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Reflections on the Violence of Development

Wendy Harcourt¹

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Abstract

In my reflections of the 2004 Editorial I wrote with Smitu Kothari, I first look at what I consider to be the salient points of our original text. I then move onto underline what I think we need to be even more vigilant about today as we consider who has the ‘right’ to development.

Keywords Social and environmental justice · Body politics · Extractivism · Agency · Community

It is alarming to look back at what you have written nearly 20 years ago and find so little has changed. We are still struggling with global systemic oppression. We are still searching for ways to undo the anthropocentric, patriarchal, racialized disordering of development. We are still pointing to a pluriversal world and to the wisdom of local communities. We are still trying to find ways to stop the deep-seated violence of development. And, it seems, despite all the knowledge gathered about the layers of violence and damage it does, we still speak of the ‘right to development’.

In these reflections I first take you through what I consider some of the salient points of the 2004 editorial, written with my dear friend Smitu, who sadly passed away in 2009. I will then push further on what I think we need to be far more vigilant about as we consider who has the ‘right’ to development, who determines access to such rights, and what kind of ‘development’ we are wanting.

In the 2004 editorial we firmly challenged the hegemonic view of development proposed by governments and ask that communities’ views are heard and taken into account. By listening to those excluded and victimized by development—forest dwellers, traditional fisher people, marginalized women and men in urban slums, tribal and indigenous

communities, domestic workers displaced and migrant people, sex workers, refugees—we argued the depth of violence in their everyday lives becomes visible, as do their stories of resistance.

The editorial underlined the agency of people who live in the majority world, and their multiple realities. We argued that development’s narrative of the poor’s vulnerability, their general lack of resources and their assumed need to be brought into modernity erased the reality of peoples’ everyday lives. We argued that we need to listen and learn from the ways people resist modernity and find ways to survive even as they face complex and multiple levels of violence.

We tentatively pointed to the importance of solidarity and support of outsiders, in political struggles, in campaigns to stop logging, dams and displacement. We pointed to ‘the possibilities’ of digital options to communicate, what we then (quaintly) saw as a move that could take us ‘beyond national boundaries’. Even if the digital world has morphed beyond what Smitu and I could have imagined back then, the typographies of violence we drew up in the editorial I would argue are still graphically true today.

We flagged the massive damage of industrialization and urbanization which destroy livelihoods and neglect rural areas. We underlined the physiological and psychological damage of displacement, of forced migration, and movement of peoples due to the global extraction of resources and capital’s hunger for cheap labour continuing the racialized historical trends of colonial exploitation. We decried the trampling of whole regions of the world by dominant world powers in processes of economic globalization that increased economic and social inequalities (despite the promises of development). Not only at the expense of

Commentary on Smitu Kothari and Wendy Harcourt. Introduction: The violence of development. *Development* 47(1): 3–7 (2004).
<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1057/palgrave.development.1100024>.

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cultures and peoples but also at the expense of all sources of life on our fragile planet—the lands, forests, air and water systems that we depend on. We expressed our fear at the enormous damage of extractivism of development through mining, deforestation, agribusiness, dumping of toxic wastes, dams etc.

Our editorial called for an end to extraction from nature and an end to the efforts to dominate it by privatizing and re-engineering nature. We argued that we need to understand how to live with nature and to recognize the wisdom of how non-Western knowledges perceive humanity as an integral part of nature and to act accordingly. We called for all of us to embrace a pluralities of knowledge systems that have evolved with nature rather than against it and to bring these knowledges to the centre of political, social and economic action.

Radically, the editorial saw cultural pluralism and the profound need to protect grounded cultural, social and political diversity as a way to resist homogenizing, developmental and scientific processes. We also called for an end to gender-based violence. In the editorial we spoke of women and girls, though now I would add all genders, including transgenders. We spoke of the growing acceptance of rape, pornography and graphic scenes reported in the news as part of sexual violence, reflecting, perhaps even leading, to increasing violence and oppression in the home as well as in society at large. Our editorial underlined that gender violence was not only specific to social and cultural contexts but also linked to global economic violations.

Finally, we spoke of the violence of the very process of doing development in its compartmentalized policy responses which measured and analyzed through complex ‘rigorous’ methods led by experts, too often blind to the lives and livelihoods of local communities whom development was meant to reach. The huge disparities that exist between the economic poor and the elites in our societies, we argued, undermined the very concept of democratic governance through which development proposed to support the economically and socially marginalized.

Our conclusion is one I still stand by:

It is important to work collectively together, to form creative alliances and networks respecting the many different needs and therefore ways of organizing livelihoods, production systems and social structures to create more secure and culturally richer lives, and above all in harmony with this fragile planet, our only home.

But questions remain about how to work collectively—and, even more importantly, who is forming alliances and networks, whose livelihoods are being respected, and whose lives can become secure/richer? And, given the subject of this journal issue, does the current trend to the ‘Right to Development’ offer any new (or real) possibilities?

One thing I have learnt in my move to academe from the world of international NGOs and advocacy (and as editor of *Development*), is that it is important to build from grounded knowledge that you are engaged in, feel passionate about, and can analyze well, aware of the history and the context. We can only ever know partially, and only from our own standpoint and position. So, in adding some comments to this 2004 editorial, I feel it is important to be clear about my position and what I feel I know and can contribute to the debate now in 2022. I will not go into elaborate academic discussions on what is positionality or standpoint theory, suffice to say in this commentary, I draw on my knowledge of feminism and environmental practice and theory. In other words, my point of view is first shaped by privileged position as an educated white cis-woman living in Europe and my decades of engagement in different gender and environmental campaigns, in and outside of the development discourse, in acts of solidarity across the divides of class, race, sexuality and gender. Second, as a teacher at a Dutch-based international post graduate institute, I have learnt from students who are feminists and activists in environmental justice movements around the globe. And third, as a researcher I am in conversation with feminist, environmental, anticolonial and antiracist struggles against oppression based on gender, race, coloniality, ethnicity, class, sexuality and ability.

In response to the crucial question which we posed in 2004 of how to work collectively together for social and environmental justice, I would like to push deeper into what we heralded as possibilities offered by technologies for networking and sharing information across geographic differences, even across languages and across platforms of knowledge. It is hard to recall an era where we were not entangled in digital truths and half truths about what is happening to others through a myriad of digital pathways and technologies that record, measure, and determine how we perceive the world as they accompany us almost every waking moment of our lives. Unlike in 2004, today there is no need to subscribe to a newspaper, or be in an academy, to follow major scientific and technical advances, nor do you have to know someone directly to be part of a network. With access to a smartphone, or computer, it is possible to access all manner of documents, information, people and knowledge. You can google translate across languages and spend hours pulling up all sorts of archives. People share huge amounts of information, and it is easy to get behind firewalls. In fact, the question is how to shift through all the data. Twenty years ago, you had to network by traveling and visiting different places. You had to know people and be invited to events, to have the money and an institutional position. Now you just need to have the time to scroll through a myriad of apps or visit the pages selected for you by research engines based on your earlier searches. In fact, the problem is to be aware of exactly how that information is gathered, and with whom



you are in contact and what digital network you want to choose in order to form alliances and networks beyond your immediate community.

As someone concerned with gender and environmental justice, my networks have expanded hugely in the last years as I have moved beyond the people I have met and known over the years to the people I read and who read me, to the websites and videos I visit anonymously. I leave a digital trail behind me that inform the research engines of my interests and publications and then send me more information about more publications, websites, and networks. How secure this information is, how much people will find out about my life as I accept cookies, and leave addresses, I have long stopped worrying about, as this has become my main way to glean information, in an endless world of possibilities that flash by my screen, or pop up on my phone.

Beyond the issue of personal cybersecurity, something my university worries about for me, is my lack of knowledge about the way my smartphone and computer are made, and how the Internet operates. I do not know from what minerals, whose land is taken, whose cheap labour is exploited. It is not Silicon Valley but the low wage workers who keep the internet going in India, Uganda, Palestine, Venezuela, the Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya and Shatila refugee camp in Lebanon. It is in the lands of poor people in different parts of Africa who are displaced and suffer from toxicity where the minerals are mined and the material waste dumped. It is in large factories that never close in Asia where the phones and computers are assembled. The true cost is not in terms of what the consumers pay for a smartphone or computer, but the human and environmental cost, the exploitation and pollution caused in the localities that do the mining, the lack of fair wages and good living conditions. Is this what we mean when we say the right to development? Are the miners, data microworkers and factory parts assembly workers being paid well? Are they able to live with their families and ensure they have good living conditions, good education and good health?

On the other side, as the user of these technologies as a knowledge worker, do I have the right to choose or not to use the technology in the modern academe? Caught in the need to produce, I am required to become an avid consumer of these boundless possibilities to read more, link more, network more, produce more. Who is actually getting richer from all of these digital worlds we are living in? You just need to look at the Forbes 500 to see who. Concerns of social and environmental justice as well as economic power in relation to the ‘knowledge economies’ need to be discussed as part of the actual price society and the planet pay for the right to access to global knowledge and network using digital technologies which is driving development.

In relation to the question posed in the editorial of whose lives can become secure/richer in a more just and fairer

world, I need to push further than Smitu and I did in 2004. I remember distinctly our conversations as we planned the issue and wrote the editorial. I was determined to bring in the issue of gender-based violence, not only for economically marginalized women but also as something all women and girls face. Smitu felt my stance was as a white Western feminist. Our argument was not entirely resolved in the editorial, and there is an awkward attempt to bring in sexualized representations in the news, and suggest that domestic violence happens because of economic hardship. In 2008, I was in Cambridge to write my book *Body Politics in Development* (2009) when Smitu visited me, and we discussed again whether gender-based violence was a global issue. He still saw it as a cultural and economic issue that had a specific context, and he was not convinced of my claim that gender-based violence was part of broader political struggles. In my book I argued that the body was a site of cultural and political resistance to power. I think that time has shown me to be right. The visibility of the ‘#MeToo’ movement and many other global campaigns are evidence of a global body politics which challenges the norms and practice of sexism across the world.

What I would now add, is that body politics includes not only issues of gender-based violence but also issues of race, class and ableism. Body politics links local, national regional and global concerns that exclude and silence marginalized bodies, as it challenges the interests of privileged men and boys over those of other genders. Through public activism, global body politics has disrupted the codes of how women and gendered others are expected to behave, breaking taboos that have allowed men to act with impunity towards female bodies.

This battle is ever more crucial in 2022 with the revoking of the Roe v. Wade—the shocking US Supreme Court decision which threatens not only almost 50% of US women’s right to choose abortion but also, threatens the sexual health and reproductive rights of women in other parts of world. Body politics advocates are now putting pressure on the US government to fight the decision, and making sure activists are aware of threats in other parts of the world. These are crucial issues for the security and wellbeing of the majority of people, and something we need to take up forcibly, openly defying misogynist practices as development discourse did in the past, such as in UN Conferences held in Cairo in 1994¹ and Beijing in 1995.²

Lastly, this brings me to the heart of what we were probing in the 2004 editorial—what kind of ‘development’ are we wanting? In 2022 we see the impact of climate change

¹ The International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), Cairo, 1994.

² The Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, 1995.



with the melting glaciers, loss of biodiversity, increasing floods, fires, record temperatures. It feels like we are close to the end times. We cannot continue to speak of the ‘right to development’ as if there are parts of the world that require developing, and others that need to provide expertise and resources. It is time to end that narrative. It is undeniable that the effects of climate crisis impact not only the economically marginalized in the South but also privileged people in the North. No one is in the position to ignore how global ecological, technological and political-economic processes are changing our shared world in ways that threaten its existence. But at the same time, it is important not to give into fatalistic narratives where only technocrats and scientists are able to understand and manage climate change (or development). Such responses are presented as universally for the common good, above politics (beyond the need for vast amount of money) and nothing to do with systemic inequality, injustice and exploitation due to the economic power relations which determine access and control of resources.

Instead, we should look to social and environmental movements in both the Global North and South which

are building emergent and emancipatory economies and ecologies capable of sustaining life by resisting extractivism, capitalism, colonialism and anthropocentrism. Such grounded, responsible communities centre on life-affirming care relations.

Instead of a catch all ‘right to development’ we need to learn from the courage and care of Smitu, who devoted his life to making visible the diverse and pluriversal ways we belong in the world, aware of the multiple interdependencies and responsibilities that connects humanity with other forms of life.

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