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BOOK REVIEW

In Search of Post-development Futures

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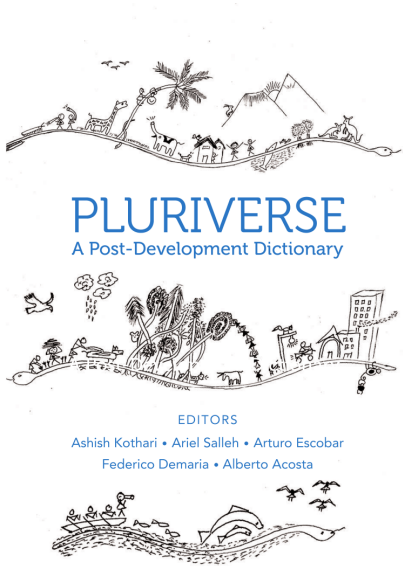
Ashish Kothari, Ariel Salleh, Alberto Acosta, Arturo Escobar, and Fedrico Demaria, eds. 2019. *Pluriverse: A Post-development Dictionary*. New Delhi: AuthorsUpFront and Tulika Books. ISBN: 978-8-193-73298-4, pp. 384, ₹950 (PB).



While writing this review in Delhi during a seemingly endless lockdown, I am struck with some keen realizations. Such a "natural disaster" at a global scale is unprecedented in my lifetime. However, as we affirm our humility with respect to nature and try to become more mindful of human transgressions against the non-human, some of us are equally hopeful that science will ultimately conquer the virus. Such are the fears and hopes that dominate my mind as I engage with the ambitious volume under review.

Pluriverse follows an engaging academic tradition of post-development writing that began in the 1980s and acquired

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considerable intellectual heft throughout the 1990s. Post-development literature, in essence, sought to challenge several of the claims that called for pursuing industrial development in the "third world" in the period following the Second World War. Post-development scholars, in fact, largely viewed unbridled development projects and plans as being both ecologically unsustainable and economically unjust.

Pluriverse has a three-part structure, beginning with scholars located on different continents reflecting on the crisis of development in the contemporary world. This is followed by a set of critical write-ups on mainstream "reformist" ideas that acknowledge some shortcomings in the current development agenda and proffer suggestions to fix them. The final, and longest, section compiles the various transformative and radical ways to reimagine the functioning of the world once development in its current avatar is dethroned.

The volume comprises a diverse set of contributions that range from relatively well-known schools of thought like agroecology, *buen vivir*, and degrowth to the relatively lesser known writings on eco-anarchism, Jain ecology, and sea ontologies. The editors, however, are careful to emphasize that the origins of these visions spring from diverse world views such as indigenous cultures, social movements, and ancient philosophical and religious traditions. Importantly, they point out that although these perspectives are marked by differences, they can also be understood as "complementary notions and practices".

Before going into detail about the content, it is important to alert the reader about the form in which the hundred plus entries have been written up. The average entry is only two-and-a-half pages long, and the reader is required to distil the crux of the argument from such brief summaries. Setting aside the unavoidable variation in the quality of the writing across the volume, it is safe to say that even the best pieces often fall short of communicating their key concepts. One cannot help recalling the longer and more substantive entries in the earlier *Development Dictionary* (Sachs 1992), where the contributors had ample space to introduce and elaborate upon their subjects, and provided an annotated bibliography for further reading. The undue compression of the contributions is less than ideal for intellectually curious readers who would have gained from more detail and elaboration. It is possible that each contributor was given limited space because the editors were keen to accommodate as many perspectives as possible.

The development perspectives presented in the first section illustrate the issue I have indicated above. The six pieces by authors based in the six

continents (not including Antarctica) are highly uneven in their coverage and treatment. While Nnimmo Bassey, Maristella Svampa, and Kirk Hoffman write about contemporary development processes and their critiques of the same by focussing on "developing" regions of Africa, Latin America, and the island nations in Oceania, respectively, the two-and-a-half page remit does not allow them to even scratch the surface of the task at hand. Interestingly, the two scholars based in the Global North, Philip McMichael and Jose Maria Tortosa, do not write on North America or Europe specifically but comment more generally on chosen aspects of global development. At the risk of sounding pedantic, I wonder why the northern scholars do not have anything particular to report on the development in their own geographical contexts. Are development and its shortcomings only visible in the Global South? It can be said, of course, that authors should not be limited to their continent of origin. If so, it still appears incongruous that it is the scholars based in the Global North who have the privilege to comment on development projects across the world.

The second section, aimed at debunking some of the "buzzwords" in the mainstream development discourse, is particularly interesting. Despite the limited space available to the authors, some have managed to communicate the core of their criticism compellingly. Jeremy Gould, in his entry on "development aid", takes a fresh look at how development practices have become a much more forceful form of corporate funded aid. Larry Lohman is successful in lucidly explaining the advent of trading in ecosystem services, while making his key criticisms clear. Deepak Malghan writes engagingly on efficiency, one of the building blocks of technocratic development, before finishing off rather hurriedly and unsatisfactorily with the following statement: "the efficiency revolution has run its course" (52). Other articles that deal with popular ideas like "green economy" and "smart cities", which are regularly peddled around in mainstream development as magic bullets, turn out to be similarly unsatisfactory as they are not allowed to run their full explanatory course due to a paucity of space.

Clearly, the most compelling parts of the book, which also justify its title, are the reflections that make up the "people's pluriverse"—the myriad imaginings of a post-development transformative future. The range of ideas presented in these entries is truly remarkable, moving between long-standing lines of radical thought like deep ecology, liberation theology, and worker-led production to recent entrants in the post-development lexicon like *minobimaatisiiwin* and *kametsa asaike*, representing indigenous quests for a fulfilling and harmonious life. Given the large number of entries in this section, it is not only impossible to comment on each piece individually but also difficult to make statements that relate to the section as a whole.

I particularly want to raise the issue that delving into conventional religions for post-development wisdom leaves me dissatisfied. This may be the result of my inability to engage with religious thought seriously given my materialist predisposition or the realization that "doing good" to fellow humans and non-humans is taught in all religious texts, making it less about subscribing to a particular religion and more about the humanist undercurrent present in all major religions. But humanism as a universalist tenet par excellence may sit uncomfortably with post-developmentalism and, as such, there is no entry under humanism in the *Pluriverse*. Moreover, since all major religions have been deeply entrenched in social power hierarchies, often by justifying oppressive practices, it is problematic to talk about a given religion's vision of a post-development egalitarian society without owning up to its own legacies of injustices.

Another disturbing aspect of several entries in this section is the lack of critical perspective on the ideas presented. A case in point is the contribution on Gross National Happiness (GNH) in Bhutan. A minor rage in the international development community in recent years, it remains the official development framework in Bhutan and is used extensively while planning government interventions in different domains. While the concept of GNH is not trivial and deserves serious intellectual engagement, it is striking that the author avoids any mention of the various criticisms of the GNH and related development choices that exist prominently in the literature.

Degrowth is another concept on which productive engagement with naysayers is avoided entirely. In particular, the debate on whether the framework of degrowth should entirely reject growth or if we are better off growing within limits went unaddressed. It is also critical to examine the applicability of degrowth for the Global South. Can poorer countries actually afford degrowth? It would have been a valuable addition to the volume if the authors engaged with some of these arguments. In these omissions, one senses a lack of interest in taking on the difficult task of critiquing the development mainstream. I am reminded of Wolfgang Sachs' comment in the preface to the second edition of the *Development Dictionary*:

> Looking at the *Development Dictionary* today, it is striking that we had not really appreciated the extent to which the development idea has been charged with hopes for redress and self-affirmation. It certainly was an invention of the West, as we showed at length, but not just an imposition on the rest. On the contrary, as the desire for recognition and equity is framed in terms of the civilizational model of the powerful nations, the South has emerged as the staunchest defender of development. Countries in general do not aspire to become more "Indian", more "Brazilian" or for that matter more "Islamic";

> instead, assertions to the contrary notwithstanding, they long to achieve industrial modernity. (2010, viii)

Sachs' insight succinctly captures the challenge of moving beyond the contemporary development paradigm, which cannot be overcome without a serious engagement with both development orthodoxies and the popular sentiments that sustain them. I am not suggesting that post-development literature as a whole has shied away from this responsibility, but this volume could surely have taken on such questions more directly.

Post-development thinking has played an important role in questioning some of the fundamental elements of the global development project—industrial accumulation and the accompanying unsustainable levels of consumption. Adopting such ideas would undoubtedly be key in formulating plans for a sustainable and just future. The problem, however, has always been in the inability of scholar-activists to construct feasible models for the future and envision pathways for attaining them. Going back to my initial thoughts in the time of the pandemic, post-development thought definitely helps me to place human beings within the larger natural system and makes me aware of the risk of imbalance in human–nature relations. But it does not provide a framework to generate and use scientific knowledge in a globally collaborative way to come up with solutions for the pandemic related crises that we face today.

REFERENCE

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