leads to corresponding forces of resistance and a succession of development-resistance cycles. In Latin America in particular we can witness this dialectic from the colonial era of mercantilism through to the extractive imperialism characteristic of neoliberal globalisation. The political dynamic of extractivism is also explored and how the period since
2000 has seen the rise of progressive governments that sought to break this patter, albeit with mixed degrees of success.

Arturo Ezquerro-Cañete (2024) engages with Veltmeyer’s analysis supporting it and expanding on its basic thesis. We see in more detail how the post 2000 progressive governments in Latin America opposed extractivism rhetorically while at the same time seeking to benefit from it in what might be called a neo-developmentalist trajectory, sometimes called neo structuralist. What we see here is how embedded the neo-liberal development model had become and how hard it is to simply develop a post neo-liberal approach.

Mick Dunford (2024) turns next to the long-term development models in China as way to illustrate the ways in which neo-liberalism is not the only path to development. He argues for a transition from an economically underdeveloped and semi-colonised country of the global South into a modern socialist country in a multi-polar world. The various phases of development in China including a succession of crises and contradictions are critically examined in considerable detail. The phase of reform beginning in the 1990s is seen as crucial on terms of creating the conditions for the New Era characterised by a drive for innovation and green development within the context of a more equitable world order. The Chinese experience of development is seen as essential in any global theoretical review. Rhadika Desai (2024) replies, presenting a dialectical and historical account of the impact of the internal contradictions of capitalism on China’s development.

Kalpana Wilson’s (2024) article problematises the response of Global North NGOs to the Black Lives Matter movement, highlighting the contradictions and tensions embedded in these responses and the ways in which they evidence a continued coloniality within Development. She then goes on to skilfully weave this analysis together with a critical analysis of the ways in which Hindu supremacism in India appropriates similar anti-racist discourses to justify and support far-right ideologies. Wilson argues for a stronger engagement with
contemporary Marxist theorising from the global South, in order to make sense of the racialised nature of contemporary development structures and discourses. In reply, Kamna Patel (2024) traces the impact of binaries of inferiority and superiority within racialised structures of capital to explore the implications of Wilson’s work.

Both Zaragocin et al. (2024) and Wilson’s (2024) papers bring critical attention to historical and contemporary racisms and exclusions embedded in development discourses and practices, and how these play out in relation to the distinct (post)colonial contexts of India and Ecuador. Sofia Zaragocin et al. (2024) emphasise the ways in which Black feminist scholarship and practice has been invisibilised in Ecuador, and explore the potential that this presents for problematising mainstream Development narratives, in the context of the continued insecurity faced by Black women in the province of Esmeraldas, Ecuador. Their article seeks to bring to the fore the voices, critiques and praxis of Black women living in Esmeraldas, arguing for a Black Feminist Political Ecology of the Americas. Zaragocin et al. (2024) navigate the difficult terrain of underscoring the material and embodied impacts of the marginalisation and wilful neglect of racialised territories such as Esmeraldas, whilst trying to avoid reproducing narratives centred on ‘lack’ and victimhood. Mollett’s (2024) commentary introduces further nuance into this discussion, and foregrounds the tensions around positionality, race, and knowledge production that are inescapable in research of this type.

Zaragocin et al.’s (2024) and Convivial Thinkers’ (2024) articles grapple with the epistemological challenges of foregrounding development knowledges that have often been hidden or excluded, and provide compelling arguments as to why this must be a priority for development scholarship going forward. In particular, Convivial Thinkers (2024) explore the possibilities and limitations of decolonising development in the context of their own positioning within global North academic institutions. Their reflective and open discussion considers the tensions in activist-academic positionalities, and explores the ways in which they
navigate these in relation to their decolonising endeavours. To do this, they critically engage with examples from their own scholar activism, which they characterise as ‘messy, contested, incomplete and full of contradictions but nonetheless integral to our academic lives.’

Benita Siloko’s (2024) article argues for the importance of bringing the concept of Human Security into dialogue with sustainable livelihoods and environmental degradation, specifically in the context of the impacts of oil extraction in the Niger Delta. Siloko (2024) contends that although both livelihoods and environmental degradation are reasonably well understood in this context, linking these more explicitly with ideas about human security provides a fruitful way of understanding the worsening challenges faced by farmers and fishers in sustaining their livelihoods. Ronaldo Munck (2024b) draws on Siloko’s article to advance the need for greater critical examination of human security as an instrument of development.

Siloko’s (2024) and Veltmeyer’s (2024a) papers both foreground the neoliberal extractivist model of development as a subject of critique, exploring the distinct inequalities this has produced in different contexts and scales and the resistances that emerge from this. Similarly, the imperative of tackling the violence and insecurities that stem from the extractivist development paradigm also provide the backdrop for Zaragocin et al’s (2024) contribution. Together these three papers problematise the continued centrality of extractivism for equitable and sustainable development.

Together, the collection offers both an overview of new perspectives on development and a series of diverse positions from which further critical work can emerge.

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