A review of the development divide between Global North and South through a Foucauldian perspective

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ABSTRACT

‘Unequal development’: a cherry narrative always assumed as natural and continuous between the Global North and South. As de facto assumed, the foundation of poverty has always been diagnosed as a domestic and technical immaturity of developing countries that will find a solution within the international economic order. But what if the North–South divide was the direct product of a political palette nurtured by the supposed solution to the problem? In his book The Divide: A Brief Guide to Global Inequality and its Solutions, Jason Hickel turns his back on old developmentalist formulas, challenging the development-machine effectiveness based on foreign intervention and international institutions’ agendas. The author, anthropologist at the London School of Economics, analyses through historical fragments the core of an economic order built over centuries to benefit a small percentage of mankind in the name of progress. Accordingly, his analysis proves eliminating inequality and poverty would mean unsettling the world economic system the international arena is based on. The answer? Eventually, the acceptance of a new economic order willing to embrace debts liberation, more democratic and participatory agencies, and a biased trading system to favor developing nations.

List of Acronyms

GDP gross domestic product
IMF international monetary fund
NGO non-governmental organization
SAP structural adjustment program
UN United Nations
US Unites States

to comprehend global inequality, the book theme is firstly introduced by the ‘development’ discourse launched by formal US President Truman (see pages 7–11). By discussing the development discourse agenda, the first part of the book part one: the divide (7–62) challenges the constructed concocted belief disguised by a system that adjusts hunger and poverty’s thresholds to validate progress has been achieved – the latter, vended as the bore fruits of a perfect international economic system. In part two: concerning violence (63–141) Hickel explores 500-year-old North–South relationships revealing the economic order’s logic. From the discovery of ‘The New World’ in 1492, European colonizers found the key to ‘European development’ by overstraining colonies’ resources; accordingly, structuring the colonies’ economics to grew reliant on Europe by controlling their market prices and earnings. This system’s birth marked ‘the basic logic of the process that would produce poverty across the […] world’ (82). To defend this new economic order – designed to benefit Europe and the US – the latter fought to halt South’s development through planned coups and military manoeuvres. Yet, a more effective, and non-violent strategy to counteract the South’s growth was designed by the system’s powers: Neoliberalism. Specifically, in part three: The New Colonialism (143–250) Hickel summarizes the economic strategies inspired by the Neoliberal ideology, which the West adopted to administer the flow of our planet’s capitals – the product of managing the laws of economic relations. Through Neoliberalism, strategies for development designed by international agencies seduced developing nations to borrow massive assets. Hence, debts accumulated leaving South countries with unpayable debits. Consequently, new loans would be provided

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only if inheritors aligned their economies with Neoliberal norms. Thereby, the new architected form of remote colonialism started to bore fruits. Eventually, in Part Four: Closing the Divide (251–305) the author moves from theoretical explanations to pragmatic proposals for improvement, such as debt relief and global minimum salaries. However, Hickel concludes by returning to the original rationale: to successfully combat poverty, the economic system must be reformed, as it is the de facto controller of the inequality machine.

Although the book discusses an array of subjects, yet Hickel appears to structure his work around three major narratives: development, aid, and good news. The three, below examined, appear to be theoretically balanced within M. Foucault’s power and discourse analysis, enabling for prospective future work into the field.

To better explore the first development narrative, the author discusses – and confronts – the various positions of developed and developing nations ‘along the Great Arrow of Progress’ (Hickel 2018, 10). He criticizes European denial of responsibility for global South poverty, arguing the development narrative is the constructed ‘alibi’ permitting the Global North to deploy, in Foucauldian terminology, the concept of bio-power (Foucault and Gordon 1980). Therefore, the author covertly engages in a debate of bio-politics – the use of subjugation and objectification to exercise power and knowledge – emphasizing – sometimes redundantly – how this concept lies at the heart of the development discourse culminating in the orchestrated South’s impoverishment. Particularly, the author uses an argumentative tone to emphasize how impoverished nations remain poor due to wealthy countries’ agendas, which positively brings attention to how important the world system needs reform. Intertwined in the development narrative, The Divide points to a strategic intervention of power, which is hidden under generous support for progress and depicted as the true source of poverty and inequality. Hickel’s viewpoint is that development theory and practice are carried out via Western systems of people and societal politicization, bolstering the argument these disciplining and normalizing processes were essential to capitalism’s growth. Several instances of development narratives are examined to illustrate the hidden rationality of the Foucauldian logic of biopower; the ‘Banana Wars’ are an example. Under the pretext of an American safeguard for newly independent countries’ sovereignty to avoid any European recolonization attempt, the US appealed to the Roosevelt Corollary of December 1904 to interfere with and control Honduras’ economy – invaded seven times throughout the twentieth century (Hickel 2018). This constant intrusion, disguised as a political development assistance, allowed American authorities to promote American fruit companies’ interests by supplying them with land and low-cost labor. Despite its abundance of data and easily reading information, the presented development narrative occasionally appears prejudiced towards Western failings and power thirst.

Proceeding with the reading, the second major theme is a compelling claim global aid is designed to maintain the development narrative’s deception, therefore hiding true poverty’s causes. To combine the book’s profound themes with a comprehensible reading, Hickel provides bridges to theoretical frameworks accessible for future inquiries into the study. The aid narrative itself, for example, refers inexplicably to Foucauldian power and discourse analysis. Correspondingly, the book explains how the Global North achieved economic growth through a spread of power-knowledge due to institutionalization development (Lauritz Larson 2015). Specifically, Hickel claims benefits of aid contributions act as a remote-control authority piloted by international organizations to ensure the capitalist system function. Although the book habitually repeats its point, Hickel’s goal is highlighting how forms of power-knowledge are eclipsed by sovereign debts and SAPs in the guise of humanitarian activities. An example from the 1980s may be explicative. The IMF ‘assisted’ developing nations fund rising loans on the condition they undertake SAPs, which had a counter producing effect resulted in a $480 billion loss in GDP annually. According to Hickel, ‘the discourse of aid distracts us from seeing the broader picture’ (Hickel 2018, 29); it serves as propaganda, masking the dynamics of global capitalism nurturing poverty. Despite Hickel emphasizing how many NGOs reinforce the aid narrative, the book’s debate overlooks charity organizations fight against aspects of the system that Hickel identifies as toxic. Thus, to someone who has worked with international organizations, Hickel’s overview of NGOs and charities may look perplexing. Although a more balanced approach would be more compatible with a variety of readers, The Divide appears to indicate whether philanthropy truly helps NGOs’ efforts to combat poverty or whether it merely feeds the North’s built-in economic structure for its own benefit.

Eventually, North’s goals must be sold for the economic system to be recognized worldwide. The latter is achieved by using the good-news narrative. Hickel identifies it as a political Western tool for claiming success to keep the system going, although the very opposite is achieved. Again, a Foucauldian perspective becomes analytically valuable in understanding this. The good-news narrative seeks to generate truths – and hence power – using media information as a field of knowledge
control. Similarly, the Global North builds development norms (truths) becoming embedded in the public’s perception of reality (power-knowledge) (Barsan 2016). Hickel’s argument is not a point about data, but a rich analysis to highlight how development practitioners preserve peoples’ consent of the system without questioning the whole game. The World Bank’s redefining of the poverty threshold is an example of the good-news narrative. In 2000, after the dollar’s value depreciation, the poverty line was raised from $1.02 to $1.08, such that the ‘new’ $1.08 level was lower in actual terms than the previous $1.02. Although nothing changed in inequality terms, the World Bank’s revised line resulted in an apparent drop in poverty. Importantly, this adjustment was made just before the launch of the UN’s Millennium Campaign, which lauded worldwide poverty reduction owing to the present system’s ideal setup. Arguably, while Hickel’s logic is sound, why is more emphasis not placed on politics? If the argument is a political issue, a political solution, rather than a change in economic orthodoxy, is likely to be necessary.

Conclusions

Finally, inside a 300-plus-page trip, The Divide examines today’s global disparity, claiming poverty is a direct result of the political system. But take a step back to understand what has been explained thus far. The Global North must maintain the present capitalist system to conserve their prosperity. Accordingly, the development narrative serves as a cover for exerting power and controlling the South’s resources. However, the Global North requires institutions to promote its indirect influence, to both hide historical harms done to the South and profit from its resources; a ‘help for progress’ approach molded by the propagandistic Western aid narrative. Completing the system’s cycle, the good-news narrative helps persuading the world the current economic arrangement is the best configuration to alleviate poverty – truly, to keep the entire system in place. Unambiguously, what sets the book apart are the writer’s convictions and the meticulous evidence he gives to back them up. Although Hickel’s experiences of his upbringing in Swaziland give The Divide its distinctive style, the narrative would benefit from a more balanced approach if it did not provide a harsh discourse entrenched in inertia and oblivion’s accusations against the West and international bodies. The Divide’s objectives are not just indications of a poorer future if the system remains unchanged, but also a proactive manifesto for transformation for both expert researchers and novices to the sector. Hickel suggests tangible solutions – indebtedness resistance, non-discriminatory trade, global minimum stipends, etc. Yet something more fundamental is required: a paradigm shift in contemporary thinking.

Disclosure statement

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