

## RESEARCH BRIEFS

# Escobar's Proposed Alternative to Development: A Critique and Proposed Revisions

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In *Encountering Development* (first published in 1995 and then in 2012), Arturo Escobar argued that: (i) there does not exist a unitary model for social-economic development (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2014), (ii) there are no grand alternatives to development that are applicable to all places or situations (Escobar, 1995; Ynalvez et al., 2005), and (iii) development schemes—no matter how noble their proponents' intentions are—do not necessarily yield their intended outcomes and planned effects so that context and identities are important factor to consider. This is what Shrum (2005) and Ynalvez, Duque, and Shrum (2010) described as *reagency*. Escobar revealed how the West run athwart these three points in its pursuit to apply its own version of development to the non-West, and how that version “expectedly” or “unexpectedly” produced the antithesis of development—mass poverty, malnutrition, environmental degradation, energy crises, and the destruction of the indigenous cultures in developing countries (the Third World).

Escobar treated development as a form of colonialism and analyzed it using discourse analysis; to think of *development as a discourse* “makes it possible to maintain the focus on domination, explore more fruitfully the conditions of possibility and the most pervasive

effects of development” (Escobar, 1995, pp. 5-6). For Escobar, discourse analysis

creates the possibility of standing detached from the development discourse, bracketing its familiarity, in order to analyze the theoretical and the practical aspects with which it has been associated. It makes it possible to single out “development” as an encompassing cultural space and at the same time separates the analyst from it, by perceiving it in a totally new form. (Escobar, 1995, p. 6)

In *Encountering Development*, Escobar delved into the theory and practice of development and revealed how these are characterized by subjectivity, ethnocentrism, cultural bias, misunderstanding, and ultimately failed promises (Escobar, 1995). Escobar's ideas are borne of the growing realization that the promises of development are far from being fulfilled and clearly becoming an epitome of destitution and destruction. He saw the social construction of the Third World as a product of Western ethnocentric invention of the development discourse—an invention in sync with Philip McMichael's (2007) notion of the Western-led *development project*—, and that development itself was an equally crafted regime of representation in an attempt of the West to impose power-driven interests

on the cultures and peoples of Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

Escobar saw development as a historically singular experience, the creation of a domain of thought and action. He analyzed the attributes and interrelation among the three axes that define development as a discourse. Those axes are: (i) the forms of knowledge through which the development discourse comes into being and is elaborated in concepts, theories, and practices; (ii) the system of power that regulates the development practice; and (iii) the forms of subjectivity fostered by the development discourse, through which people come to recognize themselves as either developed or underdeveloped. For Escobar, “the ensemble of forms that results from this three-dimensional space constitutes development as a discursive formation, giving rise to an . . . apparatus that systematically relates forms of knowledge and techniques of power” (1995, p. 10). This discursive formation, according to Escobar, is activated through two mechanisms—institutionalization and professionalization—that are structured by forms of knowledge and systems of power.

### A CRITIQUE OF ESCOBAR’S ANALYSIS

Engaging Escobar’s work at the conceptual level is not easy, as concepts seem to have a multiplicity of content and meanings. At times, he construed the development discourse as “a process through which social reality comes in to being” (Escobar, 1995, p. 39). At other times, he saw it as “a rule-governed system held together by a set of statements that the discursive practice continues to reproduce” (Escobar, 1995, p. 154). Yet at other times, he saw it as “a practice, with conditions, rules, and historical transformations” (Escobar, 1995, p. 216). For him, the development discourse is a process, a system, and a practice. To have it this way is awkward and counter-intuitive. Although it may

or may not be possible to have all three forms manifested in one concept, Escobar’s framework would have been clearer had he painstakingly reconciled these different definitional forms. Inconsistencies create confusion among concepts and contradictions in the relationship among concepts can render a framework shaky; this is what happens in Escobar’s case.

On another important aspect, Escobar viewed colonial discourse and development discourse as having the same underlying principles. He argued that development discourse, like colonial discourse, has “created an extremely efficient apparatus for producing knowledge about and the exercise of power over the Third World” (Escobar, 1995, p. 9). Although his argument appears logical and valid, it is rather highly unlikely that the nature and exercise of knowledge and power in colonial discourse would be the same as that in the development discourse, given the stark difference in the forms and levels of knowledge and technology of the epochs from which these discourses were formed. With contemporary society construed as both a *network society* (Castells, 2000a, 2000b) and a *knowledge-based society* (Stehr, 2001b), and with the bases, nature, and structure of knowledge and power different from those of the colonial era, it seems naïve to assume that the underlying principles would be the same for both colonial and development discourse.

From yet another perspective, there seems to be inconsistencies in Escobar’s argument in regards to the dimensions that define colonial and development discourses. While Escobar identified three dimensions—forms of knowledge, systems of power, forms of subjectivity (Escobar, 1995, p. 10)—for the latter, he only identified two dimensions for the former [i.e., production of knowledge and exercise of power (Escobar, 1995, p. 9)] and yet he maintained that both discourses share the same underlying dimensions. One could speculate on the difference in the number of dimensions. Most probably in

colonial discourse, forms of subjectivity are not an important dimension. Presumably, there was no “function” or “need” for various forms of subjectivity because there were no parties to influence but only parties to coerce by way of military force and strength. In contrast, in the era after 1945, the mechanism is knowledge and information, so that the distorting and censoring of information and knowledge became the main influencing mechanisms.

In addition, the Escobarian framework is vague and problematic with regard to the *elements* and *systems of relations* in the development discourse. He argued

that to understand development as a discourse, one must look *not* at the elements themselves but at the system of relations established among them. It is this system that allows the systematic creation of objects, concepts, and strategies; it determines what can be thought of and said. (Escobar, 1995, p. 40)

As elements, he enumerated “the process of capital formation, and the various factors associated with it: technology, population and resources, monetary and fiscal policies... education... and the need to foster modern cultural values”...and finally, “the need to create adequate institutions...” (Escobar, 1995, p. 40)

His argument in favor of a systems (or relational) approach to the understanding of development is logically sound given that the dimensions that define development discourse are fundamentally relational concepts such as knowledge, power, and the propagation of subjectivity. However, Escobar is somewhat inconsistent as to what the elements of development discourse really are or what constitutes the elements of the development discourse? For example, Escobar did not clarify but rather makes ambiguous his concept of elements, when he purported that the development discourse “was the result of the establishment of a set of relations among these elements, institutions, and practices and

of the systematization of these relations to form a whole” (Escobar, 1995, p. 40).

While it is true that Escobar gave concrete examples of what elements are, he had somehow altered the hierarchical relationship between the concept of institutions and that of the concept of elements from a previously vertical to a horizontal direction. Hence, the reader is later on prompted to think that elements are at the same level as institutions and practices, when earlier the reader was brought to think that elements are a type of institutions. While Escobar is right to argue that the understanding of development discourse does not reside at the elemental level, a clear understanding of what elements are is necessary in building an internally consistent framework. Escobar’s argument would have been more convincing if he provided a clear-cut definition of the elements of the development discourse and how these are logically connected.

Escobar viewed development as a “historical construct” meaning that it was “a response to the problematization of poverty...not a natural process of knowledge that gradually uncovered problems and dealt with them” (Escobar, 1995, pp. 44-45). He argued that

to speak of development, as a historical construct requires the analysis of the mechanisms through which it becomes an active real force. These mechanisms are structured by forms of knowledge and power and can be studied in terms of processes of *institutionalization* and *professionalization* (*Institutionalization* refers to the creation of an institutional field from which discourses are produced, recorded, stabilized, modified, and put into circulation; while *professionalization* refers mainly to the process that brings the Third World into the politics of expert knowledge and Western science. (Escobar, 1995, p.45).

With this argument, it then makes sense to counter argue that: with the advent of information and communication technologies (ICTs) which

permits access to information in real time from anywhere around the world, there may be more than two processes at work. Globalized social networking was previously confined to professionals and institutions in the developed countries. Then suddenly, professionals and institutions from developing countries find themselves in this communication and collaboration process (Ynalvez & Shrum, 2011). Hence, in the context of the network society (Castells, 2000a, 2000b), there is a proliferation of “weak” and “strong” ties (Rule, 1997) at the global scale that makes it imperative to include the process of *communication, collaboration, and social networking* in the analysis of social change.

Another important point is Escobar’s casting of time and space. While neither is explicitly stated nor defined, Escobar’s framework casts time and space still in the context of what Castells (2000a) described as the industrial mode of development in which time is construed as absolute and linear; while clear-cut boundaries, mutually exclusive, and rigid domains define space (for Castells (2000b), the sequence in the mode of development of societies is as follows: agrarian, industrial, and informational. In the latter part of this paper, I propose that the sequence is as follows: agrarian, industrial, informational, and knowledge-based). This is not an issue if Escobar were to “intrapolate” within the domain of the industrial mode of development. But this is definitely an issue if he were to “extrapolate” and recommend alternatives beyond this domain. For example, extrapolating observations made from the *industrial* to *informational* mode of development may not be applicable mainly because of differences in format (Castells, 2000a), level, and logic of technological advancements. These differences could well distort the spatial and temporal dimensions of reality (or the properties of cyber time versus real time, and cyber space versus real space). It would have been better and in keeping with realities ushered

in by advances in digital technologies if Escobar attempted at a contemporary conception of time and space (Castells, 2000a 2000b) because his notion of time and space is still driven by the central-organizing entities of societies at the industrial model of development, which are labor and property.

### **ESCOBAR’S ALTERNATIVE TO DEVELOPMENT: PROPOSED REVISIONS**

The central thesis in *Encountering Development* is that there are no grand alternatives to development that can be applied to all places or all situations for all time. Escobar further posited that one must resist the temptation to formulate development alternatives at the abstract and macro-level (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2014). Instead, the formulation of alternatives must occur at the actual sites of action and interaction, which are at the concrete and micro-level (Aguilar et al., 2013). He proposed the investigation of alternative representations and practices in “concrete local settings”; particularly as they exist in the context of hybridization, collective action, and political mobilization (Escobar, 1995, p. 19). As possible spaces for an alternative to development, Escobar saw possibilities in models and strategies that: (i) focus on local culture and on local knowledge, (ii) employ a critical stance with respect to established scientific discourses, and (iii) support the defense and promotion of localized pluralistic grassroots movements. Despite these promising spaces for an alternative to development, Escobar gave neither a clearly stated practical strategy nor a meaningfully novel analysis of the local hybrid social forms to learn from. As such, Escobar’s concepts of the *local level* and *local knowledge* are more slippery than ever and far more instantaneous than he seems to imply.

### ***What is local?***

The concept of the *local* is core to Escobar's alternative because "the impact of development representations is profound" at this level (Escobar, 1995, p. 51). He claimed that at this level, the "concepts of development and modernity are resisted, hybridized with local forms, and transformed" and that more studies on the "languages of development at the local level needs to be done" if a deeper understanding of the development discourse is to be attained (Escobar, 1995, pp. 51-52). Yet, despite the centrality of this concept in Escobar's search for an alternative to development, this concept is less than clear. While he implied the village-level context whenever he uses the term local, this is inadequate. With the advent of ICTs, Escobar's informal definition of the *local* appears to be archaic and one-dimensional. Like many social theorists, Escobar seemed to imply that the local is something given. This thinking is akin to Robertson's (2001) notion of *geographic essentialism*, which emphasizes the "given-ness" of the local.

To provide a contemporary description of the local, I view this level (localization) relative to the global (globalization), and in relation to the spatial-temporal dimension of social reality (Robertson, 2001). This view does not imply that the local is the opposite of the global; nor does this imply the mutual exclusiveness of the local from the global. Rather, it implies the intersection of the local and the global because of the realities ushered by ICTs through which spatial and temporal boundaries are being de-territorialized; and the social realities of communication, collaboration, and networking that transcend the physical dimensions of time and space. Hence, the fusion between globalization (*space of flows*) and localization (*space of places*) is steadily attained as geographically separated locations and spaces are "made proximate" in cyberspace where time lag in the transmission of information

(or communication and collaboration) approaches zero. (In Castell's *The Rise of the Network Society* (2000, p. 458), "space of flows" is synonymous to globalization, while "space of places" is synonymous to localization). Castells (2007; 2000a) described this phenomenon as *time-space compression* in which time "ceases" to be linear and sequential, and space "ceases" to be bounded and rigid.

I propose that in the Digital Age when ICTs steadily tear down the barriers of time, space, and distance, it is increasingly meaningless to speak and think of change, ideas, and knowledge as emanating from the local to the global level and vice-versa. This is because the spatial and the temporal dimension of what is local have been altered and warped by how social reality is experienced. In the network society, the spatial dimension of the local is stretched to the point that there is no mutual exclusiveness of the boundaries among different locals. The temporal dimension of the local is compressed such that interaction among locals, no matter how spatially dispersed around the globe, takes place simultaneously and with virtually no time lag.

The social dimension of the local has been broadened such that social interaction does not only take place in *real-time* and in *real-space* (e.g. face-to-face interaction) but also in *cyber-time* and in *cyber-space* (e.g. live chats). Socially interacting units are more and more heterogeneous, and less and less homogeneous. In other words, the local contains much of which is global, while the global is increasingly penetrated and re-shaped by many locals (Riggs, 2002, p. 2). Escobar's notion of local fails to account for these alterations, changes, and warping in the logic of the local.

Hence, I argue in favor of a "hybrid concept" that covers the spatial and the temporal of the local and the global back grounded by the diffusion of ICTs. Along this line of thought, Robertson (2001, p. 402) developed the concept of *glocalization*. It denotes new kinds of realities

and relationships between local and global, which are made possible by ICTs. While Escobar proposed alternatives at the “local concrete setting,” I counter that the “local concrete setting” is steadily disappearing so that alternatives are increasingly being situated in “glocal setting.” The glocal setting, being local and global simultaneously and emanating from the local and transacted at the global, are manifested in the communication, collaboration, and networking that take via social networking media such as *Facebook*®.

### ***Knowledge and Mode of Development***

Knowledge plays a central role in Escobar’s analysis. Knowledge is one of three dimensions that define development as a discourse (Escobar, 1995, p. 45). Escobar argued that Western-led development has relied extensively on one knowledge system: *the modern West*. It is the dominance of this system that has resulted to the marginalization and disqualification of non-Western knowledge systems (Escobar, 1995, p.13). In Escobar’s search for alternatives, forms of knowledge take a central role. One such form from which alternatives could possibly be harnessed is what Escobar referred to as *local knowledge*. I will discuss this in the next section.

Escobar made sense in emphasizing knowledge as key to the analysis and prescription of alternatives to development. However, his treatment of the role of knowledge in development seems to predate the Digital Age. Castells’ (2000a) and Stehr’s (2001a, 2001b) ideas about knowledge and development addressed this weakness in the Escobarian framework. Castells (2000b, p. 16) talked of “modes of development” as the technological arrangements through which labor works to generate the products that ultimately determine the levels of profit. Castells further argued that societies in the Digital Age are increasingly approaching the “informational mode of development in which the source

of productivity resides in the technology of knowledge production, information processing, and communication... and in contrast to other modes of development, the informational mode is characterized by the action of knowledge upon knowledge itself as the main source of productivity” (Castells, 2000b, pp. 16-17).

Similarly, Stehr (2001b, p. 495) argued that knowledge has always had a major function in society and that societies in the Digital Age are increasingly becoming knowledge-intensive compared to societies that predated the Digital Age. This is not to imply that societies in the Digital Age have done without property and labor. What Stehr posited is that a new mechanism—knowledge—has entered the social relationship of production to the extent that “it challenges as well as transforms property and labor as the constitutive mechanisms of society” (2001b, p.496). Stehr further argued that sociological analysis must increasingly focus on the nature and function of knowledge in social relations “as well as the carriers of such knowledge together with the resulting changes in power relations and sources of social conflict” (2001b, p.496). Hence, a synthesis of the ideas of Escobar (1995), Castells (2000a), and Stehr (2001b) on the role of knowledge in development provides a superior framework applicable to the social realities generated by the diffusion of ICTs.

Despite the centrality of the role of knowledge in his critique of Western development model as applied to Third World countries through projects and economic development strategies of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, Escobar’s idea of knowledge remains in need of further refinement. While he has done much to emphasize the role of knowledge in development discourse, he somehow is unable to come up with a formal definition of knowledge, which is crucial if his framework for an alternative to development is to stand empirical validation. Granted that at the very least, Escobar implicitly provides a definition

of knowledge, Stehr's (2001b, pp. 494-497) approach proved to be more systematic because he explicitly defined knowledge as the "capacity to act" or the "capacity for action." Defined this way, Stehr argued that knowledge maybe left unused, or may be applied without regard of its possible consequences and "employed for irrational ends" (2001a, p.36) Stehr further argued that knowledge implies that the "material realization and implementation of knowledge" (2001b, p.498) is a function of the context of specific social, economic, and intellectual conditions. This is akin to the traditional view of knowledge as being generated in one place, and applied in another without regard of the possible repercussions to the indigenous culture of the latter (Escobar, 1995, p. 148).

What Escobar lacks in providing attention to details to his concept of knowledge, Castells provided in having clear-cut definitions. Castells' definition of knowledge is that of Bell (1976 as cited in Castells, 2000a). Both agreed that "knowledge is a set of organized statement of facts or ideas, presenting reasoned judgment or experimental result, which is transmitted to others through some communication medium in some systematic form" (p. 17). Castells further delineated knowledge from information by defining the latter as data that been organized and communicated. Hence, Castells' approach is superior in the sense that he distinguished among three important concepts: knowledge, information, and data.

My argument is founded upon Escobar's assertion that knowledge is a significant and vital cog in directed social change. However, I update Escobar's conception of the nexus between knowledge and directed social change. I do this by proposing to view societies in the Digital Age to be approaching a "knowledge-based" mode of development in which the central organizing principle relates to the production of knowledge and processing of information transacted via the format and logic of ICTs (Stehr, 2001b). Because

I view knowledge in a conceptually different way from information in that the former conveys "capacity for action" (Stehr, 2001b) and the latter as "inputs for the capacity for action," I purport that Castells' (2000a) notion of informational mode of development is theoretically and logically the immediate precursor of what I refer to as "knowledge-based" mode of development or knowledge societies (Stehr, 2001b).

Hence, in the ordering of modes of development, I envision the following sequence of social change: *agrarian, industrial, informational, and knowledge-based* and refer to societies in the Digital Age as characterized by an increasingly *knowledge-based mode of development*. In this sequence, Escobar's framework and consequently his proposed alternative are viewed to be in the context of societies at the "industrial" and "pre-informational" modes of development. And because societies approaching the knowledge-based mode of development "no longer mimics earlier stages—that is, the future is made from fewer and fewer fragments of the past" (Stehr, 2001b, p. 504)—Escobar's framework, if not formulated to reflect the realities of the network and the knowledge society, is fast rendered archaic.

### ***Local Knowledge versus Glocal Knowledge***

As possible spaces for an alternative to development, Escobar (1995, p. 19, 204) focused on "concrete local settings"; more specifically *local knowledge* and *local culture*. Escobar (1995, p.111) questioned the validity of conventional development approaches through which information are processed, knowledge generated, and development-strategies formulated at the "top-level and work their way down to the local level, where most of the work is done," and where action and interaction take place (Aguilar et al., 2013; Escobar, 1995, p. 111).

Escobar's critical stance toward top-down development framework finds support in

Sillitoe's (1998, p. 223) assertion that a revolution is unfolding in the pursuit of ethnography—a “hyper-ethnography” (Escobar, 1995) as the “development world” shifts its focus “from top-down intervention to a grass-root (bottom-top) participatory perspective... The focus of that revolution is on a new form of knowledge described as “indigenous knowledge” or “local knowledge” (p. 204). This is an approach that allows the ethnographer to view the entire development network, investigating in detail the main actual sites with their respective actors and identities, cultural background and context, and practical appropriations of the intervention (e.g. a project) by local groups and identities (Escobar, 1995; Shrum, 2005). While Escobar (1995) and Sillitoe (1998) shared a common development trajectory vis-à-vis the importance of grassroots development perspective, and the focus on local knowledge, Sillitoe (1998) provided a more rigorous treatment of the subject than does Escobar. Where Escobar was unclear about his notion of local knowledge, Sillitoe was clear and posited that the idea of indigenous/local knowledge explicitly sets out to make connections between local people's understandings and practices, and those of the non-local researchers and development workers who are seeking to achieve a sympathetic and in-depth appreciation of local people's experiences and to link them to scientific discourse.

Because of the “globality of the local and locality of the global” in both developed and developing areas in the Digital Age, I opt *not to use* the term local knowledge. Instead, I propose to appropriate the notion of *glocal knowledge* by which the main contention is: with rapid ICT-diffusion globally, the boundaries between local and global knowledge quickly breaks down. Hence, in the long run purely local knowledge ceases to exist. Instead, knowledge in the Digital Age is a continuing interaction between knowledge informed and generated from a particular location (or context), and knowledge

informed and generated in other locations (or contexts) such that the flow of information and production of knowledge take place in real-time despite the global spatial dispersion of other sources of information and knowledge.

While the production, generation, and flow of knowledge during the years after the Second World War until before the advent of ICTs were based on the mechanisms of *institutionalization* and *professionalization*, the main mechanisms in the production and flow knowledge in the digital age are the processes of *communication, collaboration, and social networking*; which are all the more made sustainable and viable through new ICTs (Aguilar et al., 2013; Ynalvez & Shrum, 2011). Hence, the mechanisms for the formation, production, and flow of glocal-knowledge are the on-line communications, collaborations, and social networking of knowledge producers and various identities in one location with those in other locations. As a way of knowing, the distinctive feature of glocal knowledge is it permits the multi-directional and the simultaneous production of knowledge and flow of information in real time among identities in spatially dispersed locations. Hence, the knowledge available at any one location is a conformation of experiences from several other locations.

In other words, the advent of ICTs and the emergence of glocal knowledge as a new way of knowing essentially set aside the conventional top-down (center vs. periphery, first world vs. third world, developed versus developing countries) flow of information and knowledge, which was the hallmark of the post-World War II development discourse (Castells, 2000b). The insight behind glocal knowledge is that each piece of knowledge produced and applied requires calculated sensitivity to local circumstances, identities, and practices. In a way, it can be said that glocal knowledge involves a multi-directional flow, exchange, and sharing.

## CONCLUSION

In seeking an alternative to development, Escobar focused on various aspects of the development discourse: *its dimensions, elements, systems relations, mechanisms, and processes*. Although there are issues, Escobar's framework makes sense. While he focused on "local concrete settings" and "local knowledge," I counter that Escobar's proposal is inadequate in the context of societies in the Digital Age—societies that are simultaneously knowledge- and network-based. Because ICTs warp the spatial and the temporal dimensions of what is local and what is global, it is increasingly becoming less meaningful to focus on both local level and on local knowledge only. The dimensions of the local and the global have fused together seamlessly.

Instead, a search for an alternative must focus on the "cyber and real glocal setting" and concentrate on "glocal knowledge." In the Digital Age, it is increasingly less important to look into local knowledge for these are fast becoming "hybridized knowledge" —or "glocalized." Meaning, these are fast evolving from simply and solely being local. Local knowledge is becoming a kaleidoscope of ideas and information from various contexts, identities, places, and times. However, this does not mean that Escobar's argument should be debunked all together. Rather, it means that Escobar's argument would be internally consistent and robust if his proposed alternative puts ICTs in the equation. This is because ICTs' capacity to reshape the spatial and the temporal dimension of social reality create and recreate new realities that require new perspectives and strategies in effecting social change.

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