3 FROM COLONIAL ADMINISTRATION TO DEVELOPMENT STUDIES: A POSTCOLONIAL CRITIQUE OF THE HISTORY OF DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

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A INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I foreground and explore a different history of development studies to that which is conventionally rehearsed. Here I examine the colonial genealogy of development studies through the lives and experiences of individuals whose careers stretch across different historical moments encompassing the administration of colonies and the establishment and emergence of development studies in institutes of Higher Education in the UK. The postcolonial analysis of the history of development studies that is presented here challenges orthodox versions of its history and questions the conventional start date of 1945 as marking the beginning of development. The aim is to identify the traces of colonialism that pervade the workings of the post-independence international development aid industry and highlight the extent and form of the relationship between colonialism and contemporary development studies. Furthermore, through the narratives that are presented in this chapter, former colonial officers offer their own historical perspective and critique of development. This analysis of relationships and trajectories of ideas, institutions and people is important because it deepens our understanding of why and how development studies has evolved.

The following section that analyses the recent and varied approaches to understanding the colonial legacy of development, is followed by discussions as to why development studies rarely acknowledges these colonial roots. I argue here that there is a perceived imperative for many of those within contemporary development studies to distance themselves from the negativity that surrounds this genealogy and instead present a rather truncated versions of its history. The third section is based on research with former colonial officers who following formal independence of former colonies subsequently worked in the field of development studies. Here, through their stories and recollections I demonstrate the relationship between colonialism and development focusing particularly on the experiences and skills that they took into development studies and how, if we are not to deny historical continuities, these have shaped the culture and direction of post-independence development. The chapter concludes by attempting to draw out what this particular historical reading highlights in terms of the continuities and divergences between colonialism and development.

A UNDERSTANDING THE COLONIAL LEGACY OF DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

Postcolonial analyses examine the historical effects of colonialism and the persistence of colonial forms of power and knowledge into the present. In exposing colonial discourses and practices, postcolonialists attempt to reveal how contemporary global inequalities between rich and poor countries have been, and continue to be, shaped by colonial power relations. Through problematising,
deconstructing and de-centring the supposed universality of Western knowledge, postcolonial perspectives critically engage with, and resist the variety of ways in which the West produces knowledge about other people in other places and interrogates hegemonic histories that often obscure the continuing effects of colonialism (see Kothari 2004). However, much of this type of interrogation has taken place outside of development studies.

A discursive analysis of development began in the 1980s with the emergence, and increasing prominence, of so-called ‘alternative’ approaches to development, such as gender and development, environmental and sustainable development and participation and empowerment as well as alternatives to development advocated by post-development theorists such as Escobar (1995). However, investigations of the links between colonialism and contemporary international development have emerged only recently (see Sylvester 1999). Influenced by the types of analyses that underpinned dependency and world-systems theories in the 1970s, much critical literature from the 1980s that emerged out of postcolonial and post-development critiques, focused on how the development project creates and perpetuates uneven and unequal development between First and Third World countries. These approaches centre on the analysis of development discourse and how it shapes and defines different realities. Post-development theorists attempt to deconstruct the idea of post-war development and some call for a total abandonment of the project. They argue that development discourse is ahistorical and obscures the political realities of the development industry. Further, they suggest that it is hegemonic in its construction and regulation of Third World identities and limits the adoption of alternative ways of organising and achieving social progress. Some of these critics have argued that development is a ‘neo-colonial’ project that reproduces global inequalities and maintains the dominance of the South, through global capitalist expansion, by the North. In questioning the history, objectives and means of development some of these critics have argued for the recognition that the current economic, social and political situation in developing countries and the continuing interest of the West in the Third World cannot be properly understood without an adequate understanding of their historical, and particularly colonial, background (Chandra 1992; Crush 1995; Cowen and Shenton 1996). Others have specifically traced the origins of the field of development studies in order to explore how development mediates, extends, entrenches or counters colonial legacies (Pieterse and Parekh 1995; Rahnema and Bawtree 1997).

There is ample evidence that colonialism survives the post-independence period in the form of economic and political relations and social and cultural representations. However, there are a number of different perspectives and emphases that have emerged to account for these ongoing relationships and their contemporary articulations and consequences. Said (1989), for example, is clear that ‘to have been colonised was a fate with lasting, indeed grotesquely unfair results’ (207; see also Miege 1980). Goldsmith (1997) develops this idea when he claims that development brings the Third World into the orbit of the Western trading system in order to create an ever-expanding market for the West’s goods and services and to gain a source of cheap labour and raw materials for its industries. This form of unequal trade is reminiscent of colonial forms of economic control and exploitation and thus ‘international development’, far from challenging uneven and unequal global relations, reproduces them. Thus, as Goldsmith states, ‘development is an old idea
and the path along which it is leading countries of the Third World is a well-trodden one’ (1997: 69). Others such as Mamdani (1996) have located continuities and divergences in institutional and administrative structures while Cooke (2003) provides evidence for the continuities between contemporary development management and colonial administration arguing that these reveal colonialist power relations. The colonial legacy of other fields of contemporary development practice have also been explored through, for example, genealogies of participatory approaches (Cooke and Kothari 2001), gender and development (Radcliffe 1994; Parpart 1995; McEwan 2001), community development and conservation and development (Adams and Mulligan 2003).

The historical continuum can also been understood in terms of the ways in which they articulate similar notions of modernity and progress. For example, Dirks (1992) suggests that colonialism can be seen as a cultural, and not just economic, project that created and maintained classifications and hierarchies between groups of people. Consequently, dichotomies of, for example, the ‘modern’ and the ‘traditional’ and the ‘West’ and the ‘rest’ are embedded within development discourse and this reassertion of colonial classifications of difference are often invoked to justify development interventions. The representation of peoples in and of the ‘Third World’ as ‘backward’, ‘traditional’ and incapable of self-government further embeds global distinctions developed during the colonial period.

Despite this evidence of colonial continuities into the present day, it would be a mistake to suggest that present day development discourse is simply a reworking of a (neo-) colonial one since development is not always and inevitably an extension of colonialism. Brigg’s (2002) has suggested that critiques of development need to take into account issues such as moral responsibility and humanitarianism and not focus solely on the perpetuation of colonial forms of authority and rule. While this is valid, it assumes that colonialism was not concerned with these issues but more problematically, by implication, that development necessarily is. An apt quote from Cecil Rhodes interestingly put these sorts of assumptions in perspective: ‘imperialism was philanthropy plus a 5 per cent dividend on investment’ (Rhodes quoted in Lawlor, 2000: 63). However, as I argue below we need to be wary of histories of development that deny this colonial genealogy and attempt to create distinct and artificial boundaries between the exploitation of empire and the humanitarianism of development.

A OBSCURING A COLONIAL GENEALOGY

The discussion above highlights the recent recognition by some critical analysts of an historical trajectory that links colonialism to contemporary processes of globalisation generally, and development more specifically. However, attempting to understand and analyse this interconnectedness is not a mainstream preoccupation within development studies. Indeed much of the postcolonial debate has been located within, for example, sociology, anthropology, literary criticism and geography and rarely in the development studies literature. However, Said reminds us of the need to locate our field of study historically and contextually when he writes,

‘…there is no discipline, no structure of knowledge, no institution or epistemology that can or has ever stood free of the various socio-cultural,
historical, and political formations that give epochs their peculiar individuality’ (Said 1989: 211).

Moreover, an ahistorical approach to development studies, or one that presents an epochal historicisation, obscures both the colonial genealogies of development and the historical continuities in the theory and practice of development. More generally, Chambers (1993) reminds us that with the accelerated rate of obsolescence of development ideas and the constant renewal of technical fashions in development practice, the need to revisit the past and be cognizant of the history of development appears increasingly important.

Although there are ongoing critiques of development, as shown above, (see for example Escobar 1995; Slater 1995) much research and teaching in development studies still tends to embed 1945 as the key year in which development was initiated with the establishment of the Bretton Woods institutions. This limited historical analysis in much orthodox/mainstream development studies reveals the largely unreflexive nature of the discipline, partly engendered through the imperative to achieve development goals and targets. With a few notable exceptions (Crush 1995; Grillo and Stirrat 1997), most historical reviews of development rehearsed in development research and teaching has tended towards a compartmentalisation of clearly bounded, successive periods characterised by specific theoretical hegemonies that begin with economic growth and modernisation theories, moving through theories of underdevelopment and culminating in neo-liberalism and the Washington consensus (see Hettne 1995; Preston 1996). An alternative version is one which is mapped onto particular events and processes; a political economy trajectory which traces by decade the history of development from the golden years of the 1950s through import substitution industrialisation in the 1960s to the debt crisis in the 1970s, structural adjustment programmes in the 1980s and subsequently alternative development and the Millennium Development Goals in the 1990s and after.

Another critical factor that shapes the continuing rehearsal of this rather shortened version of history that dominants the discipline, has been the perceived need to effectively distance development thought and practice from the contemporary negativity surrounding Britain’s imperial history. This concealment of a colonial past thus becomes, perhaps unwittingly, part of a project that creates and maintains a dichotomy between a colonialism that is ‘bad’, exploitative, extractive and oppressive and a development which is ‘good’ moralistic, philanthropic and humanitarian. This separation from colonialism absolves those in development studies of the responsibility of addressing how our work is related to the various forms of rule, authority and inequality that characterised so much of the colonial period. And, as the narratives from former officers presented below demonstrate, the extent to which engagement with the colonial encounter may also question our homogenising assumptions about those involved in colonial administration towards the end of empire. As one interviewee challenges,

You know, someone who sort of brands me as a sort of colonial, imperial exploiter, I'd say - OK, I can see that in the bigger picture you can see me in that role but that isn't what I was actually doing.
Overall then, there has been a political imperative to distance the international aid industry from the colonial encounter so as to avoid tarnishing what is presented as an humanitarian project far removed from the supposed exploitation of the colonial era. This chapter suggests that not only is there a need to question the comparison made whereby development can only be ‘good’ as it is set against a colonialism which is wholly ‘bad’ but that in presenting a different history of development we can see how development works in and against its colonial past.

A further reason for the dearth of critical analysis and extended historical view is perhaps related to the policy and practice focus of much work within development studies. Many of those engaged with these aspects of development see themselves primarily as practitioners, and therefore presume to have little use of theory. This division between the relative importance of theory and practice is an ongoing debate within development studies.

The relatively few studies that have engaged with the continuities and divergences from colonialism to development have tended to focus on institutional histories, analyses of the origins of the ‘doctrines’ of development and the colonial genealogy of ideas and practices of development (see Cowen and Shenton 1996; Havinden and Meredith 1993; Munck and O’Hearn 1999). In this chapter I want to introduce an additional focus of analysis in the form of personal narratives that I argue can provide a further resource for understanding histories of development generally and interrogating comparisons between colonialism and development specifically. Below I show how the experiences and recollections of individuals involved in both colonial administration and subsequently in the field of development studies as teachers, researchers and expatriate consultants can inform our understanding of development studies and in so doing provide another history of the discipline, its discourse and practice. I begin in the next section with a note on memory and history, arguing that the process of collecting narratives, and not simply the content of the stories provides us with evidence to interrogate alternative histories of development studies.

A MEMORY, NARRATIVES AND HISTORY

Changes brought about by political independence in former colonies led many of those employed in the British Colonial Office to leave Africa and Asia and find employment back in the UK. Amongst those embarking on second careers were a group of individuals who found employment in the newly emerging and rapidly expanding international development industry in the UK where they are (or were until retirement) involved in teaching Development Studies in Institutes of Higher Education, devising policies to address issues of Third World development and carrying out research and consultancy work for multi-lateral, bi-lateral and non-governmental organisations. The research on which much of this chapter is based traced the genealogy of post-war international development through the personal testimonies of those individuals whose experiences and skills as expatriates in the colonial service were thought to be particularly suited to the work of international development. Between 2001 and 2002 I interviewed 12 people who had previously worked for the UK Colonial Office and subsequently became engaged in development studies. The interviewees, whose stories are reflected upon here, had been posted to sub-Saharan Africa during their time in the colonial service. Most
have now formally retired although many continue to be active as development consultants, research associates in academic institutions, or in charitable foundations.

The taped interviews, only a greatly reduced version of which are presented here, focused on their motives and aspirations for joining the colonial service and their subsequent decision to become involved in post-independence development work and, explored changes in their roles and responsibilities as they continued their careers in development studies. These life histories and narratives articulate continuities through the telling of events and experiences over time and highlight how subjective and collective understandings of past and present are imbricated in each other. For example, individual stories about the period of Britain’s colonial rule, are unavoidably informed by an awareness of contemporary critiques of colonialism along with a more complex and varied Western attitude towards the outside world. Crucially, their accounts draw upon collective imaginaries and themes, since life stories are inevitably located in the social contexts of meanings, languages and institutional and national cultures. As Jameson notes, the narrativisation of an individual story and experience inevitably invokes the history of the collectivity itself (1986). Furthermore, as bearers of culture, the narrators are unavoidably influenced by historical and contemporary understandings of social relations, norms and customs that have become internalised. In this case, the negativity or at least awkwardness surrounding Britain’s Imperial history significantly shaped how stories were told, the language used and the form of self-criticism.

The lasting effects of colonialism are also manifest in the Overseas Pensioners Association to which some of the interviewees belong. Colonial officers who felt abandoned by the UK government at the time of independence established the Association whose main objective is to support those without adequate pensions. Interestingly, the Association also welcomes and supports activities which it feels will rescue the colonial project and its servants from the perceived negativity that surrounds that part of British history. There is a desire to ‘set the record straight about the good work done under colonialism’, to proffer a more nuanced testimony which foregrounds the positive impacts individuals could make in colonised spaces.

This contemporary context clearly informs their stories and the ways in which they recall and interpret the past and their role within it. The narratives provide evidence of how certain aspects of the past are invoked and others concealed in order to justify an individual’s role and actions. Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) and Anderson (1991) have shown how the ‘invention of tradition’ and the construction of an imaginary past enables this legitimisation. As Ranger writes, ‘Some traditions in colonial Africa really were invented, by a single colonial officer for a single occasion. But customary law and ethnicity and religion and language were imagined, by many different people and over a long time’ (Ranger 1993). The ‘imagined community’ of ‘home’ and ‘away’, invoked by the colonial officer, was also significant in shaping their experiences, the decisions they took and the framing of their recollections. While Gowan’s (2002) study of imperial elites returning to Britain from India demonstrates the construction of imagined geographies of ‘home’, in the narratives of former colonial administrators, there is also an imagined geography of ‘away’. For many, their lives were never as good as during the colonial period, partly because of the privileges of ‘race’ and gender but also because of what and whom they represented overseas. Therefore, as agents of colonialism
they ‘often display nostalgia for the colonized culture’ (Rosaldo 1993: 69) evident in the romanticised vision they continue to hold about, for example, Nigeria, Tanzania or Kenya. These representations and imaginings of home and away, imperialist notions of dominance and the civilising mission in much colonial discourses were transferred and translated into the sphere and context of post-independence development studies.

Importantly, through oral history, individuals can inscribe their experiences on the historical record and offer their own interpretations of the processes which connect their individual narratives with understandings of wider contexts and processes of change. Accordingly, these living memories can complement official and dominant sources and explanations of change, contest and challenge conventional discourses and interpretations, and attribute alternative versions of processes of change. Oral history not only allows evidence from a new direction but it also opens up new or under-researched areas of inquiry. In doing so, the diverse complexities of reality are illuminated while simultaneously this more nuanced understanding of different realities reveals common themes and trends. Thus personal testimonies of colonial officers can challenge established accounts, and provide significant justifications as well as critiques of colonial and development policy and practice. Furthermore, these personalised narratives can explain trajectories and processes which have led to more recent events and provide information which alludes to future aspirations and strategies (see Kothari and Hulme 2003). Finally, remembering is also about forgetting. Some former colonial officers feel that they have been forgotten in official versions of the history of colonialism and in contemporary understandings of colonialism, and that their testimonies correct this marginalisation while at the same time there are also ‘absent’ memories in their own accounts.

These reminiscences and retrospective narratives, reveal how colonial administrators and development professionals are conduits for dominant ideas and discourses about other people and other places but crucially, also continually negotiate and mediate these conventions in accordance with their experiences on the ground. For whilst colonial officers and development consultants are interpellated by powerful institutionalised practical and discursive knowledge, apparatuses which also provide legitimacy and a context for their specific roles, their experiences and approaches are inevitably subjective and contextual. I do not wish to suggest that the effects of colonialism were benign however, while we can, at one level, generalise about colonialism and development, on another, we must accept that there are multiple stories challenging the notion of a singular trajectory. Thus, historiographies of development studies may simultaneously reveal patterns and continuities but also identify what Crush (1995: 8) refers to as the ‘conflicting intellectual currents flowing through the contemporary domain of development’.

I have argued above that the process of constructing a narrative and not only its content provides evidence of the continuing effects of colonialism. This was further reflected in how my own subjectivity as interviewer, grounded in a particular ethnicity, gender and familial history, inevitably influenced the interviewees and their responses in a variety of covert and overt ways ranging from use of language to describe other people and other places to articulations of the benefits or otherwise of colonialism. Since individual recollections reflect collective and contemporary attitudes and perceptions, interpreting people’s stories then became a process of
analysing interpretations of the past and how memory is shaped by these influences, as much as about ‘real’ events and experiences. The individuals whose stories are reflected upon here who worked in development studies and were in the past part of the colonial administrative service, reveal the embodiment of historical continuities and reflect particular historiographies.

A FROM COLONIAL ADMINISTRATION TO DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

This section focuses on the relationship between colonial administration and development studies by identifying the sorts of skills and experiences that former colonial officers brought to post-independence development, their experiences of the transition from colonial administration to development studies and their thoughts on what development has come to mean. The section argues that these personal and collective historiographies provide evidence for the institutionalised links between colonialism and development and how they became embodied in the individual. Furthermore, they have wider implications in terms of understanding the origins of contemporary development discourse and practice.

The quote from Said below emphasises historical continuities. He writes,

‘Imperialism, the control of overseas territories and peoples, develops in a continuum with variously envisaged histories, current practices and policies, and with differently plotted cultural trajectories’ (Said 1989: 219).

Similarly, the era of colonialism, like the historical evolution of development and its ongoing formation, never embodied unchanging and homogeneous objectives and practices. In fact, the establishment of the Colonial Development Corporation in 1948 marked the beginning of more structured and formal development work undertaken by colonial administrators when they were increasingly required to address, for example, community development, food production strategies and most obviously forestry and natural resources projects. That these were well underway, under the auspices of the CDC in the 1940s, highlight the intertwining of these fields, wherein heterogeneous and shifting ideologies and practices were imbricated in each other.

The practical implications for some colonial officers during the late colonial period were that their responsibilities were directed towards the preparation of colonies for indirect-rule and self-government rather than the expansion of colonial territories. This no doubt created some ambivalence for those officers who were aware that their jobs were increasingly concerned with preparing nations for independence, an objective which could ironically result in the loss of their own employment and status. While the administrative workings of colonial rule appeared to be changing, so did the motives of many who joined the service in the late colonial era. Many felt that independence was imminent and therefore this was a very exciting period of global change (Kirk-Greene 1985) but at the same time, feared for their future security of employment.

Although the narratives reflected upon here are those of a small number of former administrators and their accounts are inevitably subjective, interestingly they all saw themselves as development practitioners prior to the formal end of colonial rule.
They did not view their activities in the context of the expansion or even of the maintenance of empire, but in latter day colonialism they felt that they were already ‘doing’ development. Thus, they were not only colonial officers but were simultaneously development practitioners and therefore are able to reflect on a very specific transitional moment.

A quote from one of the interviewees referring to the moment when he was required to leave the colonial service reveals the perceived link between the work carried out in the late colonial period and the work of post-war development.

And I thought, right if I can no longer do this job and work out here the next best thing is to be working for the development of Kenya in the development field – after all it is the same thing. Yes, I was fed up in that it was clear that the winds of change meant you couldn’t stay on forever. But, what’s the point of chasing a dwindling Colonial Empire around – let’s get back and get our teeth into something that will be important – helping Third World countries.

Clearly then towards the end of the colonial period, there were some administrators who felt that their jobs in the colonial service were more closely related to development work. Indeed some of them had originally been posted in the colonies out as teachers under the auspices of the Colonial Education Department, or as Forestry and Agricultural officers.

At the time of independence those employed in the colonial service had to make decisions about their future and although some stayed on after independence, they realised that this was always going to be a short-term strategy as ‘it was obvious the Africans were going to go for the administrative jobs and maybe also the top jobs in the Police’. Others chased a dwindling empire around but they were just delaying coming back to the UK and ‘in the end even they were washed away by the tide of independence’.

Finding a job on their return to Britain was not always easy partly because ‘in this country there was this attitude that ‘Oh God, he’s been in Africa for 12 years; he won’t be much use to us!’ However, some ex-colonial officers did find jobs in the legal profession or as teachers in schools, while others joined the newly-emerging and rapidly expanding international development industry. Those who were based in academic departments taught courses in public administration primarily to overseas students from newly-independent states (see Clarke 1999; Minogue 1977) and periodically returned overseas as consultants on development projects (see Chambers; Cameron this volume). Others worked for multi-lateral agencies such as the UN and World Bank, bi-lateral institutions and international non-governmental organisations.

It is not the intention here to homogenise the institutions or the individuals operating within them, as clearly they do not have fixed and singular identities but are spatially and temporally varied. However, decolonisation, processes of globalisation, the workings of the Bretton Woods institutions and the nature of international finance and trade have altered the environment within which development takes place. Moreover, within the development process, changing discourses of foreign aid, and theories and policies of international development successively shaped practices as
did the evolving relations between Britain and its former colonies. Thus, while there are continuities, the workings of the Colonial Office and the role and mission of a colonial officer within it changed significantly from the early colonial period to the lead up to independence. Similarly development organisations are distinguished in their objectives and global reach which vary from place to place and over time as are the individuals within them differentiated by their specific roles, responsibilities and location.

What this transition meant for former administrators is revealed in their narratives that reflect on their induction into the development industry, particularly focusing upon their subsequent critique of the development process and a perceived contrast between the forms of expertise and practice they mobilised in colonial and immediately post-colonial contexts and the very different skills and procedures of contemporary development professionals. They also assess apparent disjunctions and continuities between colonial and development praxis, further questioning the overwhelmingly negative perception of colonialism as a totality irrespective of specific and individual endeavours. These recollections deepen our understanding of how their experiences and skills came to shape the direction and form of post-independence development studies. That is, the experiences of former colonial administrators moving into development studies can tell us something about the ideologies and practices upon which post-independence development was formulated.

As some of the interviewees recalled, to work in Development Studies Departments in UK institutes of higher education in the early days: ‘The argument was that you must do development if you are going to teach it. So you must have done development in some way or another’. However, many former colonials felt that this was ‘later watered down and we had people who were really only theorists’. Thus, many of those who worked overseas as part of the aid mission were often not viewed by former colonial officers as ‘experts’. As one interviewee notes,

The conditions where lots of people could live for a decade or two in Africa and Asia are gone. As a professional you might be able to stay as a, I was going to say hippy tourist, but that’s not entirely fair. But you won’t be on the inside, you’ll still be, as a tourist, on the outside…..Most aid agencies have a policy which I think is wrong, that four years is the maximum they’re going to be posted to another country. As the cynic would say, they don’t want too much expertise on a single country. The senior people get worried if they can be contradicted by somebody from below who knows better. In Whitehall now, the desk officers are lucky if they even visit the countries they’re handling in the files on their desks.

This reduction of in-depth knowledge of other places and people was expressed as a considerable problem within development studies:

We want to be able to teach courses here where we can say this is going to be the best approach for this sector in Africa but the point I’m trying to make is we should not continue to generalise about Africa. Each country is unique.
This was compounded by the antagonism between those in development who had a background in the colonial service and younger development ‘experts’ who did not.

In 1970 in ODA there was still a residue of old colonial servants – former District Commissioners or Provisional Commissioners and all the Agricultural Advisers, Engineering Advisers, and Education Advisers were all ex-colonials who had experience overseas. By 1983, the young, very intelligent, tremendously articulate had taken over but with no overseas experience. There were still some old chaps left, but not many and the atmosphere had changed. The attitude towards what was happening in developing countries had changed. It had become more impersonal and less sympathetic.

Importantly, former colonial officers were unimpressed with the policies and strategies being devised in post-independent development:

I shouldn’t say this but I will, when I meet young chaps who now work as development Advisors or listen to people talking about development aid, and they say ‘We’re doing X, Y and Z’ I think ‘Oh my God, we were doing that 20 years ago and we failed as well!’ I am astonished sometimes that we go on inventing the wheel and the wheel goes round, and I don’t think that this is just a silly old man talking.

In order to contextualise this tensions between those who began their careers in development studies and those who had a background in the colonial service and whose working environments now overlapped it is necessary to understand their histories. Specifically, the practical skills, knowledge and accumulated experience that they felt they had acquired from living for long periods in former colonies they felt were subsequently mistakenly being devalued.

During the late colonial period, the skills required to become a colonial administrator included the practical skills and capabilities of living for extended periods in often geographically isolated areas including speaking the local language (Kirk-Greene 2000). More often then not these administrators came through public and grammar schools and many from Oxford and Cambridge. All new recruits were required to attend a 12 month course known as the Devonshire A course in which they were educated on, amongst other subjects, imperial history, language skills, judiciary and ethnology (see Kirk-Greene 2000). For colonial officers language skills were thought to be particularly important alongside training in developing a disposition which encouraged a practical engagement and cultural and social immersion in the place of work. In development studies, on the contrary, language, while not unimportant is often considered secondary to specific forms of theoretical or technical expertise. Indeed these are conceived as far more relevant than regional experience and geographic specialism.

Some colonial officers felt that they had much greater geographic knowledge than younger development ‘experts’. They were trained in the local language before being posted overseas and although they were moved from one posting to another, the scale of movement was limited and most stayed within the same country. Thus, whereas specialisms of the colonial era tended to be based upon a knowledge of
particular geographical areas, the Africanist or Asianist has largely been replaced by those with thematic and/or technical expertise in, for example, translocal foci such as gender analysis, rural development, impact assessment or participatory rural appraisal. They seemingly move unproblematically between and within countries, taking with them their particular expertise, but often with limited knowledge of the different historical, social and cultural contexts in which they are required to apply it. Thus, the interviewees feel that while they had experienced enduring and profound engagements with the places to which they were posted, the contemporary development ‘expert’ tends to move within a world of fleeting consultancies.

Academic background was not as significant a criteria in the recruitment process of colonial officers although many did come through Oxford and Cambridge. It was more the ethos and discipline nurtured in the culture of these establishments than the academic status that was valued. As one interviewee recalls, ‘the Colonial Office didn’t want people who are too clever, on the other hand they don’t want people who are too thick’. Indeed, reliability, honesty and ‘good character’ were valued much more highly than academic knowledge and technical skills. This ‘good character’ and ability to deal fairly with people, albeit within the context of an unquestioned superiority, was valued in the colonial service and one way of measuring these qualities was through an individual’s extra-curricular activities of which sport was the most significant. Sporting capabilities were seen to reflect qualities of leadership and fairness as well as fitness (see Furse 1962). However, the significance of sport goes beyond reflecting individual character; it was also something particularly British. This focus on character, personal qualities, and sport also reveal the importance of class. Indeed the very characteristics and attributes that were so valorised were class-specific and it was often the background in grammar and public schools followed by Oxford or Cambridge which ensured this. Although there were also those from more working-class backgrounds, they had often been awarded educational scholarships and hence had been educated in primarily middle and upper class institutions.

So the colonial officer was typically someone with a good second class degree from Oxford or Cambridge, a sportsman with an ability to live and work in ‘difficult’ environments. When they moved into the field of development after independence these qualities and behaviours were initially valued or at least accepted, however as younger development professionals joined the industry these mores were perceived to be not only less important but more crucially old-fashioned and unprofessional. Other criteria for recruitment was valorised that placed greater importance on technical skills and expertise than on personal character. The cultural capital and the specific relevance of class background in assigning an individuals’ status in the colonial hierarchy was being eroded and replaced by divisions based on other criteria. Indeed in development the status ascribed to an individual consultant often relates to that of the institution they represent in terms of the extent of its financial resources, and political and global sphere of influence. That is, whether they are from a multilateral agency such as the World, Bank, a donor agency, an NGO or an academic institution.

The end of empire also brought with it a social distancing from colonialism and one British High Commissioner said that he had to demonstrate that he was a ‘new kind of Brit, not like those gin guzzling, idle, red faced colonial chaps’. However, some
former colonial servants feel that this negativity towards all things colonial was misplaced:

I can remember once a British High Commissioner saying to me ‘Why does ODA send out these terribly bright, articulate economists who don’t understand what the hell is going on in my country; I don’t want to see any more; I can’t stand them!’ Not because they were bad men, or wicked men, or corrupt but because they lacked any feel for the country.

In part, this discord reflects the changing boundaries of what development studies involved in the early days of the establishment of UK academic development institutes and what it later evolved into. At the time of the establishment of development studies institutes in Britain, former colonial officers’ jobs in these centres included a range of activities that were less ‘academic’ and more related to the provision of professional training courses, with individuals associated with them being involved in short and long term consultancies overseas and secondments to bi-lateral and multi-lateral development agencies. Therefore, many people could be associated with a development studies institute but still spend long periods of time, sometimes two or three years, working overseas. Thus, many of the former colonial officers comments about post-independence development refer to a period when it was more difficult to distinguish between development studies and the broader field of the development aid industry. Their references primarily draw out comparisons with post-independence professional ‘experts’ and technical assistance and not generally to the teaching and research carried out within what has become development studies. Indeed, the divisions between researchers and consultants, and policy makers and academics became more distinct as these institutes started to provide more academic training in the form of Masters courses and PhD programmes. Importantly, the modifications necessary post-independence, and the profound resentment between the ‘old’ and ‘new’, were compounded by the adjustments former colonial officers inevitably had to make in terms of the loss of power and control, cultural capital and status that had been their privilege whilst overseas.

In this section I have presented colonial officers personalised accounts of the implications of the end of empire and their perceptions about the changing nature of the relationship between Britain and Overseas as articulated by what development studies, broadly understood, has become.

A CONTINUITIES AND DIVERGENCES

That the experiences and attitudes of former colonial administrators who moved into development studies should not be carried over after formal independence denies historical continuities and the perpetuation of certain kinds of discourses over time and space. Certain regularities and consistencies, as well as distinct and contrasting practices, stand out from these interviews and other recent critical literature on colonialism and development.

At a fundamental level, both colonialism administration and development studies involve an engagement with institutions and ideas which originate in the West and have a global reach. Most obviously, continuities are borne in the experiences of
colonial officers and many of those involved in development studies through their
travel to places outside of Europe and so involve an encounter, at the level of the
individual in the ‘field’, with other places and other people. Thus, colonialism and
development articulate relationships between Britain and overseas, and the British
and others. Even for those who do not travel, teaching development studies in UK
institutes of higher education can invoke past relations since a large proportion of
students come from former colonies. These missions are inevitably embedded in
relations of power, control and knowledge that intersect and are expressed and
mobilised by the colonial administrator and the Western development ‘expert’ who
become embodied sites of power, exercising forms of control and imparting
knowledge in and amongst people from other parts of the world. In order to
understand how this relationship is played out it is suggested here that the shift from
colonialism to development represents a process involving a redistribution of ideas,
institutions and people.

While there are continuities in terms of individuals, there are also divergences
between the projects of colonialism and development in that the relationships
between colonial officer and colonised, development practitioner and aid recipient,
and teacher and student are articulated variously and take different forms. The
changing importance of particular types of experiences, skills and expertise,
particularly from regional, geographic knowledge towards a valorisation of technical
or thematic specialisms, highlight significant divergences between colonialism and
development. Furthermore, the decolonising process heralded a more equitable and
varied social mix, opening up possibilities which diverged from the conventional
segregations of colonialism.

To say that development represents a continuation of colonialism is for some
axiomatic and for others an unfair generalisation. But what I have tried to suggest in
this chapter is that through individual experiences, we can see how the development
industry works in and against its colonial past. Personal narratives simultaneously
complement and critique official accounts not only of colonialism, but more
importantly of mainstream and orthodox versions of the history of development.
However, the setting up of colonialism as ‘bad’ or indeed the denial of a colonial
genealogy has allowed many of those in the aid industry to work unquestioningly and
unproblematically in, and on, Third World countries. This ahistoricism is
continually legitimated by the pervasive representation of development as Western
philanthropy, as a humanitarian mission that bears no resemblance to the perceived
inequalities and exploitations of empire. Thus, development can only be ‘good’ when
set against a colonialism which was ‘bad’. This dichotomy absolves those of us
teaching, researching and advising in the field of development studies of the
responsibility of examining the ways in which we may be perpetuating and
entrenching notions of Western superiority, difference and inequality.

This dichotomy problematically ignores the experiences of those ‘demonised’ former
colonials in at least two ways. First, it neglects to identify the perpetuation of
inequities from the colonial era which entrenched notions of Western superiority and
difference. A form of Eurocentrism continues to articulate First World/Third World
relations in the post independence period of development aid. It would, however, be
disingenuous to construct development studies solely as a neo-colonial discipline.
Clearly, individuals in development studies today are far more diverse in terms of
gender, class and ethnicity than were the colonial officers and this has necessarily meant an opening up of the field and the emergence of multiple strands of thought and practice. It is also evident that ‘development professionals’ are immersed in broader ideas and possibilities reflected perhaps in the move from nation-state led eurocentrism to globalised values. Second, the separation between development and colonialism neglects to study those numerous examples of individual colonial practice, which although embedded within unequal relations, provided instances of processes grounded in local cultural context. Many former low-ranking colonial officers feel therefore, that the broader knowledge acquired by development professionals has come at a cost: in contrast to the colonial specialist, deeply familiar, yet superior within, his geographic environment, the universalising of thematic, theoretical and technical expertise within development studies is less able to be mobilised in the local cultural field. Additionally, by theoretically and empirically separating the moment of colonialism from the time of development limits the extent to which contemporary processes of global change can be understood and evaluated rooted as they are in (unequal) relations over time and space.

To produce a postcolonial development that critically re-evaluates development theory and practice and disconnects it from what has variously been termed, its neo-colonial, re-colonial and imperial context and articulations requires, as a starting point, an historical analysis that identifies the particularities, and varied expressions, of the continuities between colonialism and development. It is hoped that this chapter has contributed to this analysis to enable development studies to move beyond its complicity with Western knowledge and power, understand why it has evolved in the ways in which it has and importantly, provide an alternative historical context with which to evaluate its future potential.
References


Notes

1. I am grateful to the former colonial administrators whose narratives are anonymously referred to here.
2. For a more detailed description and analysis of the narratives of former colonial officers see ‘From colonialism to development: oral histories, life geographies and travelling cultures’ (forthcoming), *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*