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Postcoloniality and Development: Development as a Colonial Discourse

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Mad, Caesar?
Why, you set the standard of sanity for the whole habitable world.
Tiberius Claudius¹

It seems rather foolish, or at best smacks of unrealism, to speak of postcoloniality in the current global geopolitical climate in which empire seems to take hold before our very eyes. Invoking the term postcolonial today calls back questions that critics of postcolonial theory raised many years ago.¹ Notably, Ama Ata Aidoo, the Ghanaian author, argued that ‘applied to Africa, India, and some other parts of the world, ‘postcolonial’ is not only a fiction, but a most pernicious fiction, a cover-up of a dangerous period in our people’s lives’ (1991:152). For critics like Aidoo, postcolonial theory seemed to substitute a dream of a borderless, multicultural world for the reality of global disparity and persistence of oppressive structures. Aidoo admonished the term postcolonial for its implications of ‘something finished’ while Africa remained bogged down in debt and multinational corporate piracy.

I would like to argue that, although I understand and appreciate the place from which Aidoo’s comment is made, this comment misses the mark because it is rooted in an emphasis on postcoloniality as a purely historical marker (post-colonial), whereas postcolonial theory offers a profound critique of hegemony and domination rather than a mere depiction of the state of affairs since the formal end of the colonial era. In particular, I believe it presents a most promising philosophical entry point for grappling with the question of ‘development’ and with living in a contemporary world in which Africans are both discursively constructed and materially exploited in ways that secure them in a location of subalternity and loss of agency.² Of course, debates about the residue of European colonialism, and the extent to which it may offer an explanation of current tremors on the continent, are legion. My purpose here is not to delve into these debates but to examine how the insights of postcolonial theory might contribute to an understanding of development in relation to Africa.

Furthermore, it must be made clear that in order to extend the idea of postcoloniality from a limited historical reference to a general critique of hegemony, the term colonial must be read as a metaphor for all forms of oppression – past and present – without necessarily overlooking the historical specificities of colonialism.

I will arrive at my conclusions by first giving a brief introductory outline of postcolonial theory, focusing primarily on Homi Bhabha's (1983) theory of colonial discourse. Needless to say, this is my own reading of a highly contested and not altogether unproblematic field (see Zein-Elabdin and Charusheela 2004); others may disagree or wish to point up different themes. In the second section, I discuss the 20th century discourse of development, which continues to prevail as the line of thought organising international relations despite failures and theoretical challenges.³ By discourse I, like many postcolonial critics, adopt the Foucauldian idea to refer to the totality of mental space, theories, texts, language, and conventions that set the parameters of what is to be thought and uttered and which do – directly and indirectly – produce whatever material reality is experienced. For the past half century, the development discourse has defined what I call a global *regime of sanity*, namely, the cognitive normative structure that governs all of its participants. As I explain in this section, postcolonial theory suggests reading development as an orientalist, colonial discourse rather than a culturally neutral, scientifically knowable path of an economy. In the final section, I elaborate on postcoloniality as a concept that I believe comes closest to capturing Africa's present realities and location, and contributes to a better understanding as well as reconstruction of a contemporary African space.⁴

Postcolonial Theory and Colonial Discourse

Postcolonial theory evolved from readings of 19th and early 20th century European novels and other documents by some pioneering literary critics who came to the conclusion that classics such as Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*, George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (Said 1978), Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (Spivak 1985), or Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (Bhabha 1985) could not be fully understood and evaluated as 'pure' artifacts.⁵ These texts carried far too political implications and references to Europe's imperial position and cultural encounters than the reading made possible by conventional disciplinary methods. Such texts had to be read as *colonial discourse*.

As a result of this reading, some key concepts emerged. Most crucially, *orientalism* came to be understood as more than just the academic exercise of studying the history and cultures of the 'Orient;' it was an epistemological political phenomenon, with far reaching historical consequences (Said 1978). The idea of *the postcolonial*, as a cross-cultural outcome of modern European hegemony, soon followed. At the risk of great crudity, I would schematically summarise the most defining elements of postcolonial theory in the following three propositions:

- Modern Europe had a historical ability to produce the Orient – a theoretical representation of all dominated regions – as *subaltern* through the 'knowledge'

produced by Orientalists, which set up certain derogatory representations of the Orient that in turn authorised its domination.⁶

- Cultural hegemony, in the Gramscian sense, is never complete or simple – the colonial is as much constituted by its subaltern Others as they are by its dominant position. (The import of the colonies to Europe's imagination of its own self was such that Said concluded Orientalism was less about the Orient than it was about the Occident).
- The subaltern postcolonial, the product of this historical process of domination, is a *hybrid* state of mutual constitution, irreversibly inflected by the colonial encounter.⁷

These propositions, although not exhaustive, indicate clearly that the 'postcolonial' is not 'post-colonial,' i.e. a mere historical marker, as significant as this may be. It is also a critical move, a reference to the formerly colonised as well as a critique of their domination.

At first blush, the themes of orientalism, subalternity and hybridity may appear to have little to do with development or material conditions in general. But this is precisely the appearance that gave rise to charges against postcolonial theory as misleading (Aidoo 1991) or even complicit with 'global capitalism' (Dirlik 1997). The charges, to me, reflect the common (mis)understanding of economy and economics to be an extra-cultural universally applicable rationality, a self-contained 'science.' This general failure to recognise economic theory, in all its ideological shades, as a classic instrument of cultural hegemony largely underlies the resilient power of the development discourse.⁸

For the longest time, development has been construed as a set of macroeconomic targets to be obtained with the appropriate policy mix, or at best broadened to include distributive and 'quality of life' goals, but as a whole, the perception remained of the final objectivity and universal desirability of these goals. As I have argued elsewhere (Zein-Elabdin 1998), however, development is a philosophical question; it is part of a total cosmology rooted in metaphysical assumptions that transcend the realm of the limited disciplines of social science. It is ultimately a question of social meaning – or collective understanding of purpose; therefore, making it futile to attempt a substantial challenge to it without first treading the philosophical and cultural grounds on which it firmly rests. Postcolonial theory goes a long way to unravel these grounds because, in the end, it *is* a philosophical endeavour; as Spivak (1990:204) suggested, 'a deconstructive philosophical position.'⁹ So far, the philosophers of postcolonialism have not pointed up development as a prominent single theme, yet the crux of their intellectual struggles has everything to do with the development discourse once this is clearly seen as a cultural product.¹⁰ A brief look at Bhabha's theory of colonial discourse illustrates the philosophical depth of postcolonial critique and reveals its direct relevance to the problem of development.

As I have noted, the major breakthrough of postcolonial theory has been to read European literary texts as colonial discourse – in other words, documents written in

the era of colonialism and therefore imbued with imperialist conceptions of Europe's place in the world, general understandings of itself vis-à-vis other cultures, and hierarchical representations of Europeans and 'natives.' One of Bhabha's scholarly gifts to the field has been to articulate a concise theory of such discourse. In 'The Other Question' (1983), Bhabha interprets colonial discourse as an 'apparatus of power,' following Foucault's concept of *dispositif* (apparatus): 'strategies of relations of forces supporting, and supported by, types of knowledge' (Foucault 1980: 196). In Bhabha's interpretation, colonial discourse exercises this power through an articulation of difference, racial or cultural, in order to justify subjugation. The main discursive strategy of articulating this difference is *stereotyping*, where alterity is fixed by deploying stereotypes such as the native, the savage, or the cannibal. In short, colonial discourse:

- 'turns on the recognition... of racial/cultural/historical *differences*,'
- creates 'a space for a *'subject peoples'* through the production of knowledges... of colonizer and colonised which are stereotypical,'¹¹
and
- construes 'the colonised as *a population of degenerate types* on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction' (Bhabha 1996: 70).

Despite these strong terms Bhabha reads colonialism, on the whole, as an *ambivalent* mode of power/knowledge rather than an impenetrable system of domination. This is a marked departure from Said's first account of the colonial discourse of orientalism as a 'corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorising views of it, describing it, teaching it, settling it, ruling over it' (Said 1978:3). Here, Europe's authority appears complete and unassailable. Bhabha, on the other hand, stresses the ambivalence of colonial discourse in which the stereotype, e.g., the oriental, is a site of conflicting emotions and imagery – desire and derision, savagery and exoticism. It is both strange and familiar, 'at once an 'other' and yet entirely knowable' (Bhabha 1996:70-1) since for the stereotype to have any credibility, it must manifest substantial 'knowledge'.

Even more crucial, from the point of view of interest in the development discourse, is the argument that the cultural authority of colonial discourse is never complete. For Bhabha, this authority was challenged in every instance where natives presented missionaries or colonial administrators with difficult questions, 'questions of authority that the authorities cannot answer' (ibid:115). By way of example, he recounts the story that, early in the 19th century, a group of Indians happened to come upon a translated copy of the Bible and to fall in love with it. But they had questions – 'How can the word of God come from the flesh-eating mouths of the English?' 'How can it be the European book, when we believe that it is God's gift to us?' (ibid:116). Not having their questions answered, the natives adopt the holy book in a manner that troubles their catechist: they refuse to take the Sacrament which in their vegetarian eyes amounted to eating flesh. Bhabha uses the term *hybridity* to

indicate the natives' tendency to question and appropriate colonial discourse in ways that deflect its authority, and additionally to refer to the ensuing state of postcoloniality as a product of this cultural exchange.¹²

Hybridity has been interpreted, especially by critics of postcolonial theory, as a simple pastiche of multiculturalism that in effect mutes current polarisation and hierarchy (e.g. Dirlik 1997). No doubt there is such a conception, but this is a rather shallow meaning. In this paper, I draw on its far more radical and philosophically productive dimensions.

In the instance of *translating* Christianity in India, the cultural authority of the colonial has been hybridised, i.e. 'contaminated' with another (here, non-European) culture.

The upshot is that, even though colonialism is a dominant mode of power/knowledge, it is riddled with ambivalence at the same time that its power is troubled and vulnerable. The significance of this insight for challenging development cannot be over-estimated as it offers grounds for subversion by empowering the subaltern's conception of its own authority relative to that of its colonisers. In other words, it opens the door for disrupting the authority of development rather than take it as given.

Development as a Colonial Discourse

The idea of development has deep historical roots but it has become the reigning trope of our own time. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that the discourse of development has 'set the standard of sanity for the whole world.' When the majority of African 'states' broke away from European rule, the development imperative was firmly in place, with the UN officially designating 1960-70 as the 'development decade.' African leaders took this imperative as given and began the monumental task of retracing the path of industrial modernity. The sense of urgency was clear as President Nyerere stated: 'what has taken the older countries centuries should take us decades' (1968:93). Tom Mboya went even further to claim that it was 'not necessary to explain why these (African) countries must develop;' it was that axiomatic (Mboya 1970:266). To my mind, the pre-occupation with 'development' among African leaders, and at least a generation of intellectuals and students, has been an integral part of the interminable 'African crisis.'¹³

To understand the current problematic of development, one must distinguish between development as a historical process and as a discursive fetish, although, of course, the two are dialectically inseparable. Development – as the process of large-scale material accumulation that took place in the north Atlantic and later on other world regions – is a historical 'fact.'¹⁴

In some instances, industrialisation was set off by the 'exceptional encounter' – to use Amin's (1976:157) term – of events and processes that created extraordinary commitment to economic growth. This was true for the 'less developed' countries that have achieved the highest rises in income (e.g. Singapore, South Korea), which were helped by the exceptional encounter of the Cold War and the commitment of

the north Atlantic bloc to development in this region as part of its stated strategy to contain communism. Here, I am not concerned with this process or with development in the protean sense of growth, evolution or positive change. I am interested in the 'fact' that this north Atlantic experience has been deployed into a discourse that helped to silence and subdue 'underdeveloped' regions in largely the same way that orientalism served Europe's domination of the 'Orient'. The development discourse proceeds on the premise that this experience offers the prototype for all.

To fully understand development as discourse, I return to Foucault's more encompassing concept of *dispositif*, which he explains as a 'heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions – in short, the said as much as the unsaid' (1980:194). Thus, the discourse is part of a larger, more pervasive structure. The complexity of the apparatus explains the daunting task of forming a grip on and undoing the development discourse, and its ability to repeatedly transform itself and reappear in new guise – alternately highlighting gender (gender and development), the environment (sustainable development), or capabilities (human development).¹⁵ In Escobar's words, development has functioned as a discursive practice that sets the rules of the game: who can speak, from what points of view, with what authority, and according to what criteria of expertise; it sets the rules that must be followed for this or that problem, theory, or object to emerge and be named, analysed, and eventually transformed into a policy or a plan (1995:41)

In other words, it set the parameters for what may be said or unsaid, and effectively produced the regime of sanity that equally governed its participants – development 'experts' as well as 'clients.'

Postcolonial theory exposes development as a direct parallel to orientalism. In Said's (1978) account, orientalism is: a distinct academic field, a 'style of thought' that perceived a deep ontological and epistemological divide between East and West, and a corporate institution of power (2-3). Any faithful application of Said reveals *developmentalism* as the name of orientalism's 20th century descendant.¹⁶ It is an academic field of specialisation; a style of thought that divides the world into developed and underdeveloped based on perceived ontological and epistemological differences between the two; and an institution of power, a set of authorities that hold the final word on development and the financial and technological means to intervene and reconstruct the lives of the underdeveloped. The Orient is simply displaced onto the Third World. As orientalist scholars presented the Orient as exotic, mystic, and mysterious to the Western imaginary, developmentalists represent the Third World as backward, pre-modern, pre-capitalist, or deviant in one form or another.

Can development also be read as a colonial discourse in line with Bhabha's theory? As we have seen, colonial discourse requires the presence of a difference, a space for a stereotypical subject people, and degenerate types that justify their own subordination. The development discourse clearly turns on an articulation of dif-

ference, but moreover on problematising this difference, with the beginning point in any given textbook being that ‘Third World nations share a common set of problems... problems that in fact define their state of underdevelopment’ (Todaro 2000: 29). Bhabha’s emphasis on racial and cultural distinctions is replaced by the economic dimension, and the level of income now serves as the supreme gauge of difference. Second, a ‘space for subject peoples,’ that is to say, people whose lifeways require development, is carved out in specialist texts where their ‘problems’ are discussed and dissected based on the stereotypical knowledges produced.¹⁷

I borrow the term ‘lifeways’ from Grim (1994) who uses it in the context of Native American religion and ethics.

Finally, intervention is justified on the basis of construing those subjects as ‘degenerate types.’ Their degeneracy is figured not in the old colonial sense of being savage, cannibalistic, or lustful, but in the new developmentalist terms of being poor, malnourished and illiterate. Development, then, may be read as a colonial discourse proper, a structured set of hierarchical representations of different cultures that justifies ‘conquest.’

This orientalist colonial discourse of development is carried to extremes in Africa’s case.¹⁸ Any cursory survey of the extensive literature on the ‘African crisis’ uncovers the rhetoric of disaster and tragedy that aggressively solicits intervention. For instance, Easterly and Levine’s frequently cited article announces that ‘Africa’s economic history since 1960 fits the classical definition of tragedy’ (1997:1203). Howard Stein more recently confirms that ‘Africa is mired in a developmental crisis, ... a crisis of a more profound and protracted nature’ (2003:153). In fact, Africa ‘poses the greatest challenge to world development efforts to the end of the century and beyond’ (Todaro 2000:708).¹⁹ Thus, Said’s almost 30 years old conclusion that orientalism had less to do with the Orient than with Europe’s imagination of its own world is borne out. Development, even more so than the Orient, has become a field of imagination and fantasy – in this case, for human challenges and possibilities – that has less to do with Africa than with a universal campaign.

To serve the purposes of this campaign, Africa remains a representation of the challenges ahead. This representational bias was revealed by Sender’s (1999) critical analysis of the current economic consensus on the continent. Using the same World Bank and UN database, Sender produced a starkly different profile of trends in ‘human capital,’ ‘quality of life,’ infrastructure, and agricultural production over the past 40 years rarely presented in development texts. For instance, he found an impressive uniform decline in infant mortality even in beleaguered, war-torn countries such as Ethiopia and The Sudan.²⁰ The most remarkable change has been in the area of women’s education where the female proportion of all secondary school students is now higher than in some rapidly growing economies such as China. In Madagascar, the country with the smallest improvement in this area, the gain from 1960 to 1991 was almost three fold (ibid:94). Yet, the point of citing Sender’s findings is not to ‘prove’ that Africa is developing – despite wars, debt, and epidemics. The point is to highlight the orientalist bias in the development discourse,

and to suggest that this discourse offers a version of 'truth' that locks Africa firmly in a subaltern location by constructing it as tragic, marginal and dependent.

Drawing on postcolonial theory tells that it is time to shift from a theoretical framework of 'dependency' to one of subalternity. The idea of subalternity has been invoked mainly in reference to marginalised classes within national borders (Guha 1982), but it may be extended to also highlight the subordination of the 'underdeveloped' within the current world hierarchy. Although space is limited, it is necessary to briefly spell out the significance of this shift. Dependency theory was revolutionary in pointing out the historical contribution of formerly colonised regions to the development of industrial capitalist economies. Unfortunately, the theory also helped generate the mistaken impression that today's 'peripheral' economies are the dependent partner in the centre-periphery relationship. But, of course, this impression can be sustained only if one accepts the present calculus of economic value, which as Amin (1976) and other unequal exchange theorists made clear long ago, merely reflects the highly skewed terms of trade between manufactured goods and raw materials. A conceptual framework of subalternity exposes the perverse logic by which those who provide the very materials that fuel industrial economies and allow such high levels of consumption are discursively produced as dependent and thereby maintained in a subaltern position. The potential results of this revision are far reaching.²¹

Understanding development as a colonial discourse opens up space for disrupting its authority. In the same way that postcolonial critics have approached European literary texts as world constructions that embody a relationship of power between Europeans and Others, by extension, development economics must be read as texts that contain dynamics of power and cultural-epistemic hegemony.²²

Even though in his analysis Said (1978) focused primarily on literary documents, he was very much aware of the potential implication of disciplines such as economics in orientalism (p. 15). For an exposition of the role of economics in classical as well as contemporary orientalism, see Zein-Elabdin and Charusheela (2004), particularly the chapters by Robert Dimand and Jennifer Olmsted.

This reading is instrumental for breaking apart the dominant single vision of social meaning and progress.

Postcoloniality and Africa – Hybridity and Resistance

If development is understood as a colonial discourse, what does this engender for resistance and for better understanding of contemporary Africa? I believe theorising Africa as postcolonial offers rich possibilities. This is not simply a matter of semantics – substituting postcoloniality for development – but of a substantive epistemological political transformation, because it brings to the fore the narratives of how communities live in the present and allows these narratives to hybridize the authority of the development discourse and, more importantly, to offer a different social ethics.

Postcoloniality naturally obtains on both sides of empire; but here, I am primarily concerned with its subaltern side.²³ As a subjective consciousness, postcoloniality is best captured by Spivak who suggests the postcolonial presents a doubleness of being or a conflictual existence, an ‘impossible ‘no’ to a structure, which one critiques, yet inhabits intimately’ (1990:204). This is the inevitable result of having been ‘worked over by colonialism’ (Prakash 1992:8). Bhabha sees postcoloniality inscribed in any situation of cultural displacement; it is a moment of in-betweenness, diaspora, refuge, and exile; being ‘neither ‘one’ nor ‘other’ (1996:127). In all the variedly stated expressions, it is clear that there is a hybridity that renders obsolete the binarisms of tradition and modernity, development and underdevelopment.

To elicit the full potential of postcoloniality, however, requires extending it more directly to the realm of political-economy. Accordingly, it may be also be taken as both an unavoidable contemporary material condition,... (and) a consciousness of resistance to the current cultural hegemony powerfully maintained in place by monopoly over economic resources as well as the discursive construction of what constitutes economy and economics (Zein-Elabdin and Charusheela 2004:6).

As such, postcoloniality may encompass not only a subjective awareness of hybridity but, in addition, an existence in and social consciousness of a global environment marked by political/cultural domination and material inequality. Resistance to this environment can draw from both an ethical commitment to a different, less oppressive time-world, and from recognition of the cultural authority of the subaltern. Therefore, far from being a condition of political aporia, ‘wilderness’, or limbo, postcoloniality can offer a powerful mode of resistance to despotic representations of being and becoming.

Theorising African societies as postcolonial entails understanding them as contemporary constructions, with coeval modes of being and provisioning, where social institutions and processes express a continuum of regional and worldwide encounters, mixing different technologies, lifeways and philosophies. This hybridity problematises any claims to ‘authenticity’ or a secure original identity, for example, in the way that Negritude perceived the African character. In the present context, authenticity can only refer to actual social patterns as they exist and perform now, not as built up in either nativist or developmentalist discourses. Most African communities today are far from the level of technological capability and material affluence found in the ‘developed’ world, but they are also distances away from the social formations that prevailed only a few decades ago. They have been transformed – in different ways – by immense and multiple forces of change, including colonialism, development programmes, and general contact and movement, synergistically with their own internal dynamics, whatever their sources may be. A theoretical perspective of postcoloniality allows an examination of these communities in their present fullness.

What is perhaps of more consequence is that this perspective helps free some of the social ethics that have all along been denied in the development discourse. In the following, I give a broad sense of these ethics and how they might offer a strong

critique of the current conception of development, abstracting away from immediate problems and policy limitations in order to stress the importance of recovering agency. Substantivists in economic anthropology have long studied African economies as cultural creations and were, therefore, able to grasp social patterns typically dismissed in economic literature. For example, they saw the centrality of the family and kinship, reciprocity, and gift giving to economic provisioning, and the predominance of obligatory over contractual relations across a wide range of African societies.²⁴ More recent scholarship documents the continued presence of these patterns, which raise questions to the assumption of autonomous, self-interested choice that undergirds the current archetype of economic development.

A first narrative of postcolonial African sociality can be found in Trulsson's (1997) institutional economic study of industrial entrepreneurs in northwest Tanzania. One of the questions Trulsson set out to answer was 'why do they (African entrepreneurs) often appear irrational to a Western observer?'²⁵ He found that, like all firms, Tanzanian businesses relied on a set of *ad hoc* rules to respond to contingencies as they materialised. Yet, their desire for profit was subject to almost every familial priority, often against the dictates of economic efficiency. Such commitment was reflected in the 'irrationality' of importing costly labour-saving technologies while employing unnecessary numbers of relatives and friends. Trulsson found that family obligations were the leading cause behind the shortage of liquidity among his sample of entrepreneurs. Another example was earlier documented in MacGaffey's (1991) ethnography of the 'second economy' in Zaire (now Congo), defined as production for own-consumption and monetised but unrecorded or illegal activities. Her study established the role of kinship and personal obligation in both basic provisioning and business ventures, manifested in diffused reciprocity between families, clans, and trading partners. This reciprocity played an important part in the movement of food and other supplies between rural and urban areas, and helped support Zaire's economy in the midst of gross mismanagement by Mobutu's regime.

Indeed, many years ago, Hyden (1983) generalised such patterns as observed by MacGaffey and Trulsson in what he called 'the economy of affection: 'a network of support, communications and interaction among structurally defined groups connected by blood, kin, community or other affinities' (8).²⁶ These networks operated in all aspects of life, including basic survival – which comprised anything from day-to-day living to disaster relief; social maintenance such as marriage and burial expenses; and 'development,' for instance, helping to pay for education or business ventures. Hyden's developmentalist Marxian premise prompted him to see this economy as an evolutionary link between a peasant and a capitalist mode of production, and therefore to argue that its persistence was an obstacle to the emergence of capitalism as a necessary historical precursor to socialism.

Accordingly, if one were to follow the colonial discourse of development, the stereotype would be the inefficient wasteful African, who must be replaced with the self-cantered sybaritic economic agent. Public policy should then seek to accelerate movement away from the 'economy of affection.' On the other hand, if one were

to frame these same social patterns – regardless of the extent of their generalisability for now – in terms of postcoloniality, they can be seen as contemporary valid reality, with positive and serviceable attributes. Africans would then be in a position to participate in the construction of meaning and definitions of social being; to set not only the terms of their own sanity, but to also suggest a more socially sympathetic and generous example. Thus, Hyden must be turned on his head altogether to embrace African familial obligation and social commitment as a positive ethic rather than an obstacle to development.

But, how is this any different from the common call for cultural preservation? To show the postcolonial departure, I will give just one example. Lopes (1994) has argued that some African attitudes that have thus far been seen as an economic handicap should form the basis for an indigenous development platform. In the context of evaluating structural adjustment programmes, he identified an ‘African economic behaviour’ or a ‘psychology,’ which included a tendency toward ‘wasteful’ conduct, ‘disdain for accumulation,’ and ‘need for family cohesion and security’ (20). He argued that Africans’ concern with preserving social relations at the expense of individual gain was a source of excessive spending and chronic indebtedness and, accordingly, he questioned the effectivity of emphasising austerity in structural adjustment directives. Instead, he asked: ‘Do we have a basis for a genuine and indigenous reform process?’ (21).²⁷ Some of this behaviour clearly converges with the social patterns discussed above, and Lopes’ contribution is welcome to the extent that it takes them as equally valid modes of organisation rather than inferior aberrations.

Nonetheless, from a postcolonial standpoint, the call for an indigenous this or that is difficult to endorse because it suggests a recoverable authentically African ‘tradition’ that has persisted in the face of all change, something permanent and unshakable. In contrast, a postcolonial perspective demands understanding African communities in their full present depth and dynamism. Much of what is seen on the continent today are ‘translations’ of European institutions introduced in the process of colonialism; an obvious example would be ‘the market economy.’ Surely, Trulsson’s Tanzanian entrepreneurs display a profit-driven business ethic, but one that is highly incongruent with the logic of a market economy, structural adjustment, or ‘development.’ The developmentalist text of self-interest and efficiency, thus, has been hybridised in an African context of hospitality and connectedness. Similarly, the transactions that MacGaffey observed in Zaire (Congo) were no barter trades removed from the market economy; they existed in complex hybrid formations that amalgamate market and non-market exchange (Zein-Elabdin 2003).

I do not claim that all African communities are hybrid to the same extent, but let’s also realize that nothing at hand resembles the sharp dichotomy sometimes drawn between an indigenous or traditional and a modern Africa.²⁸ It may be true that some know or think they know their ‘roots’, and I would not dismiss or trivialize this sensibility. But, even though the words and melodies of these roots echo and call deep, perhaps even ancient, associations and longings, those cannot be lived

except in the present. At this point, the indigenous is a historical impossibility. The most it can do, and may be that is enough to invoke it, is to serve as a psychic anchoring mechanism in the face of change and uncertainty, to account for all the absences in a new historical context. My concern is that the appeal to the indigenous often becomes an appeal to diachronic oppressive social structures. In contrast, again, postcoloniality, as a strong critique of domination and oppression – past and present, European or African – demands redefining the terms of reference with regard to all subalterns, redrawing intra-African individual and social relations of all orders – religion, ethnicity, gender, or any others. The call for embracing certain social patterns is to be done not so much in the name of preserving a phantasmagoric indigenous culture, but from the point of view of their present vitality and serviceability, of what they might offer to help manoeuvre the way out of the present socio-ecological impasse.

The world today is faced with an acute need to re-think the received wisdom on development. It is now clear that material accumulation of the magnitudes reached in ‘model’ societies inheres on building immense productive capacities and engenders tremendous dislocation. It entails command over vast reserves of nature and a great deal of brutality against multitudes of human communities, with such heavy ecological and social cost that Africans should not wish to repeat. This accumulation was historically facilitated by processes of enslavement and colonialism that provided access to such reserves and allowed such brutality. The perspective I have suggested here enables Africans to possess the discursive authority to offer a different direction – in short, one might say, an ethic for a post-hegemonic world where the positive may be understood as a qualitative change in ethics more than quantitative additions to material comfort.²⁹ This may seem utopianist, and at the moment it remains an ideal. All I can do in this space is to extend the invitation for collective and patient reflection on the elements necessary for its realisation, but I hope that I have already pointed toward some.

Conclusion – Philosophy and Development

As I have argued elsewhere (Zein-Elabdin 1998), development is a metaphysical question. It is ultimately about social meaning and unknowable directions. Long ago, J. B. Bury (1932) suggested there were two types of ideas: those that are within human will or knowledge and can be influenced by humans, and those beyond human will and knowledge and therefore cannot be determined or verified. They may be questions of ‘fact’ but a fact that we do not know. The idea of development, I think, falls under the second category. The colonial discourse of development rests on the peculiar premise that the lifeways of the overwhelming majority are ontologically inferior and it, thereby, ‘sets the standard of (*in*)sanity for the whole habitable world.’

Theorising African communities as postcolonial, ontologically no higher nor lower than others, affirms what they constitute and experience today, and decentres development as an epic in which the present can only be read as an insignificant overture

to the future. This need not imply isolationism, certainly not resistance to change, or denial of problems that call for attention. Instead, it restores some agency to the location from which conditions may be considered problematic and from which remedies may be proposed. I suggest, therefore, that the postcolonial, far from being a ‘pernicious fiction,’ is a necessary and hopeful critical outlook capable of illuminating the complexity of today’s world, interrogating hegemony, and restoring agency to the subaltern.

Notes

1. Responding to his uncle the Emperor Gaius Caligula’s question: ‘Do you think I’m mad?’ (Robert Graves, *I, Claudius* 1934: 464).
2. By general assent, the ‘beginning’ point of postcolonial theory is considered the Palestinian author Edward Said’s landmark book *Orientalism* (1978), which was followed by key contributions from Homi Bhabha (1983, 1985) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1985, 1988, 1990). The term ‘postcolonial theory’ is typically associated with these authors’ approach and insights, while ‘postcolonial critique’ more broadly incorporates other literature that explores questions of cross-cultural interaction and the legacy of colonialism. Of course, historicising origins is not so simple; strong traces of similar themes can be found in the writings of earlier thinkers, most prominently Fanon who inspires much of Bhabha’s work. For more background, see Williams and Chrisman (1994), Mongia (1996), Gandhi (1998), and Charusheela and Zein-Elabdin (2003).
3. The terms hegemony and subalternity are derived from Gramsci’s analysis of the domination of the ‘popular masses’ by the ‘intellectual strata’ in Fascist Italy. Hegemony may be effected by creating the social climate that elicits the subaltern (subordinated) groups’ consent to the ruling ideology. See Charusheela and Zein-Elabdin (2003). The Subaltern Studies historians adopted the term subaltern to refer to ‘subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or any other way’ (Guha 1982: vii). My usage of the term is consistent with this formulation.
4. Challenges to development have arisen from diverse quarters. The most forceful have been presented by the ‘post-development’ literature, which sees development as a historical work of ideology. Post-development work is salutary. However, much of it contains a somewhat romantic idea of ‘tradition.’ See Rahnema (1997).
5. One must always struggle with the complexity and even legitimacy of ‘Africa’ as a category or analytical unit. Here, Africa may be taken as the quintessential representation of cultural and economic subalternity in the development discourse.
6. Examples of other colonial documents examined by postcolonial critics include Macaulay’s *Minute on Education* (see Bhabha 1996, especially ‘Of Mimicry and Man’) and Lord Cromer’s *Modern Egypt*, in particular, the passage in which he describes the difference in mental composition between Europeans and Orientals (Said 1978: 38).
7. Europe here is not confined to the geographical location but includes extensions of the same broad culture in European settlements in other regions such as north America and the south Pacific. Notice that all parts of these regions, including, for example, New Zealand, automatically acquire the emblem of development and are classified as such in the literature. I do not, of course, take Europe as a coherent, incontestable place, but I do want to single out its unifying substance vis-à-vis its Others.

8. This is, arguably, a crucial departure from anti-colonial or 'nativist' reactions to colonialism, which tended to isolate a 'native' that is ontologically different from Europeans. The classic example in the context of Africa is Negritude. As is well known, Negritude philosophy drew a razor sharp essentialist distinction between 'Europeans' and 'negroes,' with Senghor (1962) claiming that the latter's psychology was grounded in an 'emotive attitude towards the world' (p. 15). Of course, Negritude poets were themselves a hybrid product of colonialism, and concurred – perhaps in nothing more than a shrewd political move – with European characterisations of Africans. After all, it was Sartre who defined 'negrohood' as 'a certain affective attitude towards the world' (ibid.:10). For more on the relationship between postcolonialism and Negritude, see Williams and Chrisman (1994) and Mongia (1996).
9. The volume *Postcolonialism Meets Economics* (Zein-Elabdin and Charusheela 2004) highlights this cultural nature of economics. In particular, see the introduction. By culture I continue to mean an 'incomplete, unpredictable, historically specific social frame of reference that gives rise to different practices and ideas, including economy and economics' (Zein-Elabdin 2004: 28). It is not to be understood in the classical Marxian sense of a superstructure.
10. For an exploration of the philosophical character of postcolonial theory, see Gandhi (1998). Postcolonial critique has followed a particular disciplinary trajectory, beginning in literary criticism and moving on to history and other fields. Its explicit extension to the discipline of philosophy has been carried out primarily by African scholars, see Mudimbe (1988), Appiah (1992), and Eze (1997).
11. Although development does not figure as a distinct major theme, critical engagements with this discourse are scattered throughout the literature. For example, Spivak (2000) has commented on 'gender and development' and the curious notion of 'gender training'. Escobar's ethnography of development (1995) was, to my knowledge, the first move in the direction of extending postcolonial scholarship to the horizons of economics.
12. Memmi (1965) anticipated this claim although he did not develop a theory of stereotyping or even used the term. His 'mythical portrait of the colonized' sums up the composite European representation of the native that contains all *his* stereotypical traits – laziness, weakness, wickedness, greed, dishonesty, and ingratitude. He also anticipated the idea of mutual constitution in his discussion of the 'bond' between the colonizer and the colonized.
13. Hybridity has been interpreted, especially by critics of postcolonial theory, as a simple pastiche of multiculturalism that in effect mutes current polarization and hierarchy (e.g. Dirlik 1997). No doubt there is such a conception, but this is a rather shallow meaning. In this paper, I draw on its far more radical and philosophically productive dimensions.
14. Ake (1996) has argued that African leaders were never genuinely concerned with development; it was simply a matter of rhetoric for the masses. This is also implied in Ki-Zerbo (1997). This argument, I think, underestimates the power of the development discourse. In fact, as Mkandawire (2001) suggests, one might say there was all along a 'developmental state' in post-colonial Africa. I have commented elsewhere (Zein-Elabdin 1998) on the attitude of the first generation of leaders (Senghor, Nyerere, and Nkrumah) with respect to development. Their pronouncements on the subject clearly support Mkandawire's claim. Still, my concern here is with the effectivity of the discourse rather than its motivations. What matters is that the development paradigm was there to be exploited by some politicians.
15. In some instances, industrialisation was set off by the 'exceptional encounter' – to use Amin's (1976:157) term – of events and processes that created extraordinary commitment to economic growth. This was true for the 'less developed' countries that have achieved the highest rises in income (e.g. Singapore, South Korea), which were helped by the exceptional encounter of the Cold War and the commitment of the north Atlantic bloc to development in this region as part of its stated strategy to contain communism.

16. The capabilities approach, currently spearheaded by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, may be the most invasive articulation of development so far as it conceives the individual – rather than an economy or a society – as an unfinished product. Its most troubling aspect, however, is the level of universality and unilateral vision at which it is being proposed. For a critical comment on Sen's perspective on development, see the chapter by Antonio Callari in Zein-Elabdin and Charusheela (2004).
17. See Escobar (1995). Although he follows Said closely, Escobar rejects implications of clearly malicious intentions. The self-serving capitalist impulse was there, but to a credible extent there was also a strong belief in 'helping' the 'third world' break out of 'poverty.' He, therefore, describes the project of international development as a blend of philanthropy and greed.
18. I borrow the term 'lifeways' from Grim (1994) who uses it in the context of Native American religion and ethics.
19. The literature is too vast to cite but two notable examples can be found in the Symposium on Economic Growth in Africa in the *Journal of Economic Perspectives* (Summer 1999), and the special issue on African Economic Development in a Comparative Perspective in the *Cambridge Journal of Economics* (May 2001). See Zein-Elabdin (1998, 2004) for more on the construction of Africa in the development discourse. To be sure, there is plenty of developmentalist scholarship by Africans. Many work faithfully for international development agencies. I do not see this as a form of 'false consciousness' or misguidance. It simply shows that Africans may hold a diversity of convictions.
20. This statement was made in a joint report by the International Institute for Environment and Development and the World Resources Institute, *World Resources 1987*.
21. Of course, the absolute mortality rates are still higher than world average but the gains, which after all is what grounds the idea of development, are remarkable. Improvements in infrastructure are equally impressive (p. 96). Even in agriculture, the most neglected sector, average yields have improved significantly (p. 99). Sender calls this phenomenon 'development without growth.'
22. Consider, for instance, the difference between estimating Africa's contribution to the world economy in monetary terms (gross domestic product of less than 2%) and calculating it on the basis of the quantitative percentage of natural materials it provides (for example, oil and other minerals). I refrain from using the term neocolonialism to describe this exploitative relationship simply because of its historicist origins in dependency theory. See Zein-Elabdin and Charusheela (2004: 5) for a comment on this literature.
23. Even though in his analysis Said (1978) focused primarily on literary documents, he was very much aware of the potential implication of disciplines such as economics in orientalism, p. 15. For an exposition of the role of economics in classical as well as contemporary orientalism, see Zein-Elabdin and Charusheela (2004), particularly the chapters by Robert Dimand and Jennifer Olmsted.
24. Even as applied to the subaltern, postcoloniality has been a matter of furious contestation. Some have given it highly unflattering connotations. For example, Appiah (1992) suggested it is 'the condition of what we might ungenerously call a comprador intelligentsia: of a relatively small, Western-style, Western-trained, group of writers and thinkers who mediate the trade in cultural commodities of world capitalism at the periphery' (149). See Williams and Chrisman (1994) for early debates about 'the postcolonial.'
25. For instance, Bohannan and Dalton (1962). Although in this respect anthropologists transcended the theoretical error of economics, their analyses were cast in the conceptual framework of 'primitive' society, which reinforced the assumptions of the development discourse.

Contemporary anthropology (e.g. Gudeman 1986) has significantly surpassed this limitation. For more on the treatment of Africa in economic anthropology, see Zein-Elabdin (1998).

26. I have discussed these patterns in the context of the feminist critique of economics. Much of feminist economics questions neoclassical economic theory on the basis of the observation that the model of individual welfare maximisation stands at odds with behavioural norms found in the family, which require an ethic of 'altruism.' In the literature, however, this ethic has been largely theorized as 'feminine' (see Zein-Elabdin 2003). The exclusion of the family from 'History' and 'Economics' has deep roots in European philosophy and social science. Any serious attempt to reposition Africa discursively and materially will need to address this in substantial and unapologetic terms.
27. This call is inspired by the fashionable sentiment that east Asia's economic success has not been purchased at the expense of cultural integrity. Notice his remark that '(for) a long time Asian archaism was blamed on Confucius. Today Confucius is the hero that explains Asian progress' (1994: 35). Of course, the notion of an indigenous development strategy is not new, going back to post-independence 'indigenization' efforts across the continent.
28. For example by Ayittey (1998) who states 'There are two Africas that are constantly clashing. The first is traditional or indigenous Africa that historically has been castigated as backward and primitive... The second Africa is the modern one, which is lost. Most of Africa's problems emanate from its modern sector' (14). Such statements give the impression that the author is largely unaware of the overlap between these 'two Africas,' and the continuity of individual and communal lives from village to African city, to the metropolises of Europe and America, with kin and friends traversing these worlds over and over and contributing to further cultural and economic hybridity. For an analysis of such 'transnational subjects,' see Zein-Elabdin and Charusheela (2004), in particular the chapter by Colin Danby.
29. For more on postcolonial ethics, see the chapter by S. Charusheela in Zein-Elabdin and Charusheela (2004). Also see Gandhi (1998).