Critical geography III: Critical development geography

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Abstract
Recent work by critical development geographers has broken down borders between Marxist political economy and postcolonial theory. This has enabled deeper integration of critical approaches to race and culture with political economic analyses of class politics and imperialism, as well as more embracing theorizations of violence within capitalist development. It also potentially opens onto development geographies that more fully address the internal variegation of the Global South and South–South geopolitical economic relations, as part of the transnationalization of capital and social struggle.

Keywords
class, critical geography, political economy, postcolonial theory, race, violence

I Critical development geography: Beyond an(other) impasse?
Perhaps because it is an immodest, ‘big picture’ field that purports to tell us much about the world, development theory – and, thus, development geography – seems to pass frequently through phases in which impasses, dead-ends, or other kinds of crises are announced. Obviously, if one attempts to conceptualize the world, one will fall short (in some sense), and perhaps too readily betray the inevitable partiality that marks attempts at theorizing totalities. In a recent review of development studies that rearticulates the sense of impasse, Stuart Corbridge chides development theorists for being overly oppositional and failing to adequately engage in debates with policy-makers (Corbridge, 2007).

While I am not sure that such a characterization fits all development theorists especially well, I do think that Corbridge is right to see a disconnect – in fact multiple disconnects – between the work of critical development scholars and the projects of mainstream development practitioners. Unlike Corbridge, who portrays this as a mark of immaturity in development studies, I would contend that the disconnects between critical development geography and mainstream development practice – which are not largely the creation or the responsibility of critical scholars themselves – are inevitable and speak not to the immaturity but, rather, to the vibrancy of critical development studies. Critical development geography, I contend, is burgeoning. Whatever may be the projects of various of critical geographers, the ‘practical’ significance of radical or critical scholarship is unlikely to be effectively measured by looking for direct uptake in policy-making circles. The engagement of critical

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development geographers with numerous crucial issues and social groups is nonetheless evident, as I will suggest in this review.

As with my previous reports on critical geography, I will build this review around several recent, book-length works that seem to me to mark especially important contributions, while noting other books and articles as well. I cannot summarize all the significant themes that have emerged in critical development geography in recent years and focus only on three that I find of special interest: the interleaving of political economy and postcolonial theory; the deepening analysis of violence and development; and the attention being paid not only to the internal social variegation of countries in the Global South but also to the variegation of the South as a whole.

II Political economy and postcolonial theory: Encounters with development and beyond

Corbridge’s critical assessment of critical development studies pays special attention to Arturo Escobar’s famed post-development text, *Encountering Development* (Escobar, 1995), noting its weaknesses and prodding development theorists to move beyond its sense of the ‘impossibility of development’ (Corbridge, 2007: 189–190). To be sure, development geographers have been strongly influenced by Escobar – for example, the subtitle of the second edition of Eric Sheppard, Philip Porter, David Faust, and Richa Nagar’s development geography textbook, *A World of Difference*, is *Encountering and Contesting Development* (Sheppard et al., 2009) – but, in my view, critical development geography has long since moved well beyond Escobar. Indeed, this is not a recent phenomenon (see, for example, Chari, 2004, for one of many examples), and the work I note here would seem to fully announce this movement beyond early post-developmentalism.

Vinay Gidwani and Joel Wainwright, for example, both announce in various ways the impossibility of not trying (or desiring) to develop (Gidwani, 2008: 69–70; Wainwright, 2008: 10), but rather than merely returning from this observation to the fetishization of conventional development objectives (e.g. reduced infant mortality, increased GDP), they analyze the debilities and contradictions of specifically capitalist development. Both do so through a supple interleaving of Marxist political economy and postcolonial theory, and in doing so they help open political economy more fully to the ways articulations of class with race and numerous other social processes shape the dynamics of accumulation, labor, and social struggle.

Wainwright’s book, *Decolonizing Development: Colonial Power and the Maya*, openly announces as its theoretical project the fusion of Marxist political economy with Edward Said’s postcolonialism (e.g. Wainwright, 2008: 14–27). In particular, Wainwright extracts four lessons from the postcolonial literature – and especially Said’s work – that are crucial for critical development studies, including those studies influenced by Marxist political economy. These lessons are: (1) ‘that the achievement and perpetuation of colonial rule required the production of particular forms of knowledge’ (p. 14); (2) ‘that nationalism, as a response to the problems caused by colonial knowledges and discourses, has proven to be insufficient to the task of decolonizing the world’ (p. 15); (3) that postcolonialism ‘teaches us to read with a persistent scepticism towards practices that represent subaltern voices’ (p. 16); and (4) ‘that we must call into question the essential congruence of the trinity that structures the very worldliness of modernity, i.e., the state-nation-territory complex’ (p. 17). The interleaving of Marxism with these lessons from postcolonial theory, worked out with special attention to issues of territorialization, informs an impressive and detailed engagement with colonial development and the Maya in Belize, including a critical – indeed self-critical – examination of postcolonial projects such as those embodied in the *Maya Atlas* (Wainwright, 2008: 241–281).
Gidwani’s book, *Capital, Interrupted: Agrarian Development and the Politics of Work in India*, circles slightly more indirectly around the interactions between Marxism and postcolonial theory, but devotes considerable space to the filiations between Marx and various other thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu (e.g. Gidwani, 2008: 13–14, 144, 168). In the final, especially bracing chapter, however, Gidwani directly raises the spectre of Marxist postcoloniality by bringing David Harvey’s work into conversation with Dipesh Chakrabarty’s subaltern histories of South Asian workers (Gidwani, 2008: 216–232). Gidwani’s nuanced reading navigates between the limits of Harvey’s *Limits to Capital* – which for Gidwani ‘writes back dispersed geographies of life into the expansionist narrative of capitalism’s becoming’, making them but ‘variations in a singular, relentless process of capitalist development’ (p. 217) – and the weaknesses of Chakrabarty’s *Rethinking Working-class History* and *Provincializing Europe*, namely Chakrabarty’s rather ironic convergence with Harvey in his failure ‘to adequately theorise how subaltern consciousness manages to remain autonomous . . . of elite conceptions of the world’ (p. 228). In his production of this conversation, Gidwani announces a perspective that embraces what is strongest in Harvey’s work, including his ability to interrogate capitalism’s restlessness as value-in-motion, while subjecting it to a postcolonial reading of capitalist value’s attempts to subordinate all that is singular and particular in the work of varied labourers.

The pathways traveled in these texts flag a more general interleaving of Marxist political economy with postcolonial studies of the production of race and culture. Wainwright’s book, for example, devotes most of part I to critically ‘unsettling’ the colonially constructed Maya ethnos (Wainwright, 2008: 41–149), while Gidwani devotes a chapter to critically unpacking the birth of a caste – a construct that is undoubtedly quite distinct from race or ethnic group, but one which expresses a similar pretension to reify and essentialize deeply geographical-historical and social processes of cultural construction (Gidwani, 2008: 32–67). In similarly postcolonial yet Marxist-influenced fashion (Asher, 2009: 24–25, 198–199), Kiran Asher’s book, *Black and Green: Afro-Colombians, Development, and Nature in the Pacific Lowlands*, displays the fractures in any simple notion of racial subalternity by examining encounters with development, and contestations of it, by Afro-Columbians – a group positioned uncomfortably (and sometimes invisibly) in relation to both the projects of dominant European-descended social groups and the compensatory discourse and activism centered on indigenous populations (Asher, 2009: 32–56).

If postcolonial theory has thus opened up the issues of race, identity, and culture within Marxist political economy and development studies (cf. Saldanha, 2007), it has also created space for a somewhat more intensive examination of discourse within development. It is increasingly de rigeur – à la Tim Mitchell’s influential *Rule of Experts* (2002), as well as Bob Jessop and Ngai-Ling Sum’s cultural political economy project (e.g. Jessop and Oosterlynck, 2008) – to see development discourse as integral to developmental dynamics (see Peet, 2007; Sheppard et al., 2009: 52–114).

In my own work on the Mekong, I have suggested that elite discourses of regionalization – which are not singular but varied according to the varied and sometimes competing interests of different elite actors – are neither independent forces nor irrelevant epiphenomena of political economic projects. Rather, specific discourses of regionalization serve as mobilizing forces (at least among elite and bureaucratically powerful actors) within specific political economic projects of regional development. As such, the Asian Development Bank’s notion of a Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), the Chinese state’s notion of a ‘Western Development’ campaign, and the Thai state’s notion of a ‘Golden Land’ (Suwwanaphum) all jostle against each other in...
helping elite groups legitimize their projects and mobilize capital and institutional support (Glassman, 2010b).

III Violence, development, and de-development

If Marxist development geography has become increasingly postcolonial – or, as one might have it, if postcolonial development geography has become more Marxissant – it is not surprising that critical development geography’s language for discussing the violence of development has become richer and more complex. Violence has been a central concern of both Marxist political economy and postcolonial theory, the former tending to analyze it in the functions it performs for capital, the latter in its racialized, especially imperial, moments. If these faces of violence were ever seen as in some sense deeply different or antagonistic, this is certainly not the case within contemporary critical development geography.

Violence has long been addressed within development geography as an integral moment of capitalist development (e.g. Peluso and Watts, 2001), including in its gendered dimensions (Nagar and Sangtin Writers, 2006; Wright, 2006). Recent work by critical development geographers further articulates the significance, meanings, and variegation of such violence. For example, Aaron Bobrow-Strain’s remarkable study of landowners in Chiapas highlights both the importance and subtlety of violence – showing how landowners’ own perceptions of violence, including their fear of subaltern violence against them, has conditioned their acquiescence to land invasions and expropriation by Zapatista groups (Bobrow-Strain, 2007: 143–144). Indeed, for Bobrow-Strain, one of the remarkable aspects of recent developments in Chiapas is that a landowning elite that had historically responded to land invasions by indigenous groups with guns and thugs has largely responded to recent invasions by cooperating with state-wide programs of land redistribution. Bobrow-Strain finds the methodological and theoretical keys to explaining this conundrum in combining (not rejecting) some precepts of Marxist political economy with detailed attention to the factors shaping landowners’ consciousness and identity (Bobrow-Strain, 2007: 7–9).

Both the Foucauldian notion that violence is in fundamental ways productive of subject formation and the Marxist notion that dominant classes and states will use violence to maintain social order have long been a concern of critical development geographers, and such concerns reappear in some of the works cited above (e.g. Asher, 2009: 23; Gidwani, 2008: 80–82). In addition, Harvey’s re-emphasis on imperialism and refurbishing of the Marxist notion of primitive accumulation, under the heading of ‘accumulation by dispossession’ (Harvey, 2003), has brought the interconnections between globally uneven development and the violent displacement of agrarian producers back to the foreground of critical development geography (e.g. Bobrow-Strain, 2007: 54–55; Retort, 2006; Wainwright, 2008: 200–240; Wolford, 2010: 70–76). Adding to this, the deployment by geographers of Giorgio Agamben’s notions of ‘homo sacer’ and the ‘state of exception’ (see Gregory, 2004) have given conceptual texturing to the discussions of violence by critical development geographers (see, for example, Gidwani, 2008: 80; Wainwright, 2008: 111). In all of this, it becomes clear that for critical development geographers violence is not merely productive or functional but rather a pervasive, multifaceted, and integral feature of capitalist (and colonial) development, that is at the same time multiscalar – ranging from the disciplining of gendered human bodies to the dispossession of racialized others and the conflict of warring capitalist powers (Glassman, 2005, 2006; Gregory and Pred, 2007).

In the discussions of violence and development I would like to note two especially important features of recent discussions by
geographers. First, while it continues to be acknowledged that violence, as integral to capitalist development, is in various ways productive, it cannot be ignored that violence is inevitably destructive enough in its immediate impacts on both human bodies and social structures as to constitute a means of de-development (see Nevins, 2005). It is unfortunate, given its importance in global affairs, that Middle Eastern studies tends to be somewhat underrepresented in geography, but work such as Derek Gregory’s postcolonial forays into ‘the colonial present’ and the ‘biopolitics of Baghdad’ forcefully remind us that the violence of development is routinely subsidized by the violent destruction and sacrifice of those swathes of humanity that have been targeted in the ‘war on terror’ and subjected to the ‘state of exception’ (Gregory, 2004; 2008; Gregory and Pred, 2007; cf. Glassman, 2005).

Second, given that violence does its work not merely through cold calculation but through experiential surpluses that routinely render academic analyses of violence inadequate, it is important and telling that many geographers have ventured into a variety of non-conventional formats for addressing violence. Some of these include long-standing practices such as participant observation and partisan scholarship in alliance with groups involved in struggle, such as Nagar’s work with the Sangtin collective and Geraldine Pratt’s work in solidarity with women investigating extra-judicial killings in the Philippines (Nagar and Sangtin Writers, 2006; Pratt, 2008). Others include timely academic commentary on issues of violence, such as the intervention symposium by Oaxaca scholars organized by Melissa Wright (Wright, 2008), with such interventions now more quickly available through online publication. Especially important here, in my view, are efforts by geographers to reach broader audiences through means such as the use of visual imagery. Michael Watts’ remarkable collaboration with Ed Kashi and Nigerian journalists, Curse of the Black Gold: 50 Years of Oil in the Niger Delta (Kashi and Watts, 2010), provides an especially effective (and affective) pictorial narrative of de-development, which while it can no more fully represent reality than can words alone nonetheless evokes far more powerfully than mere words some of the experience of violence in Nigeria. Addressing by contrast the resilience of social actors in the face of violence, Altha Cravey’s video collaboration with Elva E. Bishop, ‘People’s guelagetza: Oaxacans take it to the streets’, displays vividly the remarkable spirit of people contesting repression by the Mexican state (Bishop and Cravey, 2006).

IV Reconfiguring the Global South

If the interleaving of Marxism and postcolonial theory is providing critical development geography with richer tools for thinking about issues such as class-race-gender articulations and multiple valences of violence, it is also bringing home the necessity of interrogating and disaggregating the large sociospatial units of development theory. As per Wainwright’s salutary warning, critical development geographers are unwilling to take nationalism as an adequate response to colonialism or imperialism, and are unwilling to allow nationalist elites the pretence of representing subalterns. Wendy Wolford’s fascinating study of Brazil’s Landless Movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra, or MST), This Land is Ours Now (2010), is in many ways a model. Not only does Wolford explore in great detail the fissures within Brazilian society but in a fashion informed by both Marxist studies of agrarian change and postcolonial approaches to subaltern struggle she shows that movements like MST are not composed around fully fixed or easily categorized political identities. Rather, such identities crystallize – and for some actors dissolve – around specific projects and moments of struggle. As Wolford rightly notes, recognition of the diversity within social movements
and the fungibility of political identities in the context of material social struggles is crucial if academics and activists are to avoid championing social movements in ways that ‘unintentionally exoticize the very subaltern they hope to support’ (Wolford, 2010: 10; cf. Glassman, 2011; Glassman et al., 2008).

Many other studies by critical development geographers address the deep fissures and complex of discourses and identities that inform social struggles within postcolonial contexts, including around articulations of race, class, regional identity, and gender in contexts of neoliberal restructuring. Examples, here, include Gillian Hart’s work on South Africa (Hart, 2002, 2008), Jamie Doucette’s critical readings of contemporary Korean politics (Doucette, 2010), Dennis Arnold and Toh Han Shih’s assessment of globalized garment production in Cambodia (Arnold and Toh Han Shih, 2010), and my own analyses of recent Thai political conflicts (Glassman, 2010a, 2011).

Crucially, much recent work by critical development geographers emphasizes the differing national projects of states within the Global South, including the complex ruptures in that South produced by phenomena such as the rapid growth of East Asia. Padraig Carmody’s interrogations of Chinese foreign policy and resource extraction in sub-Saharan Africa are especially important here, not only because they escape the trap of cataloguing and celebrating Chinese developmental successes but also because they note the complex implications of this success for different states and social groups in regions of the South that have rarely been favored by transnational capital and its uneven growth dynamics (Carmody, 2010; Carmody and Taylor, 2010; cf. Glassman, 2010b).

V Conclusion

Even the most constructive developments in an intellectual field are bound to produce new problems and exhibit shortcomings. If my account of recent developments in critical development geography is somewhat celebratory, this should not be read as an argument for contentment. What I do contend, though, is that recent developments have pushed forward a very generative interaction between Marxism and postcolonial theory, one which allows critical scholarship on development in the Global South to make important strides.

As such, I cannot concur with Corbridge’s sense of malaise. Supportive interactions with development policy-makers is certainly an option, and one of which many development scholars avail themselves, including some scholars I cite here. But there are good reasons, too, for critical development scholars to retain space between themselves and a political mainstream that is unlikely to be sympathetic toward – or find ‘practical’ relevance in – the concepts critical scholars are developing. Many critical development scholars will likely find the most relevant outlet in their ongoing collaborations and solidarity with different groups involved in social struggle, and I see no reason why they should be discouraged from doing this or coached to be more affirming of the projects of mainstream development practitioners. All will, of course, decide for themselves in what ways they want to be relevant, but the merits of their scholarly efforts will not be diminished by their maintaining positions necessary for the production of hard-edged, analytically critical concepts devoted to exposing the debilitating sides of capitalist development.

References


