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How the discipline of geography exacerbates poverty in the Third World

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Abstract

Conventional wisdom informs us that poverty represents a lack of development; naturally economic development is seen as the answer to the problem. Contrary to that, I claim that poverty is a form of scarcity induced by the very process of development. The materiality of the poverty problem does not exist independent of discourses we have constructed to understand it. By concealing how development induces scarcity, social science discourse is implicated as a causative agent of poverty. Using a poststructural framework of reasoning, I demonstrate this argument by examining how mainstream geographers (in the spatial tradition) have looked at the topics of poverty and development. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

A *raison d'être* of social science is the claim that its knowledge can produce solutions to social problems such as poverty, underdevelopment, and ecological degradation. However, I take the view that the current constitution of the social sciences cannot solve problems because it is an integral part of what causes problems. In short, social scientific theory regarding social problems is deeply implicated as a causative agent in the very problems it is designed to address. I shall illustrate this line of argument by examining how the discipline of geography views the problem of poverty and underdevelopment in Third World countries. The issues I detail are not peculiar to geography, although I shall confine my attention to that discipline.

Within the discipline of geography there are several methodological approaches and sub-discourses. A popular book on geographic thought entitled, "Approaches

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to Human Geography: An Introduction to Contemporary Theoretical Debates” [11] identified the following approaches: the regional tradition (or chorology), quantitative spatial science, Marxism, humanism, structuration theory, realism, and postmodernism. The geography sub-discourses on underdevelopment and poverty include: economic geography as influenced by neo-classical economics; radical geography founded on Marxist political economy; sustainable development; and political ecology.¹ Of these I will focus only on the sub-discourse of neo-classical economic geography using a chorology (or regional) approach. My reason is the following: I am interested in geography as public discourse. The majority of geographic writing on poverty and development falls within this perspective. A perusal of high-school social studies texts detailing Third World poverty shows the influence of this understanding. Major newspapers and news magazine articles on poverty also show the unmistakable influence of this approach. I advance my critique of the geography of development by drawing on poststructural arguments developed by scholars such as Foucault [18] and Derrida [12].² It is true that geographers following Marxist and political ecology paradigms have articulated very searching critiques of theories of capitalist development [27,28,34,9,36]. But my argument differs from the Marxist one in two respects. First, it claims that development itself, not just capitalism, is implicated in the social construction of scarcity. Second, it makes the “epistemic” argument that social science discourse is a causative agent of poverty.

The first part of the essay briefly describes a poststructural theoretical framework. The second part of the essay suggests a new social theory of poverty. The third part looks at the most common geographic approach to poverty and development. Lastly, I explain the attributes of the geographic approach using the poststructural framework. This is also where I make the argument that the discipline is implicated as a causative agent of poverty.

1. The poststructural framework

A convenient point to begin the poststructural argument lies in semiotics — the study of signs. By combining ideas from Saussure [33: 56–63] and Peirce [33: 39–47], we can view a sign as consisting of three parts: a word (signifier); a concept (a signified); and an object (a referent). For every single “word/object” pair, there is a large number of mediating concepts (polysemy), which implies that objects cannot yield unique meanings. When discussing an object located in the world, we necessarily use only one or a few of these mediating concepts.

The conventional model of science assumes that words simply reflect meaning already existing in the world of objects. This is called the *reflective* approach because language is supposed to reflect, as in a mirror, true meaning that already exists in

¹ Examples of these approaches are: neoclassical economics [16]; sustainable development [43]; Marxist development [34]; and political ecology [37].

² The anthropologist Escobar [13,14] has made an explicit effort to apply poststructural arguments to development.

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