POST-DEVELOPMENT THEORY AND THE DISCOURSE-AGENCY CONUNDRUM

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Abstract: Through its post-structural critique of development, post-development provides a fundamental dismissal of institutional development. Drawing on the work of Foucault, post-development portrays development as a monolithic and hegemonic discourse that constructs rather than solves the problems it purports to address. Yet post-development itself becomes guilty of creating an analysis that loses sight of individuals and agency, being fundamental to its development critique. This article discusses the discourse-agency nexus in light of the post-development context with specific reference to the grand structure-actor conundrum of social theory, and asks whether an actor perspective is compatible with discourse analysis and what—if anything—should be given primacy. It aims to provide insight into social theory and post-development comparatively and, furthermore, to put these in context, with Foucault’s work being pivotal to the seminal post-development approach.

Keywords: agency, development, discourse, Foucault, post-structuralism, power, social theory

Postmodern theory entered the field of development studies in the late 1980s. This post-structural critique of institutional development’s idiom and empirical field, known as post-development theory, draws on and extends Foucault’s reconceptualization of power-knowledge formations as discourse. The essential idea of post-development theory “is to see the discourse on development articulating First World knowledge with power in the Third World” (Peet 1997: 75). It analyzes development as a significant discourse of power, focusing on “the way in which discourses of development help shape the reality they pertain to address, and how alternative conceptions of the problem have been marked off as irrelevant” (Nustad 2004: 13). Post-development scholars apply Foucault’s work on the appropriation of the mind in modern societies to the relation between North and South and argue that development produces post-colonial
subjects (cf. Brigg 2002) permeating the South as a category defined in relation to the North (Manzo 1991) through the disciplinary and normalizing processes of the development apparatus. Post-development’s pioneers see “development discourse and practice [as] constituting the last insidious chapter of the larger history of the expansion of modern, Western reason” (Peet 1997: 75), leading some to argue that “development colonised the world by ordering it into ‘us’ and ‘them’, ‘the developed’ and ‘underdeveloped”’ (Nustad 1998: 42; cf. Brigg 2002). Such a view on a discourse’s formative power has implications for the epistemological discourse-subject relation.

This article draws on my previous research on the development sector (Lie 2004, forthcoming), which takes post-development theory as a point of departure in presenting an empirical account of development discourse. During my first fieldwork I experienced an anthropological revelation, arguably what most rookie anthropologists are faced with after a period of professional depression at the time of their first outing. In short, the revelation related to deciphering the problem that I faced—that is, the great disconnect between how post-development theory portrayed the empirical field and what was actually going on in it. I thus reread Ferguson’s (1994) _The Anti-Politics Machine_—part of the post-development gospel—and now noticed an almost total absence of the individual subject; at most, the individual was included in its generic form. Individual variations were more or less neglected, and the subject was portrayed in a static relationship to development discourse and as a product of it. In referring to individual subjects, Ferguson (ibid.: 17) asserts that “whatever interests may be at work and whatever they may think they are doing, they can only operate through a complex set of social and cultural structures so deeply embedded and so ill-perceived that the outcome may be only a baroque and unrecognisable transformation of the original intention.” This quote—as an expression of post-development theory—illustrates the lack of agency included in the analysis as well as the formative power ascribed to discourses and larger structures that are perceived as being external to the subject. This position was completely counter to my experience in the field, where actors were perfectly aware of what they were doing and acknowledged both the internal and external limitations to what they were trying to achieve.

Informed by this empirical experience, I saw the need to include an actor perspective in the study of development discourse, while acknowledging that a discursive approach could be fruitful for studying macro processes of development in their spatial and temporal contextual realm. Although privileged to grasp the grand development metaphors to which actors necessarily relate, post-development does not provide an approach to the micro-level practices of actors. In encountering the development discourse, local project staff on the recipient side of donor-recipient relationships can be manipulative and strategic with regard to imposed discourses and expert knowledge systems. By applying techniques of knowledge translation and brokerage (cf. Bierschenk, Chauveau, and Olivier de Sardan 2002; Lewis and Mosse 2006), they can thus have a tremendous impact on the local articulation and implementation of donor’s development discourse. As the intersecting point of local knowledge and external discourse, these actors
generate informal strategies as coping mechanisms toward formal structures and external expert knowledge (see Lie 2007).

The overall theme of post-development refers to and draws on a seeming ambiguity in the works of Foucault. As Gledhill (2000: 150) argues, Foucault sees power as relational and “present in all social relationships, permeating society in a capillary way.” As a consequence, the first point of resistance to power “must thus be individual strategies which counter specific forms of domination, even in minute, everyday ways” (ibid.). The ambiguity refers to Foucault’s insistence on power as relational and enabling individual resistance, something that is not reflected in his analyses and empirical material. As Gledhill (ibid.: 152) holds, “his talk about power inevitably provoking ‘resistance’ has little real substance. His capillary model of power privileges the ‘micropolitics’ of resistance, yet his analyses remain ‘top-down.’” Post-development, I argue, has inherited this ambiguity.

**Discourse in Social Sciences**

In capturing the significance of discourse, Michel Foucault (1970, 1972), who is among the most seminal thinkers of discourse analysis, creates a framework for understanding various systems of knowledge without recourse to standards of objective truth or moral and ethical right. This is premised on his rejection of the need to equate reason with emancipation and the progress of modernity. For Foucault, knowledge is indissociable from regimes of power and the temporal and spatial context in which the particular discourse has been generated. Foucault’s knowledge/power regimes suspend categories of truth and falsity (cf. Fraser 1989), consequently dismissing other modern theoretical conceptions of knowledge, such as, for example, positivism’s notion of neutral and objective knowledge and Marx’s view on knowledge as emancipatory (cf. Best and Kellner 1991). Rather, Foucault focuses on how various discourses come into being and become set as normative standards, while others retreat into oblivion.

As such, the concept of discourse denotes the interrelation between knowledge, meaning, and power, that is, a system of knowledge or meaning that is shared by various people. Discourse denotes the regularities of what is said and done, including the conditions for power and knowledge (see Foucault 1972). Neumann (2001), representing the inherited discursive turn of political science, defines discourse as a “system for the formation of statements and practices, that by inscribing itself into institutions and appearing as more or less normal, constitutes reality for its bearers and has a certain degree of regularity in an array of relationships” (ibid.: 18; my translation). Discourse analysts are generally concerned with the array of relationships connected to contemporary and historical issues that they study in order to grasp the formation of that particular discourse. The demarcation of a discourse implies the identification of the regular and systematic collection of statements and practices. An institution is a symbol-based program that regulates social interaction. The institutionalization of a discourse implies the formalization of statements and practices through
rules of formation, which bearers of that particular discourse both represent and reproduce through their agency. A discourse refers not only to statements (oral and written) and communicative meaning embodied in non-verbal infrastructure, technology, and practice, but also to aggregates of social practices.

Foucault argues that discourse is often perceived as insignificant by its bearers and emphasizes the tacit structuring power a particular discourse has over its bearers through the discourse’s conditions of existence, rules of formation, and procedures of exclusion. “In appearance,” Foucault (1972: 216) states, “speech [or discourse] may well be of little account, but the prohibitions surrounding it soon reveal its links with desire and power.” For those embedded in a discourse, the discourse is the self-evident reality—a reality inscribing itself into others who regularly relate to that discourse due to its formative power. The rules of formation lead to regularity in statements and practices aligned with the discourse. Actors’ expressions and practices that do not reflect or relate to the existing discursive order are sanctioned by exclusion. Foucault’s argument is that the actors’ self-disciplinarian and self-regulating normalization of statements and practices lead to a strengthening and reproduction of the established discursive order. His main concern is to identify the historical and contemporary discursive conditions and to study how they are articulated and manifested. Foucault is not directly interested in the discourse’s originator, since discourses “constitute a sort of anonymous system, freely available to whoever wishes, or whoever is able, to make use of them, without there being any question of their meaning or their validity being derived from whoever happened to invent them” (ibid.: 222).

**Post-Development**

From the late 1980s, a growing body of literature that viewed international development as a powerful discourse began to appear. Post-development emerged against a backdrop of post-colonial processes and subaltern studies focusing on non-elites, with an aim to study history from below. Additionally, and perhaps more directly, it is a result of both general postmodern trends within the social sciences and the impasse of development after a half-century of flawed interventions (cf. Escobar 2007; Ziai 2007). The latter led Sachs (1992: 1) to argue that “the idea of development stands like a ruin in the intellectual landscape.” The reason for development’s failure was no longer to be explained by recourse to people’s conflicting interests and intentions, but rather to the macro-systemic level of development practice and Western expert knowledge and ideology. In its somewhat vulgar appearance, post-development asserts that development is embedded in a Western, neo-colonial discourse that perpetuates unequal power relations between the North and South of the world, in which the post–Cold War United States stands as the beacon on the hill, guiding other nations to follow in its footsteps (cf. Sachs 1992; Schuurman 2000). Thus, regarding the formative power of development discourse, Sachs (1992: 3) maintains that “it is not the failure of development which has to be
feared, but its success,” illustrating the power ascribed to a discourse that is perceived as sacrificing human agency.

In their discursive approach, post-development scholars see development “as a system of knowledge, technologies, practices and power relationships that serve to order and regulate the objects of development” (Lewis et al. 2003: 545). They view development as a hegemonic and monolithic discourse that overrides cultural variations wherever it is brought about by its advocates or development agents. In her assessment of post-development theory, Green (2003: 124) argues that post-development scholars, who position themselves outside the institutional structures of development, see development as “a bureaucratic force with global reach and an explicitly pro-capitalist agenda, operating as a tool of regimes that seek to perpetuate relations of inequality and dependence between the West and the rest and, through their representation, to perpetuate the construction of others as post-colonial subjects.” Such a conviction leads to a post-structural rejection of development, “not merely on account of its results but because of its intentions, its world-view and mindset” (Pieterse 2000: 175). However, this highlights aspects of the central problem with post-development theory: the interrelationship between representations of reality and what actually happens on the ground. Post-development theory is helpful for the purpose of understanding the formal order of development on the macro-structural level and the interrelationship between various overarching structures and ideas concerning development. But to assume a direct causality between discourses and lived life raises important questions regarding the view on subjectivity and individual freedom in relation to the formative power of discourse and the process of normalization.

In the view of post-development scholars, development constitutes a particular discourse that is manifested as an objective form of knowledge through the regularity of various development institutions’ practices. This system of knowledge constructs its field of intervention as a particular object and creates a structure around that object on which development intervention relies (cf. Ferguson 1994: xiv), making development a “form of knowledge ... characterised by regularity in dispersion” (Escobar 1991: 666). It is this system of knowledge that shapes actors relating to the development apparatus through processes of normalization and discursive formation. In being formed by the discourse, actors’ agencies thus reproduce the very discourse by which they are shaped. Ferguson (1994) names this the ‘reproduction thesis’, meaning that a “structure always reproduces itself through a process” (ibid.: 13). Hence, in the Foucauldian sense, development’s mind-set and worldview are continuously reproduced by development agents and agencies, having the effect of strengthening the already established discourse and thus making other forms of knowledge less relevant (Hobart 1993). This makes it even more difficult for other forms of knowledge and practice to gain resonance within the prevailing discourse. This has obvious implications for discourse and its relation to agency. Orlandini (2003: 20) explains: “Considering the development enterprise as a discourse implies that the ‘underdeveloped’ world is constructed through representations and that reality is constantly ‘inscribed’ by discursive practices
of developers, economists, demographers, nutritionists, etc.” Consequently, the development discourse is continuously reproduced and thereby strengthens its hegemonic position and power of formation and normalization over those individuals relating to it, while minimizing the influence of alternative or deviating knowledge and practices.

Too strict a conception of discourse and its formative power, however, has implications for the general view of actors and their agency. Post-development is, Mosse (2004: 644) asserts, “an ethnographic blind alley, which merely replaces the instrumental rationality of policy with the anonymous automaticity of the machine” leading to a ‘new functionalist’ sociology. Ferguson (1994), for example, proposes a rather static picture of actors and their agency in relation to the discourse’s formative power. Actors are seen as mere representatives, bearers, and reproducers of the development discourse, which is the post-development explanation as to why so many development projects seem to fail. That is, agency is not only intentionally neglected by the development apparatus but also, in effect, inscribed into a particular worldview and thus constructed by the discourse that it is embedded in. An inevitable result of this rigid comprehension of discursive power is that human agency is neglected as a factor that might deviate from the prevailing discursive order, and individuals, in being instruments of the discourse, are disengaged from any kind of freedom. How does this notion of individuals’ inferiority to external discourses relate to actors’ lived lives? More generally, how does post-structural analysis relate to the concept of freedom and how does it take the subjects’ agency into account?

Discourse and Power

Critics argue not only that post-development in its strictest sense is guilty of homogenizing the very idea of development and conflating it with the modernization theory of the 1950s and 1960s (cf. Escobar 1995; Sachs 1992), but also that it is responsible for constructing ‘the others’—that is, the recipients and intended beneficiaries of aid—as post-colonial subjects (Brigg 2002; Kiely 1999; Peet 1997). This relates to an inconsistency among post-development scholars: while many criticize institutional development for lacking sensitivity to agency and diversity in the ‘Third World’, they are mistaken in ascribing too much power to the discourse and thus viewing the subject as a mere bearer and reproducer of a given discourse. Hence, Kiely (1999: 31) maintains, development becomes “a particular discourse which does not reflect but actually constructs reality. In doing so, it closes off alternative ways of thinking, and so constitutes a form of power.” This illustrates the capillary and productive—as opposed to prohibitive—aspects of Foucault’s notion of discursive power (Fraser 1989: 18; Oksala 2005): a discourse ‘allows’ for certain ways of thinking and thereby excludes others. With explicit reference to Foucault (1980: 115), Kiely (1999) asserts that “[i]t is thus discourse, and not the individual subject, that produces knowledge—indeed the subject is the product of discourse” (ibid.: 33). As knowledge is intimately connected to power, each society has its own
regime of knowledge, and the constitution of subjects is therefore inseparable from knowledge/power formations. Oksala (2005: 4) writes that “the subject is always constituted in the power/knowledge networks of a culture, which provide its condition of possibility.”

Critics read this omission of agency in discursive analysis as one of the key weaknesses in Foucault’s thoughts (Best and Kellner 1991; Oksala 2005). For Foucault and post-development scholars in particular, power is not seen as something operating over or against individual subjects; rather, it is “a machine in which everyone is caught” (Foucault 1980: 156). However, in his later works, Foucault analyzed three various modalities of power: dominance, strategy, and governmentality (Foucault 1994). Dominance is a direct power relation that leaves no doubt as to who governs whom. Although it is akin to the Weberian notion of power, it differs in that Foucault emphasizes the subjects’ ability to yield resistance, since power, being relational, cannot exist without the presence of opposition. Strategy is a game between wills in which the question of who will win is not determined a priori but becomes an empirical question. Governmentality is a modality of power attached to reflexivity and how the subject governs itself, that is, the conduct of conduct. Generally, post-development theory subscribes only to the first modality of power, dominance, while simultaneously failing to grasp the relational aspect of power. In order to understand how power operates, it is necessary to see its effects from the recipient’s viewpoint. Post-development’s neglect of the various modalities of power and the ignorance of individuals lead some to see Foucault’s stance—and that of those drawing on his framework—as “anti-humanism” (Rapport and Overing 2000) and “post-humanism” (Fraser 1989).

Rapport and Overing (2000), writing on Foucault’s anti-humanism from an explicitly individualistic viewpoint, state that Foucault’s notion of discourse is inaccurate and unsubtle because it conceals the details of the ongoing work of social interaction and how individuals create themselves and their social relationships. The authors maintain that it is the individual usage of a discourse that enables it to manifest itself in a social setting. Yet Foucault seems to neglect agency, making discourse appear as an empirical travesty. “For,” Rapport and Overing (ibid.: 123) assert, “it is the agency of each individual which is ever responsible for animating discourse with significance ... without which discourse would simply remain inert cultural matter.” This derives from two bases of the anti-Foucauldian argument: first, that discourse is not the same as consciousness and that communication is “never simply a matter of an exchange of conventional verbal or behavioural forms” (ibid.); second, that socialization within a set of discourses is never ‘completed’ in the sense that all people equally incorporate the same discourse.

Fraser (1989: 56) argues along similar lines when she describes Foucault’s approach as a post-humanist one, “which explicitly rejects the metaphysics of subjectivity.” Fraser’s reading of Foucault concludes that “for Foucault, the subject is merely a derivative product of a certain contingent, historically specific set of linguistically infused social practices that inscribe power relations upon bodies” (ibid.). This is the rationale for Foucault’s assertion that power
is in our bodies, not in our heads, and it leads him to state that even the producer of a discourse is incapable of deciphering it because power is everywhere and in everyone. Fraser is skeptical about this apparent hegemonic notion of modern power, which leaves nothing to the individual act, even though the individual is seen as the discursive bearer, because it objectifies people and negates the autonomy usually attributed to them. Fraser consequently calls for an understanding of the individual as being able to conduct morally reflexive acts and to distinguish between better and worse—a capability ignored by a theory that sees the individual merely as a derivation of discourses.

The anti-humanism in discourse analysis is reflected in post-development theory. Kiely (1999) argues that the almost exclusive focus on discourse has been at the sacrifice of the agents of development, who are seen merely as bearers and thus reproducers of a particular discourse. Granting too much formative power to discourse leads to a great reductionism of individual and cultural variations. The resulting neglect of agency behind discourse has been identified as among the key weaknesses of Foucault-inspired analysis (ibid.; cf. Oksala 2005). According to Peet (1997: 77): “Postmodernism favours fragmentation and difference except in its own treatment of modern development theory which it portrays in terms of a monolithic hegemony.” This brings a critical reaction to post-development theory, which in Peet’s perspective is guilty of exaggerating the power of discourse over agency, namely, that “discourse analysis often denies what postmodern philosophy supposedly cherishes—that is, difference, and difference of a fundamental kind” (ibid.: 79). Human agency and variations within the discourse are overlooked, and the actor is seen merely as an instrument of the discourse. This is because post-development scholars tend to equate discourse and discursive practice with the totality of social life and the multitude of what is going on. Kiely (1999: 43) maintains: “Recognising that the ‘objects’ or ‘subjects’ of development can only be known through discourse is not the same as claiming (as post-development theory sometimes implies) that they can be reduced to discourse.” Kiely points to the problem that post-development faces with reductionism, since everything is reduced to discourse, thus rendering the concepts of agency and individual freedom meaningless. Calhoun (1995: 110) states that “the postmodernist is called upon to ‘wage a war on totality.’” Rather, post-development theory, in its neglect of agency, can be considered guilty of homogenizing development (Kiely 1999; Peet 1997), or, in its failure to represent agency and its choice to “substitute the dead hand of determinism” (Rapport and Overing 2000: 123), it can be viewed as an empirical travesty.

To claim for discourses their own animating force is an act of reification and hypostatization that might lead to totalitarian analytical consequences, which is the case with some post-development scholars. When it is argued that there is no freedom in discourse, the argument rests on the claim that there is no autonomous subject (Oksala 2005). While discourses provide means of expression, they do not determine what is meant by them (cf. Knapp and Michaels 1982). It is actors, through their interpretive practices, who instill discourses with meaning, not the other way around. Boden (1990: 189) contends that
actors are “knowledgeable agents, not cultural dopes” and suggests that structural macro approaches be integrated with micro studies that take the individual as the point of departure in order to see how the meanings they attribute to their (joint) action feed on each other and thus both shape and renew those understandings in consequential ways. Boden (ibid.: 192) calls for the return of the agent in social theory in order to counter the reductionism of macro analysis and to show actors’ potential reflexivity toward larger structures. A further account is given below on the macro-micro pair with relation to the discourse-agency nexus and its post-development scope in particular.

**Discourse-Agency Nexus**

Is an actor perspective compatible with discourse analysis? What level of importance, if any, should this relationship be given in social analysis? What is the relation between an actor perspective and what is perceived as various scales of social analysis? These questions relate to the many conceptual pairs of social sciences, such as, for example, structure-actor, macro-micro, and collectivism-individualism (cf. Boden 1990; Ritzer 1990a, 2001; Kapferer 2004), along with the related notion of individual freedom. According to Oksala (2005), in referring to the critique of Foucault, post-structuralism is often read as a rejection of the subject and a repudiation of its autonomy, which “leads to the denial of any meaningful concept of freedom, which again leads to the impossibility of emancipatory politics. When there is no authentic subjectivity to liberate … the idea of freedom becomes meaningless” (ibid.: 1–2). Post-development scholars tend precisely to neglect individual freedom and to see the subject as shaped by discursive power and structural constraints (Kiely 1999). Appropriating Foucault, Oksala (2005) argues that the subject gains meaning within discourse—that is, in the context of power relations and in relation to larger structures—and this is, in Foucault’s thoughts, the freedom of the authentic subject: “[i]t is in the body that the seeds for subverting the normalizing aims of power are sown. The body becomes a locus of resistance” (ibid.: 124). The focus on actors’ relation—and potential for resistance—to larger structures has been largely omitted from social theory as a result of the conflation of micro-macro approaches following the rapid proliferation of structural analysis (Grønhaug 2001).

At the outset of the 1990s, Ritzer (1990b: 2) asserts that the social sciences have entered a new era, away “from theoretical dogmatism and in the direction of theoretical synthesis.” He argues that there is no longer room for the old and reified labels that have dominated sociological theory for centuries: “older theoretical and conceptual (e.g. micro-macro) boundaries and divisions are breaking down” (ibid.). Either there is a great distinction between sociology and social anthropology, or Ritzer’s prophecy of theoretical development did not come true. On an empirical level, the rapid growth of post-development theory during the 1990s conflicts with Ritzer’s view. On a more general level, Grønhaug (2001) counters Ritzer by stating that the 1990s were characterized
by a conflation of various theories and approaches in uniform categories such as structures and discourses. Kapferer (2004) represents a third perspective when he argues that the trend of the last two decades has seen an increasing dichotomization of our perception of society emanating from the retreat of the ‘social’—being the node where micro and macro necessarily need to relate to and thus shape each other.

As with other disciplines, Grønhaug (2001) asserts that contemporary anthropology is also characterized by Kuhnian ‘paradigms’ and the conflation of theories and approaches into grand theories, such as Lévi-Strauss’s structuralism or Foucault-inspired post-structuralism. Overarching ideas and guiding structures gained terrain simultaneously—awkwardly enough—in the heyday of postmodernism in the social sciences. Postmodernism entailed a focus on the fluidity of categories and society, which Grønhaug considers to be among the reasons that large-scale system approaches gained influence: the reception of systemic perspectives was celebrated precisely because it enabled the researcher to regain oversight over the complex postmodern empirical field and to explain how the complexity was internally connected. However, Grønhaug reminds us, that which the model fails to grasp is neglected or, at best, put in a residual category (ibid.: 62, 65; my translation). Furthermore, it undermines the qualitative multitude that is internal to structures and relations, resulting in blindness to structural change, transformation, or dissolution, because the paradigm is demarcated so that one knows what to look for and what to omit. Grønhaug (ibid. 64–65) contends that the depiction of empirical universes from a postmodern perspective thus ends up as a monolithic structural and linguistic analysis that undermines the very multitude that the postmodernist approach initially set out to address. Grønhaug argues that those who accept Foucault’s conception of discourse are characterized by the ambition of providing a unified, comprehensive explanation, similar to that which motivated the search for grand structural theories. Hence, these scholars choose “to conflate various phenomena into one type of relation and treat them all from a singular perspective—as discourse” (ibid.: 63). This neglect of micro aspects in social analysis in order to advance macro perspectives not only reduces a field’s complexity but also has the effect of disregarding any notion of agency, so that individuals are seen as being merely derived from structures.

Whereas Grønhaug sees the recent trend in social sciences as one of theoretical conflation with the aim of advancing structural approaches, Kapferer (2004) sees the same field as the “retreat of the social,” which is leading to an increasing dichotomization: “The idea of the social as integral to understanding is being bypassed … [This] development has forced oppositions (structure versus agency, determinism versus freedom, objectivism versus subjectivism, for example) that are radically distorting and are otherwise negative in consequence” (ibid.: 151). However, where Gronhaug views conflation as a general trend in social sciences, Kapferer sees anthropology as the abnormal discipline, being “expressly anti-structural, asserting processes of agency and individual subjectivity” (ibid.), that is, romanticizing subjective-oriented empiricism at the cost of generic and structural analysis. This has led to a growing dichotomization
and a marginalization regarding notions of the social and society, causing them to be fragmented (cf. Iteanu 2004: 214) into micro and macro.\textsuperscript{9}

Iteanu (2004: 218) argues that the retreat of the social,\textsuperscript{10} which formerly made up a fertile field of research, has led to a radical distinction between practice and discourse. This, Iteanu asserts, contradicts Derrida’s premise for studying the social, which identifies discourse with practice. This is in line with Neumann (2002), who asserts that many who appropriate discourse analysis fail to recognize what initially made it influential in social analysis—that is, practice, the importance of which was also emphasized by Foucault and Wittgenstein, the seminal thinkers of discourse analysis. There is thus a need to reintroduce practice and agency as part of the social sciences’ use of discourse analysis.

**Discourse-Agency Amalgamation?**

Various scholars relate differently to the discourse-agency nexus. Foucault characterized his work as a genealogy of the modern subject, and his archaeological approach reveals different modes of objectification by which human beings are turned into subjects. Oksala (2005) argues that these modes parallel three distinct periods of Foucault’s authorship. The first period centered around the archaeological approach and notion of discourse in which language constituted the main empirical field. The second period looked into genealogies and the disciplinary force of discourses and how these became inscribed in bodies. The third period focused on ethics and the subject’s relationship to itself, illustrated by the term ‘governmentality’ as the conduct of conduct (ibid.; cf. Cruikshank 1999). In the two first periods, Oksala argues, the subject appears to be subordinated to discourses, but this is mainly because the analytical focus is not on the subject itself but on how discourses are articulated and reproduced in language and body. In the last period, Foucault asks how individuals recognize and constitute themselves as a subject in relation to various discourses. Now, Oksala (2005: 4) writes, “the subject is studied not only as an effect of power/knowledge networks, but also as capable of moral self-reflexivity—critical reflection on its own constitutive conditions—and therefore also of resistance to normative practices and ideas.”\textsuperscript{11}

Oksala (2005) maintains that Foucault’s “ethical turn” does not essentially alter his notion on the subject—it is more a matter of shifting perspective. Foucault still denies the autonomy of the subject, because it will always be constituted in cultural power/knowledge networks. But to Oksala this is precisely what provides its conditions of possibility: if all is discourse, freedom must be found internal to the discourse itself. In relation to discourse, freedom “is the virtual fractures that appear in the invisible walls of our world, the opening of possibilities for seeing how that which is might no longer be what it is” (ibid.: 208). Closely related to discourse not as truth but as the result of historical and current power/knowledge formations, individual freedom can also be seen as an epistemological question: “[F]reedom is the condition of possibility of knowledge because it enables us to refrain from believing things that are not
completely certain and hence to avoid error” (ibid.: 13). Moreover, Foucault (1994) argues that “subjects will always be free in the sense that they can commit suicide, jump out of a window or kill their master.”

On the other side of the argument, there are those who maintain that Foucault and the general notion of discourse are totalizing with regard to individual agency. Honneth (1991) reads Foucault and his concept of discourse as posing an anti-subjective hypothesis; hence, he sees Foucault as a functionalist, implying that there is no playing field for the individual act, whether it is internal or external to a discourse. Honneth argues that Foucault, after developing his notion of power and discourse, forgets that his approach is based on an analysis of the practical intersubjectivity of social struggles, which opens the way for resistance. Rather, Honneth (ibid.: 174) contends, Foucault interprets “the institutionalization of positions of power as a process of the constant use of force.” By drawing on, among others, Honneth and Habermas, Allen (2000) argues that Foucault is a functionalist in his view on discourse and the subject, the latter being to Foucault merely or nothing more than “the effect of the anonymous functioning of a particular, historically and culturally specific, discourse” (ibid.: 115). In the words of Honneth (1991: 112), when assessing the consequences of Foucault’s literary-theoretic interpretation of social life: “[T]he human is no longer the experiential center of a course of action which he encounters and oversees, but the arbitrary effect of a network of events out of which he can no longer make sense and which is produced by the rules of language.”

This reading of Foucault implies a wholesale eradication of the concept of human subjectivity (Allen 2000). Brenner (1994) also sees Foucault as a functionalist, which he asserts with recourse to his empiricism. While Foucault’s theory of power is closely linked to concrete empirical studies, which led to the refinement of his theoretical apparatus, Foucault’s concept of resistance is articulated solely in theoretical terms—that is, power is seen as relational, meaning that it cannot exist without the possibility of resistance. Brenner, who parallels Gledhill (2000), asks why Foucault insisted on the centrality of resistance to all forms of power without examining this in an equal and thorough empirical way as he did when devising the theory of power and discourse. Brenner (1994: 680) does not give any comprehensive answer, but asserts that the effect for Foucault is a functional analysis of power relations that “limit his analysis of resistance to the conceptual grammar of ‘dysfunctionality.’” To Allen (2000), this leads to a cultural and social determinism on Foucault’s behalf and a total failure to recognize any kind of reflective self-understanding on which individuals rely in making sense of their social world: “[I]t completely renders negligible the first-person perspective of the individual agent as a crucial aspect of analysis for social and political philosophy” (ibid.: 116).

A third perspective, which is more about enhancing the applicability of Foucault-inspired post-structural theory, seeks to integrate the subject into discursive analysis by focusing on structure-actor interplay. This approach aims to counter what Grenhaug (2001) refers to as the conflation of social theory—which has led to the neglect of social relations and interactive structures—by readdressing the social as a nodal point for social theory in order to
grasp “the subjective experience and production of realms” (ibid.: 66).\textsuperscript{13} Social theory, Kapferer (2004: 151) asserts, needs to consider the “complexities of [structures’] internal dynamics, their structurating processes, and the forces of their effects on human action.” Although Kapferer gives importance to structures, he nevertheless makes a call to analyze how these are articulated among actors and thus contribute to shaping society. In countering the resurgence of simplistic system thinking and the recourse to either-or approaches, Gronhaug (2001: 65) argues that one should apply various (and also conflicting, if necessary) theoretical paradigms and approaches. This aligns with Denzin’s (1989) notion of triangulation, that is, the combination of multiple strategies, theories, and methods in the study of the same phenomena. It should be noted, however, that that there is no ‘magic’ in triangulation, other than making the researcher aware that different approaches yield different pictures and slices of what is conceived of as the empirical reality. This underscores a common anthropological insight that “there is no standpoint from which a phenomenon can be grasped in its entirety” (Nustad 2003: 127). Kögl er (1999) and Long (2004) both seek to fuse the tools offered by the discursive approach and the micro-analytics of social power practice.

Kögler (1999) argues for a mediation of the insight provided by Foucault-inspired post-structuralism and the conceptual framework of hermeneutics, due to their common emphasis on the social-symbolic construction and perception of reality.\textsuperscript{14} Kögl er (ibid.: 251) seeks to devise a framework of “how social power structurally influences belief formation and how such influence can be called into question through critical interpretation.” Discourses, as symbolic forms, provide background horizons for the intelligibility of individuals’ orientation in their subjective realm, that is, a form of social pre-understanding. From his critical hermeneutic perspective, Kögler asserts that this enables a concept of reflexivity in interpretation, allowing the “individual to distance herself from the taken-for-granted background of symbolic assumptions and social practices” (ibid.: 252). This interpretive dialogue characterized by subjective reflexivity enables critical self-reflection concerning agency. The subject’s ability for self-reflection is premised on understanding discourse as a symbolic construction, because, “[f]rom the agent’s point of view, symbolic values are not arbitrary but rather are grounded in her own experience and interaction with social, personal, and natural environments” (ibid.: 3). Various discourses contribute to enforcing and stabilizing the actors’ sense of reality that is conferred by discourse, but as it is the agents themselves who (re)interpret and change these discursive orders, Kögler maintains, this illustrates actors’ intuitive and self-reflexive sense regarding what composes these orders and how actors organize their worlds regarding their explicit intentional activities. This analysis of discourse-actor relations underpins Kögler’s point regarding discursive formation over the individual because his analysis of power remains “hermeneutically sensitive inasmuch as it takes as its analytical point of reference the agents’ own contextual conceptions of self-realization” (ibid.: 14). Kögl er states that this form of analysis of and approach to the structure-actor dilemma was made possible by the discursive turn of social theory.
Whereas Honneth (1991) reads Foucault as a functionalist because he draws too heavily on the structural anthropology of Lévi-Strauss in devising a “system of rules that unconsciously determines human action and thus indirectly problematizes the naive trust in the objects of the human sciences” (ibid.: 106), Kögler (1999) asserts that the Foucauldian-discursive turn opened up the possibility of utilizing the pros of structuralism while simultaneously countering its cons by applying other perspectives rendered possible by post-structuralism. This is because the post-structuralist turn initiated by Foucault enabled the (re)introduction of “the distinction between a symbolic-discursive level of ‘reality construction’ and a level of social practices” (ibid.: 4). Whereas the structuralism of Lévi-Strauss reduces the dialectic between what is perceived as universal and particular to cognitive basic universals, the same distinction is to Foucault a matter of discursive and practical particulars. However, Kögler’s point is to engage this dialectic with hermeneutics, because “a hermeneutic conception of linguistically mediated experience allows for a productive dialectic between the universal and particular within the act of interpretation itself” (ibid.: 6), which would enlighten the researcher on the interplay between theoretically informed discourses and subjects situated internal or in relation to discourse.

To return to the realm of studies on development, Long (2004), writing on knowledge encounters in relation to the development sector, argues along similar lines as Kögler but on a more practical level. Long addresses where the authoritative and influential ideas of development come from and the way in which they are transferred and received at various levels, and how we can research the process of knowledge production, dissemination, and transformation. Long applies an actor-oriented, social-constructionist, theoretical position that enables him to grasp how ideas in the form of discourses are produced, transmitted, and received among various actors by focusing on practice. A focus on practice implies that ideas cannot be conceptualized as discrete mental events or objects, or as being separate from interests. Rather, it suggests that ideas are assembled and knitted together in different temporal and spatial contexts and thus constitute forms of power through their capacity to produce or contest certain cultural representations. Long argues for the importance of unraveling “the discourses in specific arenas of struggle, especially where actors vie with each other for control over resources in defence of their livelihood concerns” (ibid.: 28). Discourses, Long reasons, “are not separate from social practice—hence the use of the phrase discursive practice in the writing of Foucault” (ibid.).

Long (2004) understands discourse as a system of knowledge on the same qualitative level as other knowledge systems. He argues for analyzing how these intersect, relate to, and influence each other as articulated in situations of interface, that is, the “critical point of intersection between different social systems, fields or levels of social order where structural discontinuities, based upon differences of normative value and social interest, are most likely to be found” (ibid.: 35; cf. Long 1989; Long and Long 1992). Interface implies a shift in analytic focus from the various discourses and systems of knowledge toward the various situations where these meet and become articulated, which
render the theoretical conception of a priori formative discourse obsolete to the advantage of studying it empirically. Studies of interface give focus to the discontinuities in social life (e.g., values, knowledge, and power), since interfaces “typically occur at points where different, and often conflicting, life-worlds or social fields intersect” (Long 2004: 35). The concept of interface thus provides a privileged approach to studying empirically the intersection of development discourse and agency.

Conclusion

Just as with discourse analysis, an actor-oriented approach should recognize that different methods yield different insights, and that assessing various systems of knowledge without having attributed formative power to them enables the study of how they intersect and interrelate. An empirical, actor-oriented approach not only helps to open up black boxes of discourse by addressing the relationship between policy and practice (cf. Mosse 2004), but also challenges and nuances the post-structural depiction of discourse, notably the formative power that post-development scholars ascribe to it. Drawing on insights from post-development theory, an actor-oriented approach offers the possibility of understanding how meanings associated with development are “produced, contested and reworked in practice—and thus … illuminate the multiple significances that the term holds for actors involved in the development process” (Lewis et al. 2003: 546). Whereas post-development provides a privileged approach to grasp the discursive formation of development and its mobilizing metaphors, an empirically grounded actor-oriented approach can reveal actors’ brokerage of externally imposed ideas without recourse to post-development’s firm belief in discursive formation and the consequential demotion of agency. Agency should be included in the realm of post-development without conflating the two approaches.

An actor-oriented approach conveys an increased emphasis on the ethnography of aid in order to grasp actors’ practices and their valuable, reflective insights on how they receive, translate, interpret, resist, manipulate, or embody development discourse. Taking agency as the analytical point of departure will contrast and shade post-development scholars’ depiction of the formative power of development discourse and disclose how meaning is negotiated and produced among actors. Although still scarce, there is an incipient and growing body of literature that aspires toward an ethnography of aid by drawing on post-development and the critique of its ambiguous relation to empiricism and its vulgar stipulation of agency (cf. Gould 2005; Mosse 2005; Mosse and Lewis 2005).

Informed by post-development, these works address development discourse empirically and demonstrate a more subtle comprehension of discourse’s formative power. Including agency in the post-development approach and moving attention from discourses to where they intersect as articulated by actors would enable one to get past post-development’s view on discursive formation that is inherent in its dichotomized discourse-agency straitjacket.
Seeing development discourse from an actor-oriented perspective implies not only a critique of post-development theory but also a strengthening of its relevance when studying knowledge encounters in the development sector. It demonstrates that discourses can co-exist and intersect with each other, and underpins Trouillot’s (1992: 25) point that “no discursive field is fully ‘ours’ or ‘theirs.’” Since discourse is perceived to be an intersubjective construction, one might thus expect that a discourse, aligned with actors’ self-reflexivity, can be reconstructed and even deconstructed.

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Notes

2. Manzo (1991) borrows Derrida’s concept of logocentrism, which describes a disposition to impose hierarchy when encountering familiar and uncritically accepted dichotomies, for example, North and South, developed and underdeveloped, modern and traditional, core and periphery, etc. In such binary oppositions, the latter is understood in relation to what constitutes the former. Manzo explains: “The first term in such oppositions is conceived as a higher reality, belonging to the realm of logos, or pure and invariable presence in need of no explanation. The other term is then defined solely in relation to the first” (ibid.: 8).
3. Roger Just (2004) makes a distinction between the ‘particular’ individual (or ‘the individual individual’, i.e., the Jack and Jill in social analysis) and the ‘generic’ individual, which is an aggregate term for individuals and is often used in narrative analysis.
4. There are numerous definitions and conceptions of discourse among those applying a Foucauldian framework. These definitions differ, but what they have in common is that they all emphasize a knowledge system’s formative power over the subject. With regard
to post-development, Long (2004: 27) defines discourse as “a set of meanings embodied in metaphors, representations, images, narratives and statements that advance a particular version of ‘the truth’ about objects, persons, events and the relations between them. Discourses produce texts—written and spoken—and even non-verbal ‘texts’ like the meaning embodied in infrastructure such as asphalt roads, dams and irrigation schemes, and in farming styles and technologies.” Sutton (1999: 6; cited in McGee 2004: 13) defines development discourse as “describing a way of thinking and looking, a system of values and priorities that marginalises other possible ways of thinking. A discourse is a configuration of ideas which provides the threads from which ideologies are woven.” McGee (2004: 13) states that “discourses are constructed and perpetuated through the selective use of knowledge, and also foster the production and construction of particular sorts of knowledge, in a logic self-perpetuation and self-reinforcement.”

5. This view is also associated with Escobar (1995), Ferguson (1994), and Sachs (1992).

6. This counters post-development’s more hermetic reading of Foucault, while also drawing on the various modalities of power—dominance, strategy, and governmentality—of Foucault’s later works.

7. This argument parallels Kiely’s (1999) and Peet’s (1997) assessment of post-development theory.

8. Kapferer (2004: 151) does not define or make any explicit conceptualization of the social or society—or “their reformulation in other terms.” However, by reading the text, the social refers to the anomaly (i.e., both/and, neither/nor) of structures and actors. The product of individuals, it is manifested in structures that simultaneously influence what is produced and how it is produced. The social seems to grasp intersubjectivity’s inter-relation with interactive structures.

9. Both Kapferer and Iteanu see this trend within the social sciences as a reflection of larger societal changes aligned to the trajectory of neo-liberalism.

10. See previous note. As Iteanu does not define the social and since his text is in the same journal as that of Kapferer, who has compiled and edited the contributions under the heading “The Retreat of the Social,” one might assume that Iteanu shares—at least roughly—Kapferer’s conception of the social.

11. Oksala (2005) counters Fraser’s (1989) critique of Foucault by introducing the concept that the individual is able to distinguish moral good from moral bad.

12. Functionalism, in the Durkheimian sense, sees society as an integrated whole, as a stable organic system where a change in one place involves change for the entire system. Functionalism sees the individual as an epiphenomenon of society. This differs from Malinowski, who called himself a functionalist yet saw the individual as the foundation of society. Malinowski reasoned that culture functions to meet the needs of individuals rather than society as a whole, so when the needs of the individuals (who compose society) are met, the needs of the society are met. This note, however, refers to the former (Durkheimian) notion of functionalism. Interestingly, the subsequent lineages of the epistemological ‘what is functionalism’ debate highlight a basic tension in the anthropological discipline between structure and agency (cf. Eriksen and Nielsen 2001: 41–47).

13. My translation of “den subjektive erfaring og horisontering av livsverdener,” which seeks to encompass the interplay of structures/discourses and actors/agency.

14. Kögl (1999) asserts that the methodological divergence concerns (a) how to undertake an analysis of the symbolic medium of thought; (b) how theorists relate to their “object domain”; (c) the interlinkage of power to language and discourse; and (d) how to address the question of cultural universals or reductionism.

References


