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## After Post-Development: On Capitalism, Difference, and Representation

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## **After Post-Development: On Capitalism, Difference, and Representation**

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**Abstract:** The post-development school associated with the thought of Arturo Escobar treats development as a discursive invention of the West, best countered by ethnographic attention to local knowledge of people marginalized by colonial modernity. This approach promises paths to more equitable and sustainable alternatives to development. Post-development has been criticized vigorously in the past. But despite its conceptual and political shortcomings, it remains the most popular critical approach to development and is reemerging in decolonial and pluriversal guises. This paper contends that the post-development critique of mainstream development has run its course and deserves a fresh round of criticism. We argue that those committed to struggles for social justice must critically reassess the premises of post-development and especially wrestle with the problem of representation. We contend that Gayatri Spivak's work is particularly important to this project. We review some of Spivak's key texts on capitalism, difference, and development to clarify the virtues of her approach.

**Keywords:** capitalism, development, Escobar, post-development, Spivak

**Resumen:** El pos-desarrollo, la corriente de pensamiento asociada con Arturo Escobar, trata el desarrollo como una invención discursiva de Occidente, la cual es contrarrestada de mejor forma a través de la atención etnográfica a saberes locales de los pueblos marginalizados por la modernidad colonial. Este enfoque ofrece alternativas al desarrollo que son más equitativas y sustentables. El pos-desarrollo ha sido criticado rotundamente en las últimas décadas. Pero, a pesar de sus deficiencias conceptuales y políticas, sigue siendo la crítica más popular al desarrollo y está resurgiendo en teorías decoloniales y de pluriverso. Este trabajo plantea que la corriente de pos-desarrollo como crítica del desarrollo dominante ha sido agotada, y que el desarrollo merece una nueva mirada crítica. Proponemos que los comprometidos con las luchas por justicia social deben revisar las premisas del pos-desarrollo y lidiar especialmente con la representación como una problemática central al desarrollo. Sostenemos que la obra de Gayatri Spivak es clave para este proyecto. Ofrecemos una reseña de algunos textos claves de Spivak sobre capitalismo, diferencia y desarrollo, aclarando sus aportes para una evaluación crítica del desarrollo dominante.

**Palabras clave:** capitalismo, desarrollo, Escobar, pos-desarrollo, Spivak

[Let us] demystify theory that ignores subaltern experiences and knowledge ... in order to relocate their politics of place as key to our understanding of globalization. (Escobar 2008: 15)

[T]o confront them is not to represent them (*vertreten*) but to learn to represent (*darstellen*) ourselves. (Spivak 1988: 288)

## **Introduction**

Across the world today, subaltern social groups face dispossession and state violence as they struggle for dignity in the face of neoliberal authoritarianism.\* As capitalist social relations deepen around the world, social movements continue to resist in disparate fashion, producing contradictory outcomes (Asher 2009; Gidwani 2002; Lee et al. 2010; Perreault 2008; Pieck 2011). The struggle continues in the face of burgeoning inequality and planetary

environmental change. Notwithstanding occasional successes, these struggles are losing ground to neoliberal authoritarianism and a persistent rightward movement in global politics.

Resistance by social movements has inspired the emergence of a robust literature on “post-development” since the early 1990s. These works call for the rejection of mainstream development because of its colonial, Eurocentric, and neoliberal qualities (Rahnema and Bawtree 1997; Sachs 1992; Saunders 2002; Shiva 1988). There are many variants of post-development, ranging from the popular to nuanced theoretical critiques (Crush 1995; Escobar 1992, 1995; Ferguson 1994; Gupta 1998; Mitchell 1991). But the writings of Arturo Escobar, especially his book, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (2012 [1995]) have proven to be the most influential.\* The basic argument of *Encountering Development* is that development functions as a discourse that reproduces structural inequalities and unjust representations of the Third World and its people:

[T]he “Third World” has been produced by the discourses and practices of development since their inception in the early post-World War II period ... [From this time, r]eality ... had been colonized by the development discourse, and those who were dissatisfied with this state of affairs had to struggle for bits and pieces of freedom within it, in the hope that in the process a different reality could be constructed. (Escobar 2012: 4-5)

Thus we need to recover and revalidate cultural and economic imaginaries and practices hitherto marginalized by the Eurocentric logic of Western development in order to displace “development as a regime of representation” (2012: 216).

Post-development ideas were roundly criticized in the late 1990s and early 2000s (see, e.g., Gidwani 2002; Hart 2001; Kiely 1999; Lazreg 2002; Pieterse 1998; Watts 1993) for their romanticized visions of “the local”, inadequate accounting of difference, and lack of engagement with historical-materialistic critiques of capitalism and development strategies. More concretely, attempts to define alternatives to development have not been particularly successful. And yet the appeal of post-development ideas and “alternatives to development” has not waned; on the contrary, they continue to shape development debates across disciplines and continents (Ziai 2015, 2017).\* They are also re-appearing as decolonial ontologies.

*Encountering Development* and Escobar’s subsequent writings (2007, 2008, 2010, 2018) remain central to these debates. In the preface to the 2012 edition of *Encountering Development*, he argues for the continuing relevance of analyzing development and imagining a post-development era (Escobar 2012: vii-xliii). He also rejects postcolonial approaches, on the ostensible grounds that they emerge from metropolitan centers of knowledge production (thus forming a hidden alliance with Eurocentric scholarship) and take the South Asian experience as paradigmatic (and are therefore inadequate to address diverse experiences). He turns instead to Latin American critical traditions to trace the crucial but often invisible role of the Americas in constituting colonial modernity’s material practices and epistemes. To address the critiques levelled against his earlier work, Escobar turns especially to the practices of transnational social movements and Latin American decolonial thought. Foregrounding the

“political ontologies” of subaltern groups (peasants, women, and especially Afro-descendant and indigenous communities), he contends that they signal a transition to “pluriversal” thinking (Escobar 2012: viii). For Escobar, “alternative to development” are clearly evident in the many concrete proposals emerging from Ecuador, Bolivia, Mexico (*Buen Vivir*, *suma qawsay*, Zapatista strategies) that think beyond globalization to imagine forms of “planetarization”, where humans and non-humans can co-exist.

Like his earlier post-development proposals, Escobar seeks “post-capitalist, post-liberal, and post-statist options” (2010: 3) grounded in the lived experiences of those situated “outside Europe”. His responses to his critics emphasize cultural difference, non-Eurocentric imaginaries, and a new-materialist criticism of a world dominated by colonial modernity and (Escobar 2007, 2008, 2010, 2018).\*

Given the quantity of criticism that post-development has received, it may seem quixotic to add another essay to the pile. Escobar’s critique of development and his search for alternatives has inspired us too, so why pick on a *compañero*?

We offer our critique – with a focus on the relations between development, representation, and capital – for three reasons. The first is personal and pedagogical; as teachers of development studies, we are discomfited by the persisting influence of post-development (now in decolonial and pluriversal guises). Having confronted certain points of confusion in the classroom for two decades, we feel we owe it to our students to present our criticism clearly. The second impulse concerns the *political implications* of post-development – anticipated by critics in the 1990s, clearer today in hindsight. Post-development and its new avatars, we contend, are implicitly driven by a weak form of identity politics and the recovery of subaltern (non-Western) subjectivity. Consequently, the proposition that the grounded knowledge of subaltern social groups is the source of alternatives contributes to the problematic notion that “natives will save us”.\* This is, we emphasize, not an issue of intent; rather it is a matter of failing to attend carefully to the problematics of capital, development, difference, and representation. Failure to explore the crucial relationship between this quartet of concepts brings us to our third reason and the paper’s underlying mandate, which we propose to address by turning to the work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

Notwithstanding their many virtues, the early wave of criticisms of post-development failed to bring about a dialogue between Escobar’s post-development and the thought of Spivak. Admittedly, Spivak’s works do not add up to a generalizable critique of development; nor do they provide a straightforward postcolonial or Marxist or feminist theory of subaltern agency. On the contrary, her thought continuously complicates these categories. But the strategies through which Spivak elaborates a persistent critique of Eurocentrism, imperialism, capitalism, nationalism, and their representational practices make her work, we contend, a powerful corrective to post-development thinking. We find her works on capitalism, representation, difference, development and Marxism from the period 1982-1994 especially pertinent (Spivak 1982, 1985, 1987, 1988, 1990a, 1990b, 1994; but see also Spivak 1976, 1999, 2012, 2014a, 2014b). These works from the 1980s were widely discussed in the humanities prior to the take-off of post-development literature, but neither Escobar nor subsequent post-development scholars have engaged them closely. For that matter, Spivak’s Marxism has not received sustained attention in the literature on development studies.\* This paper therefore aims at addressing these lacunae in a preliminary fashion. The burgeoning literature on decolonial alternatives and ontologies in a range of fields from geography to feminist

theory is taking up post-development arguments implicitly or explicitly. Critically addressing the relations between capital, difference, and representation via Spivak is particularly relevant now if these new debates are to avoid the pitfalls of post-development alternatives.

Our argument proceeds as follows. In the next section, we provide a concise overview of the third world development project and the post-development critique thereof (this is well-worn ground, so our review is brief). We then consider Escobar's work to show that his treatment of difference, representation, and capital falls short. In the section following we consider Spivak's analysis of the same problematic to distil the lessons of her analysis and to clarify its contribution to the critique of development. We conclude by clarifying why taking up the post-development challenge of imagining just alternatives must entail persistent critique and end with a concise statement on the stakes of these engagements.

## **Post-Development Redux**

While development in the Third World has a long history, it emerged as a project of state-led national economic growth and political modernization after World War II and the wave of formal decolonization (Cooper and Packard 1997; Edelman and Haugerud 2005; Leys 1996; Prashad 2008, 2014). Led by development economists, the prevailing modernization approach to Third World underdevelopment was driven toward technocratic and anti-Communist aims. Debates about development in the 1950s and 1960s focused on such issues as *how* to achieve it through economic growth (de facto capitalist) and its correlation with political modernization (considered synonymous with liberal democracy). They also focused on how "internal" factors such as rural populations, traditional societies, and corrupt fledgling states hindered development and democracy.

Early Marxist-influenced critics of development from the dependency and world-systems schools – e.g. Fernando Cardoso, Enzo Faletto, Andre Gunder Frank, Samir Amin, and Immanuel Wallerstein – saw the struggle for development as an important element of the anti-imperial and nationalist struggle to reorder the world. Making explicit that economic development was capitalist in nature, they argued that capitalist expansion depended on complex and unequal connections – between colonies, nations, regions, and markets (an insight many drew from the prescient work of Rosa Luxemburg (1913)). These approaches considered cultural factors to be epiphenomenal to the structural dynamics of political economy. With few exceptions, their understanding and analyses of social protests and resistance were couched in the language of revolution and the movement toward socialism. This generation of Marxist comrades and policy pundits drew little from the analytical insights and political questions raised by Marxist feminists concerned with development (Boserup 1970; Mies 1982).

By the last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and well before the unforeseen end of the Cold War, the failure of both liberal and socialist variants of development was evident in the debt crises, social unrest, political instability, and ecological disasters besetting the world. In the 1990s, the development project transformed into the economic globalization project (McMichael 1996). The latter, like the former, is hardly monolithic. However, all its variants subscribe to some extent to the post-1989 Washington Consensus and its neoliberal logic: free-market-led growth, a smaller role for the state, and a greater one for civil society in governance and welfare. In the last few decades much

blood and ink have been spilt contesting and analyzing “neoliberalism”, a concept best grasped as a description of the current phase of capitalist history, a phase defined by the terminal crisis of the fourth cycle of global accumulation (Arrighi 1994) and the return of imperialism (Karatani 2014, 2017).

Analysing these changes has proven difficult for social scientists in the wake of the so-called cultural turn. Consider the problem of development. By questioning the discursive operation of “development”, post-structural anthropologists and geographers contested its technical, apolitical, and ahistorical nature while stimulating fruitful conversations about the meanings and effects of development practices (Crush 1995; Ferguson 1994; Gupta 1998; Mitchell 1991). They reframed the debates regarding models of development and capitalism, social difference, and the subjects of resistance. Meanwhile, many activists and professionals from the Third World denounced development as a project of Eurocentric modernity, which imposed Western rationality and marginalized non-Western systems of knowledge (Apffel Marglin and Marglin 1990; Banuri 1990; Esteva 1987; Rahnema and Bawtree 1997; Sachs 1992; Sheth 1987; Shiva 1988).<sup>\*</sup> These and other writers argued that traditional lifestyles and livelihood practices of marginalized local communities suggested the possibility of sustainable alternatives *to* development and heralded a “post-development” era. Escobar’s work flows from this current.

Escobar’s work played a catalytic role in foregrounding post-structuralist critiques of the development project (1987, 1992, 1995, 1998). Informed by Michel Foucault, Edward Said, V.Y. Mudimbe, Chandra Mohanty and Homi Bhabha, among others – but not Spivak – Escobar argues that “development” in its modern, Eurocentric guise has marginalized other epistemes and economic systems. In his account, development was created after World War II and quickly dominated the world (thanks to its incorporation as the horizon of Third World national efforts). In his widely cited monograph, Escobar (1995: 9) characterizes development as a “discourse”, a product of Western colonialism. His goal is to move us toward a post-development era where “development as a regime of representation” and “the Western economy as a system of production, power and signification” are displaced by “different subjectivities” and “hybrid, creative, autonomous alternatives to it” (1995: 216-217). Alternatives persist even up to today in the practices of those subaltern groups excluded from modernity (he frequently cites the cultural-political practices of black communities of the Colombian Pacific lowlands for concrete illustrations of alternatives). In short, he calls for “unmaking development” through a recovery of “cultural difference”:

Cultural differences embody ... possibilities for transforming the politics of representation that is for transforming social life itself ... The greatest political promise of minority cultures is their potential for resisting and subverting the axiomatics of capitalism and modernity in their hegemonic form. This is why cultural difference is also at the root of post-development. (Escobar 1995: 225)

From these premises, Escobar identifies critical ethnography as the method appropriate to access the subjectivity of marginalized cultural groups. The recovery of traditional knowledge is the post-development credo, for it contains the seeds for alternative worlds.

Escobar's post-development critiques have undoubtedly broadened development debates across disciplines, and those seeking to influence development practice have also taken them up. For example, applied development geographers (Bebbington et al. 2008; Laurie et al. 2005) seek to integrate local practices into mainstream economic models and advocate alternative development in various tag-lined forms (sustainable, community-based, gender-sensitive, indigenous-oriented). Post-development ideas also inform debates about alternatives to neoliberalism and "post-neoliberalism" and discussions of power and resistance among social movements opposing neoliberalism (Peck et al. 2010).

The limits of post-development have also been extensively scrutinized (see, for example, Asher 2009, 2012; Gidwani 2002; Hart 2001; Lazreg 2002; Wainwright 2008, 2010; Watts 1993; Ziai 2004, 2015, 2017); the key critiques may be sorted into three types. First, despite the disclaimers against universal truth and the acknowledgment that development, colonialism, and modernity unfold differently across space and time, post-development ignores the nuances of difference – within Europe, in Enlightenment thought, among local communities, and in the politics of social movements. Second, its analysis of relations – between the West and the rest, nationalism and modernity, development and resistance, development and capitalism, national elites and marginal groups – is often cursory with little attention to the complex ways in which these forces are connected. And, third, it completely sidesteps the Marxist critique of capitalist political economy. Escobar's (1995) discussion of development economics, dependency approaches, and other political economy theories of development may be a possible exception. However, beyond chiding these approaches for ignoring local and cultural factors, Escobar offers little. He criticizes the hegemony of capitalism but without analyzing the complex workings of capitalist hegemony (Gidwani and Wainwright 2014; Sanyal 2014).

### *Postal Codes: Post-Development, Post-Capital, Post-Liberal, Post-State, etc.*

Escobar implicitly addresses these criticisms in his writings after *Encountering Development* (2007, 2008, 2010), where he aligns his position with the trend toward decolonial scholarship. The premises of decolonialism are as follows:

- Europe's conquest of the Americas and its racialized, colonial practices constituted the "modern world-system"; but
- Eurocentric modernity obscured the specificities of race and geography and made other epistemes invisible;
- The persistence of this "coloniality of power" and "geopolitics of knowledge production" is evident in disciplinary thinking about politics, economics, society, and culture (including postcolonial studies);
- For the sake of humans and nature, it is imperative to find alternatives to the exploitative and destructive practices of colonial modernity (of which development is a part);\*



- Decolonial alternatives emerge from the non-Eurocentric worldviews of those who have been marginalized by colonial modernity;
- The past and present experiences of Latin Americans are a key, though not the only, locus of enunciation for decolonial thinking.\*

In his 2008 book, *Territories of Difference: Place, Movements, Life, Redes*, Escobar develops some of these claims through ethnographic research into “place-based” cultural practices (conducted in partnership with the *Proceso de Comunidades Negras*) to visualize alternatives to development and liberal modernity (for reviews, see Asher 2013; Routledge et al. 2012; Wainwright 2010). As in *Encountering Development*, Escobar aims to tie academic decolonial perspectives to knowledge from social movements.

Critical struggles for alternatives to capitalism have been raging across South America during the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The best-known cases – Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador – are scrutinized in Escobar’s long article in *Cultural Studies* (2010). He draws on an extensive range of Latin American sources to examine the dynamics of socio-economic, cultural, and political transformations at the level of the state and among social movements as well as the interactions between them. Criticizing the Bolivian, Venezuelan, and Ecuadorian states’ attempts to overcome neoliberal capitalism, he characterizes these projects as, at best, “alternative modernizations” (2010: 11) that remain bound within the “dualist ontology of liberal modernity” (2010: 4). He contrasts these projects with those of social movements, especially indigenous and Afro-descendent ones, which he treats much more positively. He notes that the latter seek alternatives to colonial modernity by turning to their cosmovisions and “relational ontologies”. Relational ontologies reject “divides between nature and culture, us and them, individual and community” (2010: 3) to imagine a world that is saner, sustainable, and more respectful of human dignity. As in *Territories of Difference*, Escobar undertakes a detailed anthropological and philosophical assessment of these cultural and political dynamics to ask whether the current crossroads of change in Latin America suggest the possibility of a “more radical societal transformation towards post-capitalist, post-liberal, and post-statist options – what could be called ‘alternatives to modernity’” (2010: 3). He outlines his specific, post-structuralist-inspired understanding of the “post” in these terms:

The post, succinctly, means a decentering of capitalism in the definition of the economy, of liberalism in the definition of society and the polity, and of state forms of power as the defining matrix of social organization. This does not mean that capitalism, liberalism, and state forms cease to exist; it means that *their discursive and social centrality have been displaced somewhat*, so that the range of existing social experiences that are considered valid and credible alternatives to what exists is significantly enlarged ... (Escobar 2010: 11)

Escobar claims that he does not tie his conception of modernity to a singular understanding of economy, politics, society, or the family. Rather transnational social movements and events such as the World Social Forum show that the Western perspective is one way but not the only way of imagining the modern world and a good life.

Consider how the new constitutions adopted by many Latin American countries in the 1990s framed rights. The Constitutions of Venezuela and Colombia, for instance, now recognize the ethnic and territorial rights of indigenous and Afro-descendent communities. And the Constitutions of Ecuador and Bolivia enshrine the “rights of nature” or *Pachamama*, recognizing the well-being of humans and nature – *buen vivir* in Spanish and *suma qawsay* – to be as fundamental. For Escobar, such expanded notions of rights and welfare show that relational worldviews are on the rise, signaling a shift away from the “dualist ontology of liberal modernity” (2010: 39). For evidence of the decentering of capitalist forms of production, he cites non-capitalist economic practices among Zapatistas (see, e.g., Escobar 2010: 47; compare EZLN 2016; Reyes 2016) and among indigenous, Afro-descendent, and Andean peoples in Ecuador, Colombia, and Peru. Following Gibson-Graham (1996, 2006), Escobar’s newer work purports to discursively displace the hegemony of capitalism by focusing on the economic and material alternatives of these movements.\*

Escobar is moderately hopeful about these trends. After a decade of detailed scrutiny (1999-2009) of Latin American state-level reforms and social movement actions, he concludes that – while progressive legislation, struggles for cultural autonomy, and moves towards environmental sustainability abound – they have yet to gain traction. He acknowledges that many challenges remain to conceptualizing a world beyond the logic of liberal modernity and its concomitant forms of society, economy, and the state. Among these are the hegemony of development and the sexist tendencies that persist in liberal, left wing, and indigenous organizing. Escobar finds that the conjuncture of forces in Latin America are other than a “turn to the Left” (2010: 39), for they mark “a new politics of the virtual, of worlds and knowledges otherwise” (2010: 47), whose decolonial possibilities are relevant beyond the continent. Indigenous feminist activists play a key role in these efforts: they challenge the patriarchal tendencies of colonial modernity, state practices, and indigenous cosmologies; contest dualist and essentialist notions of subjectivity (whether individual or communal); and strive to articulate gender perspectives that are non-exclusionary and acknowledge the relationality of female and male experiences (2010: 43-44).

Decolonial scholarship (e.g. Dussel 1998; Quijano 2007) traces how the modern world-system emerges through unequal exchanges between Europe and its colonies and is thus potentially *transmodern* from the origin. In implicit response to his critics, Escobar highlights the relational, material, and performative nature of different cultural practices that underpin decolonial possibilities. Addressing charges of essentialism, he emphasizes the historically and spatially bound character of communities and places. Citing Doreen Massey (2004), he claims that a post-development world would be organized by “geographies of responsibility” (2010: 42) to be achieved through cultural politics and the rejection of Euro-Western thought.

Paradoxes and problems beset this approach. Put aside the fact that Escobar writes in a hegemonic European language using what can only be characterized as concepts defined within a Western tradition. For an approach ostensibly devoted to the overcoming of Euro-Western thought and development via cultural politics, Escobar’s work says remarkably little about the philosophical and political traditions centered on these issues, from

Hegel to Fanon, Marx to Luxemburg, Derrida to Spivak. Rather than examining how the development of capitalism and its state become representative of modern power, he dismisses these issues. He never answers the thorny question of *why* development, capital, and state power are hegemonic. To confront development as a form of power, he proposes ethnographic retrieval and political support of subaltern knowledge. In place of analyses of particular forms of capitalist social organization and political hegemony, Escobar offers an unproblematic cultural politics in defence of heterogeneous communities (Hart 2001).\*

There are problems with claiming that development is contested by subaltern communities, beginning with their desire for development.\* But more fundamentally, if the resisting subject of post-development is the subaltern community, then it only seems logical to us that Escobar should provide an account of the forms of hegemony or ideology at work upon them. Yet this is lacking. Ergo the explanations for why marginalized groups and social movements act as they do is painted in broad brush-strokes that fail to do justice to their contradictory and contingent natures (Asher 2009).\* Thus, as even critics sympathetic to this project note, narratives of decolonial alternatives romanticize local communities and social movements (Grossberg and Pollock 2011). Emerging accounts of social movements flag the need to go beyond empiricist descriptions of the networks and subjects of resistance. We need to reframe the whole problematic of differences, capital, development and representation. Spivak's deconstructive feminist reading of Marx offers one such reframing.

## **Reading Development and Representation with Gayatri Spivak**

Any attempt to bring Spivak's texts to bear on existing literature is fraught with the radical anti-disciplinarity and complexity of her texts. The problem is especially acute with development studies where she has been denounced as irrelevant and obscurantist (see, e.g., Peet and Watts 1996, and applied and policy-oriented development work). Spivak is rarely addressed within development geography (exceptions include Asher 2009, 2013; Gidwani 2008; McEwan 2009; Wainwright 2008). In fairness, "development" per se is by no means the focus of her scholarship. Nevertheless, development is arguably at the core of some of her writings (1994, 2008, 2011, 2012). Appreciating these arguments, we contend, requires first coming to terms with her deconstructive readings of Marx of the 1980s (an argument also implied by Castree 1996; Kapoor 2004, 2008). A philological analysis of these texts would require a book-length manuscript. In this section, we therefore focus on a half-dozen of her most important and relevant works to clarify the value of her distinctive reading of difference, development, and capitalism. We begin with the essay for which she is best known, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988 [1984]; see also 2010), a commentary on desire, interests, power, and knowledge. In the complex first section, Spivak criticizes Foucault and Deleuze – arguably the two key sources of inspiration for the post-development school in the 1990s. Her critique is that these French intellectuals, for all their radicalness and brilliance, lack a theory of ideology and an adequate account of capitalism. She further claims that their refusal to represent subaltern social groups elides the fact that they continue to perform the intellectual role of speaking-for while failing to account for their place in the international division of labor.

To address these challenges, Spivak returns to Marx's writings on representation (via Derrida) to attack Foucault and Deleuze's claim that "[t]here is no more representation; there's nothing but action" (an argument that

finds its parallel in the claim that the essence of capitalism is only to be found by tracing the practices and material connections that tie things together).<sup>\*</sup> By Spivak's reading of Marx, we must remain wary of such claims, which have the effect of eliding two distinct meanings of the English word "representation" (distinguished in German). She produces her critique through a discussion of Karl Marx's (1937 [1852]) *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, where Marx examines the strange political phenomenon – so familiar in our world today – where subaltern social groups desire to be represented by figures who do not stand for their interests. As Spivak writes:

Marx is not working to create an undivided subject where desire and interest coincide ... Marx is obliged to construct models of a divided and dislocated subject whose parts are not continuous or coherent with each other ... [So,] the (absent collective) consciousness of the small peasant proprietor class finds its "bearer" in a "representative" who appears to work in another's interest. The word "representative" here is not "*darstellen*": this sharpens the contrast that Foucault and Deleuze slide over, the contrast, say, between a proxy and a portrait. ... [R]unning [*darstellen* and *vertreten*] together, especially in order to say that beyond both is where oppressed subjects speak, act, and know *for themselves*, leads to an essentialist, utopian politics. (Spivak 1988: 276)

Our claim is that Escobar's Foucault-and-Deleuze-inspired analysis leads exactly to this utopian politics. The real curiosity is that an ostensibly anti-essentialist position produces an essentialism so general that it is tied to no particular identity, only to resistance itself: resistance to development. But what if poor people actually desire development?

Let us return to Escobar's claim that "[c]ultural differences embody ... possibilities for transforming the politics of representation" (1995: 225). This is precisely the point that Spivak contests. From her vantage, such a position is only nominally anti-essentialist, since it always already accounts for differences – they are cultural<sup>\*</sup> and transformative – and presumes the easy capability of transformation of the politics of representation. It is fitting then that, in the same section, we find one of the only references to Spivak's thought in Escobar's work; he writes, "subalterns do in fact speak" (1995: 223). His statement reiterates a common misunderstanding. Spivak is well aware that subalterns can speak; her point is that their speech, or claims, are not represented within the hegemonic frame: "the subaltern's inability to speak is predicated upon an attempt to speak, to which *no appropriate response is proffered*" (1994: 62, emphasis added). Her claim – the speech of subalterns cannot be recognized – implies a political strategy of building institutional infrastructures to validate it as resistance.

So although Spivak's commitment to transform the current order might appear the same as Escobar's, her call to "learn to learn from below" marks a clear difference. Spivak challenges subaltern knowledge retrieval and shows the post-development desire to represent subaltern subjectivity to be rooted in European episteme. Critical scholars may cite Spivak's remark about "the strategic use of essentialism" (1990b) or read her statement in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" validating the need for "information retrieval in these silenced areas ... taking place in anthropology, political science, history, and sociology" (1988: 295). But, to be sure, they provide no certain mandate for empiricist accounts of subaltern subjects and their agency – bringing us back to ethnographic accounts of Third World women. Spivak consistently wards against such readings, to little avail. As Rosalind Morris (2010) notes in her introduction to *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*:

It may be that anthropologists, historians, and other interpretative social scientists less trained in the reading practices that guide literary criticism may be more susceptible to this kind of misreading, but misreading it is. At no point does Spivak ever express a normative goal of transparency ... [A]ll her writing[s] testif[y] to the impossibility of such transparency. (2010: 13)

As Morris notes, the aporia of representation – representation is both impossible yet necessary – runs through all of Spivak's work, from "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) to *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (2012). In the introduction to the latter, she writes of this issue as the double bind of "learning to live with contradictory instructions" (2012: 3). She elaborates: "We are in an aporia which by definition cannot be crossed, a double bind. It is not a logical or philosophical problem like a contradiction, a dilemma, a paradox, an antinomy" (2012: 104). Such an uncrossing or non-passage is far from a passive acceptance or rejection of the status quo. Rather it involves an active "negotiation and acknowledgement of complicity" (Spivak 1993: 121) by investigating subjects (including feminists, postcolonial theorists, and diasporic academics) in the historical production of their objects of research and representation.

Spivak's essays from the 1980s on the problem of representation, subject-formation, and capitalism therefore center upon the concerns of post-development.\* They link the problem of representation to problems of relations: between the West and the Rest, metropole and colony, rural and urban, capital and culture, aborigine and national culture, Western philosophy/science and indigenous knowledge/episteme. However, in Spivak's deconstructive approach, relations are only oppositional (hence the need for the critique of ideology), and representation is both a necessity and an impossibility. Thus, even radical critics must be constantly vigilant about how they produce the objects of their analysis, critique, or alternative politics, including those produced by them as investigating subjects. This is different from simple self-reflexivity or strategic essentialism in that there is no

possibility of “good” representation and no space “outside” relations. Grappling with “the problem of thinking ethics for the other woman” (2012: 106), Spivak writes:

It is hard for feminist cultural studies to access this circuit without falling into global-local binaries or banalities, a substitute for the older modernity-tradition pattern. I am suggesting their constant displacement by paying attention to women’s positioning on the axis of abstract capital, needing “cultural” coding. (2012: 108)

Spivak’s “suggestion” provides a useful counterpoint to post-development. We can neither simply reject development nor fall back on the anti-Eurocentric authority of subaltern women. According to Spivak (1994), the ethical responsibility of scholars committed to social justice involves the labor of careful critique and patient undoing of the problematic of development. Her work demands perpetual scrutiny of representation, slow reading, and the aporetic inhabiting of contradictory “double-binds”. Elsewhere (Asher 2009; Wainwright 2008) we have argued that post-colonialism teaches us the need for a persistently sceptical approach to representing subaltern voices: “This scepticism is not so much scientific or empirical as it is political and ethical. The challenge is to remain open to subaltern histories and geographies without *speaking for* or contributing otherwise to epistemic violence” (Wainwright 2008: 16). The second lesson from Spivak is “to analyze the aporias of the colonial present without recourse to essentialism” (Wainwright 2008: 17). While representation is inevitable, an ethic of responsibility must accompany it. Drucilla Cornell (2010) draws the same lessons from Spivak’s (2008) relentless anti-positivist critique and her warning against misguided benevolence. Cornell writes, “once we come to terms with the inevitability of representation, both in terms of ideals and people involved in political struggle, then we must, and the *must* here is the ethical moment, confront how we are shaping others through those representations so as to reinforce the images and fantasies of the colonial as well as the not-yet-decolonized imaginary” (2010: 101).

Among those who find Spivak’s work particularly relevant to Latin American struggles are Jean Franco (2010) and Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (2010, 2012). Particularly referencing recent Latin American decolonialists, they urge critical scholars and national elites to examine how their own “institutional embeddedness” motivates their representation of indigenous peoples and social struggles. Franco further notes that post-colonial and decolonial invocations of the direct experience of subalterns rests on “forgetting” how both sides are positioned, albeit differently, within the international division of labor of global capitalism. In her analysis of indigenous women’s activism against patriarchal control of the state and (male) community leaders, she discusses how Subcommandante Esther’s speech to the Mexican government and Rigoberta Menchu’s public advocacy are examples of the “subalternity’s passage into hegemony” (Franco 2010: 221).

Spivak’s lessons are a necessary supplement to post-development. Her deconstructive, anti-positivist approach entails a critique of Eurocentric Enlightenment from *within* its parameters, and looks for traces of the subaltern within the texts of the Enlightenment. In contrast to the ethnography and anthropology that underlie Escobar’s post-development alternatives, Spivak (1999) calls for a historico-political perspective to trace the erasure

and mobilization of “culture” in dominant narratives, including those of the state, nationalism, and development. As scathing in her critique of development as Escobar, her methodology “supplements Marxism” in service of feminist, anti-racist, and anti-colonial efforts. This “supplementing” offers neither a corrective to Marxism nor a rejection. Rather it extends Marx’s thought to trace the insertion of rural communities, especially third world women, into the circuits of global capitalism. That is, to trace where they and the movements that resist development are located within the international division of labor.

## Conclusion

A vision of a world with more organic connections between human and non-human kin is particularly appealing at a time when climate change threatens the existence of both. Such kinship is not without challenges: how to be in critical solidarity with social movements without being seduced by the romance of resistance and identity politics? how to juggle the tasks of critique and struggles for dignity? How to work collectively to deepen and sharpen collective critiques of capitalist globalization while imagining and theorizing planetary justice? We have sketched Escobar and Spivak’s responses to these challenges apropos of the problematic of development and difference. Both are concerned with creating planetary justice via some means other than development and state power. Both are committed to learning from below and with “democratic pedagogical involvement” of the poor (Spivak in Sharpe and Spivak 2002: 615). But while post-development offers the lure of decolonial alternatives, Spivak’s methodological and political approaches call for constant vigilance against nativist positions. Post-development approaches also grapple with the incommensurability of non-Western, non-capitalist practices as part of the search for ecological justice and decolonial alternatives. But their efforts to validate do not offer tools for thinking through their relations – past and present – with the state, capital, and development. The methodological and political challenges of reading development and representation with Spivak are different. They include the uncomfortable labor of applying one’s critical lessons to one’s own critiques. But Spivak also offers an example in that she is always attentive to these lessons in her interrogation and theorizing of relations – between colonialism and capitalism, modes of productions, nationalism and capitalism, elites and subalterns, patriarchy and feminism, third world diaspora and migrant labor, and indeed post/decolonial academics and grassroots intellectuals.

These arguments go some way in explaining those recent works of critical development geography that draw upon Spivak to pull Marxist political economy and postcolonial theory into productive dialogue concerning development. Wright (2006), Wolford (2010) and Werner (2016) provide textured accounts of capitalism at work in factories and farms, invoking Spivak to grapple with the heterogeneity of identities and struggles. Sundberg (2014) and Maese-Cohen (2010) engage Spivak in their efforts to decolonize geography and feminism. Byrd and Rothberg (2011), and the contributions to a special issue of *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, consider the relevance of Spivak’s for possible exchanges between subaltern studies and Native American studies. Still much more work can be done.

The economic and ecological crises of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are renewing debates about development, modernity, and democratic social change. Radical social movements face daunting challenges. It is easy to feel pessimistic, one of the points of dissatisfaction with Spivak’s thought for some is its uncompromising “negativity” or what we might

characterize as its resolute criticism (including self-criticism). Spivak could help confront such concerns by bragging about her own long-standing involvement in social struggles but generally avoids doing so, which we admire. To conclude, we reiterate Joanne Sharpe's assessment of Spivak's contribution:

[W]hat is often identified as her pessimism about social change is intended to offset the euphoria of the political activist who thinks that she is transforming rural women's everyday lives. Spivak's deconstructive thinking is evident in her characterization of social change as being more provisional than one would like to believe. But it is an affirmative deconstruction that finds value in the need for the ongoing work of a constant critique. (in Sharpe and Spivak 2002: 610)

Direct involvement with global social movements is a critical element of the fieldwork required to confront urgent political problems. And in this process, we should try to learn to represent ourselves through the unguaranteed labor of constant critique – a vital element of the struggle for social change.

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