

Progress report (Review Article)

Geographies of Development III: Militancy, insurgency, encroachment, and development *by* the poor.

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Abstract

One of the more familiar tropes in development-related literature is that impoverished people are neither passive recipients of development nor passive victims of process that have caused their marginalisation. This progress report examines two ways in which research has elaborated on this idea, namely the collective responses to the causes of deprivation on one hand and the collective effects of uncoordinated responses on the other. The first theme has been re-animated by remarkable mobilisations across the world, including revolutions, widespread expressions of frustration, demands for more substantive inclusion into society and distributional systems, and also mobilisations to enhance autonomy through self-organisation. The second theme considers the way in which those regarded as being in need of development transform society beyond the frame of social movements, through the often uncoordinated appropriation of space for living and working at a scale which invalidates, to varying degrees, efforts by elites to control and exclude. While these two themes seem at times to be placed in normative competition with each other, many researchers recognise the interchanges and overlaps between different forms of development *by* the poor.

Not just passive victims

Voting did not work for us. The political parties did not work for us. Civil society did not work for us. ... We have no choice but to take our own place in the cities and in the political life of the country. (Zikode, 2013, shackdweller's movement, Abahlali baseMjondolo, South Africa)

As the first two reports in this series have noted (Ballard, 2012; 2013), uneven development has been increasingly interpreted through the frame of surplus labour. Marx argued that the accumulation of a surplus of labour accompanied the accumulation of wealth. While development economics after the Second World War was geared to getting people into the labour force, global demand for labour by employers today is far smaller than the numbers of people available to work. Acute competition for employment means that many of those who do find work do not benefit from the kinds of investments in their lives that accompany unionised work such as good wages, job security and welfare provisions. It also means that many more people are simply surplus to the requirements of the job market and cannot expect to find even an exploitative wage. From this starting point, the first report considered the paradox of development *without* the poor, in which the middle class in the global South has, in the eyes of some commentators, displaced the working classes as the key protagonists of development. The second report examined the theme of development *for* the poor, and in particular the way in which populations inadequately remunerated by their livelihoods are being targeted by new distributional systems such as cash transfers.

In making use of the notion of surplus labour, some authors recognise the ‘offensive’ (Li, 2009, p. 68) implications of saying that humans are ‘wasted’ (Bauman, 2005, p. 92), whose productive capacities beyond the shop floor are disregarded (Barchiesi, 2011), and so are destined only to be bypassed or subsumed by the apparently dynamic sectors of development (Gidwani, 2013), or to be thrown lifelines by state provisions. This is uncomfortable language not least because it looks all too similar to the often racist expectation that the global South is defined by failure and lack (Chabal, 2009; Sengupta, 2010). It also dovetails too neatly with justifications for the despotic treatment of the poor, in that the eradication of poverty equates, for some elites, to the eradication of the homes, neighbourhoods and livelihoods of those they regard as surplus (Gidwani and Reddy, 2011; Huchzermeyer, 2011; Roy, 2008).

More generally however there has been an analytical recalibration since the 1970s away from what Ortner (2006, p. 108) calls theories of ‘constraint’ – that life was essentially shaped by external forces – towards the recognition of the ability of ordinary people to influence their own lives and the path of history itself. This humanising zeitgeist regards the poor as protagonists of development who are fully rounded human beings with subjectivity and agency, shaping not only their own lives but society itself. This shift is echoed today in concerns that too strong a focus on ‘objectness’ (Gupta, 2012, p. 24) might eclipse a recognition of the dynamism, resilience, creativity and resistance of resource-deprived people (Myers, 2011; Scambary, 2013), and the way in which people ‘refuse to be ruined, while surrounded by processes of ruination’ (Chari, 2013, p. 133). Despite dystopic accounts of Africa, for example, ‘people themselves are employing concepts, practices, and expectations that incontrovertibly “work” in some sense’ (Guyer, 2004, p. 8), not least the establishment of livelihoods

beyond formal employment. And social histories of development shows that those targeted by interventions ‘from above’ engage with, redefine, divert, shape, appropriate, manipulate and resist them (Lawson, 2007; O’Reilly, 2010; Young, 2010).

Affirming the grassroots is characteristic of a wide spectrum of ideological positions. A key spur in the liberal critique of top down development has been the rejection of the idea that people are passive targets of development (eg Sen, 2000). Many development programmes are engineered to reverse this relationship, to *empower* those who are impoverished to *participate* actively in development processes and take responsibility for their own advancement through various forms of self-help. de Soto sees the poor as ‘heroic entrepreneurs’ (2000, p. 34) with vast unrecognised assets upon which they should capitalise in order to create their own income (Roy, 2010).

For many on the left, these notions of agency are troubling because they place responsibility on the poor to fix problems which are in fact caused by neoliberal policies, such as joblessness, exploitation and dispossession. By contrast, critics of such policies and their affects argue that ‘freedom of the poor is best expanded by collective mobilization’ (Rankin, 2004, p. 200) through which ‘subordinate groups recognize the established order as an arbitrary human construction and fashion alternative moralities’ (Rankin, 2004, p. 3). Struggles can offer ‘counterparts to, or commentaries on ... the singular calculus of the market’, and transform people from being ‘casualties of progress’ into ‘agents of critique’ (McMichael, 2010, pp. 3-4). In contrast to a neoliberal subjectivity, then, grassroots action can forge ‘a resistant, counterhegemonic, emancipatory, and radicalized subjectivity’ (Contreras Natera, 2013, p. 253).

There has indeed been a great deal of vociferous mobilisation in many regions of the world, although as the following section will show, the role of these mobilisations in shaping the nature of development and the fortunes of the dispossessed is more opaque than some of the more celebratory accounts might suggest. The final section turns to the growing literature on insurgency, quiet encroachment and everyday practise for a complementary set of considerations on the way in which development *by* the poor occurs.

People power

Signs of revolt are everywhere. (Harvey, 2012, p. 22)

Popular expressions of discontent appear, according to the title of a recent book, to be ‘kicking off everywhere’ (Mason, 2012). In Badiou’s assessment, ‘[t]he present moment is in fact that of the first

stirrings of a global popular uprising' against the regressions caused by global capitalism (2012, p. 5). Žižek, too, speaks of reckoning: 'the rage is building up ... there is no clear way out, and the ruling elite is clearly losing its ability to rule' (2012, p. 127). Yet a quick scan suggests that although these gatherings on the streets all present impressive displays of people power, they diverge greatly in terms of constituency (they are certainly not limited to the poor) and objective. Most recently, in 2013, a protest to defend Gezi Park in Istanbul against development quickly bloomed into a much wider mobilisation in many cities and about many aspects of neoliberalism and authoritarian rule in Turkey (Kuymulu, 2013). Also in 2013, large demonstrations in Brazil were triggered by an increase in bus fares and quickly swelled into broader expression of frustration (Caldeira, 2013). In India, protests were sustained against sexual violence from late 2012 and against corruption in 2011 (Khandekar and Reddy, 2013). From 2011, occupy movements both in the North and South (Mottiar, 2013) have challenged the skewed distribution of wealth. And most spectacularly, the domino effect of the Arab Spring from 2010 has been a stunning reminder of the ability of people to rise up against and, in some cases, prevail over long entrenched autocrats.

There are further instances of mobilisation that has dislocated political elites. In Bolivia, in 2003, the president Sánchez de Lozada abandoned his office and fled to Miami in response to demonstrations by half a million people against the terms on which natural gas would be exported to the US (Kohl and Farthing, 2006; Perreault, 2006; Postero, 2007). This, and an accumulation of emphatic demonstrations including the 2000 'water war' against the concession of water provision to a foreign company, laid the groundwork for the ascent into power of Evo Morales in 2006 on a ticket of indigenous politics combined with an explicit opposition to neoliberalism. In Bolivia and in other parts of Latin America, leftist opponents to neoliberalism have gained democratic control of the levers of power (Yates and Bakker, Forthcoming).

In Tunisia and Egypt, revolution was fuelled by the indignities of suffering under long entrenched authoritarian regimes (Ismail, 2011, p. 992). Heady appreciations of the 'sublime' moment of the Egyptian revolution (Abourahme and Jayyusi, 2011, p. 626) quickly turned to concerns that it was unable to fortify itself against counter-revolutionary forces or to address the legacy of coercive neoliberal government (Bush, 2011; de Souza and Lipietz, 2011). In the assessment of Abdelrahman (2013), Egypt's new social movements were not well suited to the revolutionary moment because they, like many elsewhere in the world, organised horizontally and were broadly anti-statist. Yet Badiou insists that while 'nothing has changed' on some levels, something profound happened: people who did not exist politically rose up from their submission and claimed control over the 'history of their country' (Badiou, 2012, p. 56).

Most social movements are not, of course, revolutionary, even though they may wish to see the backs of their governments. Rather they attempt to make society fairer by stopping bad things from happening and trying to push for more just arrangements. Some mobilise defensively against evictions from informal housing (Chance, 2011; Grant, 2009), the dislocation of street traders and waste pickers (Samson, 2009), dispossession from or enclosure of land (Wolford, 2010), water privatisation (Bakker, 2007), environmental degradation (Chari, 2013) or highway construction (Laing, 2012). Activists may also push for arrangements to meet the needs of groups marginalised in various ways, such as through the provision of services and housing and social protection. Gains may be clientalist, benefiting particular groups of protestors (Cerrutti and Grimson, 2013, p. 133), or may take the form of new systems of distribution which benefit entire populations, such as the provision of antiretrovirals for the treatment of HIV (Mbali, 2013).

Although many social movements in the global South are not in the first instance about poverty, and many have constituencies that exceed ‘the poor’, many are, in effect, a challenge to the way states govern manifestations of poverty (Bebbington et al., 2010). They have the potential to contribute to a general questioning of the tolerability of deprivation in society and to re-politicise issues related to social justice (Bebbington, 2007). Many situate the issues that spurred them to action within a general critique of globalisation and neoliberalism, allowing them at times to relate activists elsewhere (Routledge and Cumbers 2009). Within a Polanyian frame, the net effect of these many struggles is to offer a fight back against the expansion of markets (Patel, 2009). Or to put it in Foucauldian register, they amount to ‘biopolitical struggle’ for the means of life (Chari, 2013, p. 154) and against neoliberal management of populations as natural, self-regulating and individual living beings (Lemke, 2011). Such social movements have also been understood as a radicalisation of democratic participation (Stokke and Törnquist, 2013) through which citizens engage the state, not just through the *invited* spaces of participation laid on by authorities, but also through the *invented* spaces of participation created by those at the grassroots (Miraftab, 2006). In short, many social movements work ‘from below’ and ‘from the margins’ to make societies fairer and more inclusive and to bring about improvements for those who most need it.

Yet the critique of neoliberalism and development itself also leads some activists and theorists to seek autonomy and independence in order to avoid inclusion and co-optation. Various forms of self-organisation have been valorised for breaking with hegemonic society (Brand and Sekler, 2009; Escobar, 2010; Marston, Forthcoming; Scott, 2009). Lefebvre was intrigued by the possibilities of what he called ‘*autogestion*’, or workers managing themselves with a view to taking control from the state and transforming society (Merrifield, 2006, p. 138). Holloway argues that ‘social change is not produced by activists’ but ‘is rather the outcome of the barely visible transformation of the daily activities of millions of people’ (Holloway, 2010, p. 12). He proposes that movements such as the

Zapatistas in Mexico invert the conventional revolutionary perspective: 'rather than focusing our attention on the destruction of capitalism, we build something else' (Holloway, 2010, p. 50). In Hardt and Negri's thesis, the seepage of capitalism into many corners of life place revolutionary power to be disruptive in ordinary people's hands. The multitude, they argue, is the 'living alternative that grows within Empire' (2004, xiii). The refusal to work is, in particular, taken as an important way of interfering with the logic of capital (Gidwani, 2008).

Some authors place an enormous burden on people to 'contest the underlying values and practices of the prevailing economic model which generates inequality and poverty' (Dinerstein and Deneulin, 2012, p. 587). Social struggles are described as 'events that break with the chronology of modernity' no less (Icaza and Vázquez, 2013, p. 684). As recent publications suggest, there is an enormous appetite for inspirational stories of Davids beating Goliaths (Gladwell, 2013) and, as a critic puts it, 'blithe assurances about happy endings for the vulnerable' (Gray, 2013). Others, by contrast, are disappointed by the net effect of the ferment. Harvey points out that many struggles do not confront the economic structures at the heart of the problem, and even to the extent that they do identify as anti-capitalist, they are not on the cusp of achieving their goals (Harvey, 2012, p. xiv). He laments that 'there is no absolute and sufficiently unified anti-capitalist movement that can adequately challenge the reproduction of the capitalist class and the perpetuation of its power on the world stage' (Harvey, 2010, pp. 226-7) and 'assume social command over both the production and distribution of surpluses' (Harvey, 2010, p. 228).

Various literatures, including subaltern studies, radical democracy and post-development, have attempted to move beyond what they regard as the essentialism of deductive approaches to mobilisation based on abstract categories. They seek in various ways to acknowledge the immediate and concrete realities of activism and everyday life, and to understand any gains as imperfect, tenuous and contingent. Recent publications on Gramsci continue the critique of 'abstractly radical, antihistoricist, and creepingly antihumanist register of some in the speculative left' (Kipfer and Hart, 2013, p. 327) and seek a 'revolutionary theory and practice as a nondogmatic, open-ended, and incomplete project' (Kipfer and Hart, 2013, p. 331). Gramsci recognised that transitions to socialism were unlikely to succeed unless oppositions had built up substantial legitimacy, or what he called hegemony (Gramsci, 1971; Kipfer, 2008). However, ruling elites also fight to sustain their hegemony often through concession to the disgruntled sections of society. The result was what Gramsci called a 'passive revolution' which had the ambiguous outcome of a more distributional capitalist society, but one which stifles the necessary transition to socialism. Hart's (2013) analysis of the political situation in South Africa shows that as the African National Congress reaches the end of its second decade in power, its hegemony has been eroded by chronic unemployment and poverty. Paradoxically, frustration has become more manifest even in the context of increasing state expenditure. Dissent,

meanwhile, comes in many different forms which Hart (2013, p. 21) describes as ‘movement beyond movements’, for example in rebellions across the country which have an ‘irreducibly “local” dimension’. In 2008, popular disaffection exploded in an altogether more menacing form when dozens were killed in xenophobic attacks.

There is no guarantee, then, that expressions of discontent translate into a group of people uniting to confront injustice. Hetherington argues that the very term ‘social movement’ problematically inclines us to think of a point around which ‘society becomes hinged (a conjuncture) and moves off in another direction’ rather than formations that are better understood as ‘heterogenous assemblages’ (Hetherington, 1998, p. 10). As Wolford’s (2010) work on the Brazilian Landless Workers Movement shows, it is a mistake to reify all activity within the movement into a singular movement since this would ignore the churn of multiple motivations and practises that occur under its banner. Page and Mercer (2012) remind us that the reason why ‘people do stuff’ is rooted in systems of practice rather than abstract rational choices. The nominal intentionality of actors might be a poor indication of the nature of social change since this ‘intentionality’ is often a narrative of justification applied by privileged voices after the fact (Scott, 2012), and the actual course of events is often unintended or unplanned (Ortner, 2006). The fact that Egypt’s revolution surprised many of those who participated in it (Bayat, 2013), means that revolutions are not straightforwardly ‘thought carried into action’ (Emma Goldman quoted in Smith, 2009, p. 51). Moreover Mbembe (2001) fears that by shoehorning agency into the frame of counter-hegemony, we ignore the many other generative capacities of ordinary people and of politics in the postcolonial context.

Insurgency, encroachment and everyday life

... the poor are neither simply dupes or secret revolutionaries. They are survivors. (Appadurai, 2013, p. 185)

While street protests and the apogee of revolution may provide an evocative reference for people power, a great deal of reflection has, then, gone into the role of more profane and less absolute kinds of social change led from below. Indeed, in many contexts protests are not possible. Under the Brazilian military dictatorship (1964-1985), for example, protests were repressed. Yet Holston shows us that working class Brazilians suffering under highly differential treatment of citizens created their own ‘alternative futures’ (2008, p. 8) through the ‘autoconstruction of house, self, and citizen’ on urban peripheries (2008, p. 263). Bayat has made a parallel set of arguments about the Middle East. Until the uprisings of 2010, mobilization had been extremely difficult and unproductive under autocratic regimes. In attempting to survive, ordinary people had to defy official plans for urban

spaces by improvising and inventing livelihoods, homes and neighbourhoods. They occupied land illegally, construct homes and linked themselves to infrastructure and services (Bayat, 2010). Bayat argues this 'quiet encroachment of the ordinary' can be thought of as a 'social nonmovement' (2010, p. 14). These nonmovements are not based in ideology, nor on organised demands, nor are they coordinated as such. However the collective effect of these disparate actions is to shift the locus of control away from planners and privileged interests and towards those at the margins (Miraftab, 2009). The politics of social nonmovements is 'not a politics of protest, but of practice, a politics of redress through direct action' (Bayat, 2010, p. 19).

One of the key themes of this literature is the way in which people trespass onto spaces which they are not 'allowed' to be on, and in so doing appropriate 'the very soil of the city itself' (Holston, 2008, p. 204) and rewrite de facto and eventually de jure property rights (Scott, 2012). In other words, the process of urbanization has produced working class groups that have had to take charge of their own inclusion into the urban landscape and in so doing reshape space (Atehortúa, 2013; Baviskar, 2003; Ghertner, 2011; Huchzermeyer, 2011). The resulting favelas, shack settlements and markets are spaces through which a living environment has been 'rigged together from whatever is at hand' (Simone, 2011b, p. 356). Livelihoods are created, for example through street trading and begging (Swanson, 2010). These are not just functional spaces which offer shelter and the means of life but also spaces of aspiration and inventiveness and rich everyday life and new possibilities (De Boeck, 2011; Hunter, 2010; Murray, 2008). Over time, the impulse of authorities to 'restore order' may give way to a recognition that it is impossible to sweep away these activities (Crossa, 2009; Huang et al., 2013).

These processes have profound implications for power and agency, as articulated famously in Lefebvre's (1991) arguments of the revolutionary potential of the right to the city. In an immediate sense, ordinary people take charge and simply ignore authorities who claim the power to authorise and disallow (Simone, 2011a). Even the most authoritarian states lack the capacity to completely police everyday life (Bayat, 2010). Concomitantly, insurgent citizens have become empowered because, as Holston remarks in the case of Brazil, they have challenged established assumptions that the masses were 'silent and mostly ignorant citizens who were incapable of making competent decisions on their own and who needed to be brought into modernity by an enlightened elite and their plans for development' (Holston, 2008, p. 248). As a result of these reconfigured power relations, 'individuals can "step out" of the futures expected for them, and make a life that is totally unanticipated, a life for which there is no obvious preparation or eligibility' (Simone, 2010, p. 137). Not only are new possibilities opened out for those who claim them, but social norms are shifted by the practises as mundane as the slightly different way head scarves are worn in the Middle East (Bayat, 2010, p. 17). Collectively, the 'accumulation of thousands or even millions of such petty acts

can have massive effects on warfare, land rights, taxes, and property relations' (Scott, 2012, p. xx). For Simone, the poor are not simply creatively manipulating 'dire circumstances', but are contributing 'to remaking notions of urban life itself' (Simone, 2011b, p. 357). Alternative worlds then are not derived from 'a particular content of alterity, whether socialist or otherwise, but through the concern with the *making* of alterity' (McFarlane, 2011, p. 211).

Although this literature too can be celebratory at times, it also qualifies itself by recognising that the deep problems of poverty are not somehow solved by resilience, inventiveness and creativity and it acknowledges that everyday life is brutal (De Boeck, 2011; Simone, 2010). No matter how remarkable everyday life might be, it does not necessarily negate the power of the state or class interests (Bayat, 2010, p. 54) nor help ordinary people access 'crucial social spaces' (Bayat, 2010, p. 65). Indeed, agency might well play into top down expectations of self-help and state avoidance of responsibility for welfare (Bayat, 2010, p. 55). For Katz, demonstrations of resilience might be recognised as both impressive and essential for survival, but it nevertheless has contradictory outcomes, including helping 'to advance and sustain capitalist accumulation elsewhere' (Katz, 2004, p. 245). Furthermore, agency is not simply virtuous because it originates at the grassroots, and it may take regressive forms such as vigilantism (Meth, 2010). Expansions of citizenship are, says Holston, 'inherently disjunctive-not cumulative, linear, or evenly distributed among citizens but always a mix of progressive and regressive elements, unbalanced, heterogeneous, and corrosive' (Holston, 2008, p. 311).

Conclusion

Sectarianism is latent, and sometimes explicit, in many lines of thinking on the way in which the poor do and should shape society. The result can be mutually exclusive formulations that oppose inclusion and autonomy, ideas and practise, small and big social changes, reform and revolution and collective mobilisations and collective of everyday practices. Yet it is the articulations between these dynamics that allow us to recognise a more complete empirical synthesis of the geographically and historically nested ways in which people shape their lives. While, as the first report showed, there are forms of development thinking that attempt try to write the poor out of the story of development, and, as the second report showed, forms of development thinking that target the poor for development from above, this report has examined themes emerging from the literature on the way ordinary people also take charge by dodging, resisting, defying, commandeering, diverting, building homes, earning incomes and attempting in many other banal and spectacular ways to improve their lives.

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