

## **Book review – Arturo Escobar. *Encountering development: the making and unmaking of the third world*, Princeton University Press, 1995.<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract:** *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World (1995)* is a celebrated and renowned work of Arturo Escobar. Born and brought up in Columbia, Escobar is a notable Professor of Anthropology at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. The text is built upon the foundations of Escobar's doctoral dissertation titled *Power and Visibility: The Invention and Management of Development in the Third World (1987)*. This ground-breaking work was conferred with the Best Book Award by the New England Council of Latin American Studies in 1996.

**Keywords:** food dependency, sustainable development, women's development and grassroots development

**JEL codes:** Y3

### **1. Introduction**

The book is structured thematically, covering an extensive range of ideas including the discovery of poverty, food dependency, sustainable development, women's development and grassroots development. The quotes, an introduction to each chapter, are thought-provoking and lend a glimpse to the rest of the chapter. This book came after the Cold War drew to a close, creating a new space for the Third World countries to have a say and place in global affairs. According to Escobar, the cold war was undoubtedly one of the single most important factors at play in the confirmation of the strategy of development (33).

The 1990s saw an emergence of anti-development or post-development literature. Most of these works were written by anthropologists and Escobar's book, released in 1995, makes a lasting and impactful impression, both due to its originality and ability to convince the reader. For a long time, the focal point of development studies had been the West. The Post Second World War period saw a shift in focus towards the so-called Third World. However, the epistemology of the development in the Third World is incomplete without the enunciation of the role played by the West. Escobar establishes this relationship by proposing the three axes that define development – the forms of knowledge that refer to it, the system of power that regulates its practice and the forms of subjectivity fostered by this discourse. This forms the very crux of Escobar's argument that the United States of America and Western Europe undertook the 'unmaking' of the

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<sup>1</sup> Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1995, pp. 312.

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Third World under the garb and illusion of ‘making’ it, breaking the decades-old myth that Europe and North America provide perfect models for the Third World.

## 2. Contents

The book propounds how, under the pretext of development, over-ambitious projects, failed strategies and unfeasible programs added to the problems they set out to solve. *Underdevelopment became the subject of political technologies that sought to erase it from the face of the earth but multiplied it to infinity* (52). An apt example of this is Escobar’s description of how decision-making and management were entrusted to ‘development professionals’ with little importance attached to the interpretation of each society’s history and culture, as undertaken by intellectuals such as Gandhi (52).

In *Encountering Development*, Escobar has rendered a narrative which is an amalgamation of anthropology and culture studies such as political and intellectual perspectives. It takes an interdisciplinary approach blending anthropology with economics, history, sociology and development studies. Relying heavily on Foucault’s work on the dynamics of discourse and power in the representation of social reality, Escobar compares Edward Said’s discourse on *Orientalism* (1978). He cautions against the differences between orientalism and development stressing more on practices rather than theory (11). Escobar’s book takes on substantial and rooted issues and aligns them in the development context such as the discovery of mass poverty (21), the rubric of the welfare state and social work (23) and the relationship between the colonialist and developmentalist regimes of representation (26). Peter Worsley’s *The Three Worlds* (1984) depicts how the third world has changed drastically over a period of fifty years and examines the constituents of cultural, political and economic development. Similarly, Escobar’s work takes on an economic viewpoint from cultural, political and anthropological stands.

The author consistently claims that the ambition and vision of American and European style of economic development brought an excessive damage to the Third World Countries resulting in disasters such as poverty, economic decline, and even crises. In my view, development is a two-edged sword. Like any other major transformation and revolution, it had positive and negative implications. Escobar unequivocally stresses on the harmful effects of development, calling it a nightmare. While the book serves as an eye-opener on the repercussions of western mode and practices of development, it draws little attention to its merits. While Escobar pronounces the capital formation and the various factors associated with it: technology, population, and resources, monetary and fiscal policies, industrialization and agricultural development, commerce and trade (40), he refuses to recognize how these elements also fostered the advancement of these countries.

A significant argument that caught my attention was Escobar’s description of the discovery of poverty in Asia, Africa and Latin America (21) and how the Third World has been meted out an unequal treatment and received a meagre proportion of the aid compared to Europe (33). In Chapter 2, he advocates that economic growth as a solution to poverty became universal truths. It provides a comprehensive account of the precursors of development such as colonization, the emergence of new strategies such as science and technology, public intervention and the role of international organizations such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. Chapter 3 evaluates the motives and structures of early development economic theories as building blocks of development. It proposes the need for a cultural politics that balances mainstream economics with local models (58). It is stimulating to comprehend the nuances of economic discourse from a social and cultural angle. The anecdote on The World Bank (86) reveals how development aid extended from planning the project, managing the practices to controlling the entire process.

In Chapter 4, Escobar states that in the post-World War II era, hunger became the core of all development initiatives. He discusses how strategies that were implemented to solve the hunger crisis have led to their aggravation. He insists that the bureaucracy involved never laid stress on the local's needs and problems (111), made the Third World dependent instead of self-sufficient, lacked coordination between the research, planning, and implementation. In the fifth Chapter, Escobar investigates the problems of the peasants, women, and environment. For example, he asserts that the Green Revolution led to a new upsurge resulting in political unrest and upheaval (158). According to him, women were reduced to docile and cheap labour force (177) and their overall position in society declined further. There is no evidence to suggest that these outcomes could have been different if development was localized rather than an enterprise of the West. He also rejects the idea of sustainable development which is a viable solution to economic hazards.

The concluding chapter entails a special mention as it is the only text that deals with 'alternatives' but does not do justice to the same. Escobar states that there is no grand solution for unmaking development. He suggests that ethnography, cultural studies, grassroots initiatives could undo the evils of development but in a superficial tone. He leaves the reader feeling pessimistic about development by his concluding statement, *there are worlds that development...is bent upon destroying*.

As a student of History and Development, I found this book extremely useful as it delivers a comprehensive discourse on how the poverty of the South became a major agenda of the world, the efforts undertaken to solve this crisis and the outcomes of the same. However, the book does not discuss *what development is* or *how is development different from westernization or modernization*. What interested me was the treatment of development as a Third World notion rather than a Euro-centric or American pejorative like most works on the issue.

The strength of the book lies in the author's ability to communicate in an articulate and lucid manner, making vital arguments in a simplistic and uncomplicated fashion. For a non-development expert like myself, the book provided a very exhaustive analysis of the process of development and its impact. The book, however, lacks practical and feasible alternatives to the predicaments suggested in the discourse. It was only in the last chapter that Escobar mentions alternatives to development which would preserve culture, environment, social life and yet uplift economic circumstances.

### **3. Conclusion**

*Encountering Development* is an in-depth analysis of Western-oriented development of the Third World within the period from the Second World War to the 1990s. The author designates development as a process involving the transfer of knowledge while retaining power and control over the Third World by the West. He evaluates the impact of development on the nature of culture, politics, society and economy of the Third World Countries. In my view, the author could have taken a less patronizing position while assessing the Third World, not projecting them as victims of policy and Western power, spineless at the local and global level. This book serves as a sound complementary read to a reader who is well versed in the fundamentals and strengths of development.