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Book Review

Ilan Kapoor, *Confronting Desire: Psychoanalysis and International Development* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020)

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In *Confronting Desire: Psychoanalysis and International Development*, Ilan Kapoor argues that contemporary theory in Critical Development Studies only gets us so far. He argues that while critical development studies' Foucauldian emphasis on analysis of the power/knowledge nexus in the "practices that structure relationships between the West and the Third World" has certainly given us a lot of insight into the continuing oppressiveness of those relations and institutions, it is missing a key ingredient for a full and complete insight into their operation and reproduction (Kapoor, 4). Kapoor argues that the main critical insight missing in this standard analysis is an understanding of the ways that individuals and institutions are captured and put into the service of the reproduction of these particular and unequal relations. This, he argues is best understood by thinking through the ways that development, as described above, in its myriad of unequal and oppressive institutions and practices "is not only a socioeconomic construction, but also an ideological construction intent on effacing its various internal traumas and contradictions" (xi). Contradictions such as the commitment to an endless economic growth model premised on neoliberal capital and exemplified by the commitment to things like structural adjustment programs which are, as Kapoor rightly points out, "one of the key neocolonial tools for reproducing capitalism, ensuring the West's central position in the global capitalist hierarchy" (134). Further, capitalist development colonizes our libidinal investments and re-directs desire to its own ends

such that those investments and desires come to act – unconsciously – to reproduce these unequal and oppressive relations even when development’s explicitly stated goal is to end such inequality. In other words, Kapoor argues, we need a theory of the unconscious in international development that can bring to light all of the ways in which development is ideologically committed to the very thing it professes to want to overcome.

It is here that Kapoor thinks a Lacanian psychoanalytic approach to studying development discourse and practice is both useful and necessary. Such an approach, Kapoor argues, can allow us to unearth these unconscious investments, traumas, and contradictions in ways that make it possible not only to understand them, but to also begin to loosen their grip. It is the very lack of total effacement of these traumas and contradictions – and their excessive and continued return – that shows us the incompleteness of the ideological project and can serve as a place from which to rethink development and to begin to, as he says, “break through the global status quo” (xii). The book organizes this project into two parts. The first part offers a clear and insightful primer on Lacanian psychoanalytic theory and an argument for its application to development broadly, outlining the ways that psychoanalysis offers us insights not found in other approaches to development like that of the Foucauldian approach mentioned above. In the second part, Kapoor pulls out a series of Lacanian concepts, elaborates further on them, and then shows the reader how their application to development yields the kinds of critical insights mentioned above. I’ll say a little about each of these parts in turn here.

In relation to the first part of the book, Kapoor begins by elaborating the key insights of the Lacanian reinterpretation of Freud’s understanding of the twin production of the subject and the unconscious. Here he shows us how Lacan theorizes the latter as not bound biologically to the primordial separation of the child from the mother (as in Freud’s own thinking), but rather to the individual’s entrance into meaning via language and social practice. As is well known, for Lacan, it is the entrance into these structures, what he calls the ‘symbolic order’ – or the linked linguistic structures and meanings that represent the world in particular and historical ways – that marks the production of subjectivity and gives the subject an illusion of wholeness. However, such linguistic structures are, according to Lacan, themselves without a central organizing meaning or ‘master signifier’ which structures and lends stability to all the rest. Each signifier, rather, only gains its meaning from its positional relation to the others (Lacan, 2017). So Lacan argues, as Kapoor describes here that, “our signifying systems are incomplete and unstable, never able to express any definitive meaning or justification, and never able to fully capture the thing being described” (Kapoor, 6). Any signifiers that purport to be such ‘master signifiers’ such as concepts, as Kapoor continues, like “freedom, democracy, god, beauty, and for that matter meanings [in general] are fixed only by social convention, habit, acts of authority, and/or leaps of faith” (ibid). It is this that makes the structures of our subjective life historically born- we are inserted into the symbolic order which pre-exists our individual lives but comes to structure our understandings of both ourselves and our worlds. This structuration is also and importantly accompanied by loss and alienation- our insertion into culture, practice, and language via the symbolic means that our relation to ourselves and our world is always mediated, and given the instability and lack of center, this is also experienced as loss and alienation from wholeness and stability. The fact that those symbolic meanings and signifying chains exist apart from us

but come to structure our individual psychic life is also what makes them shared, social and 'transindividual'- they emerge out of socially, culturally, and historically determined meanings and practices.

Critical for Kapoor's project here and as noted at the outset, is the idea that according to Lacan, in the entrance into the symbolic, biological 'need' and instinct are also structured by this process and converted into 'desires'. Social and cultural practices then are what determine desire and so our experience of desire is always mediated in this way. Further as Kapoor notes importantly here, "the problem is that, while instinctual need such a thirst can be satisfied, desire never can be, because it is mediated...there is therefore a gap between desire and need as a result of which we often desire what we do not need" (Ibid). This becomes important later in the book as our felt desires are ideologically structured in such a way as to reproduce and uphold a given set of (capitalist) socioeconomic structures (275). This is to say that we come to desire in the ways that the symbolic allows us too- and those desires, because they are organized by historically generated systems of meaning and practice that lack a stable center or core, never satisfy (36).

The symbolic is, as is also well known, only one three fundamental structures that Lacan described in relation to our psychic and social life. The structure of what Lacan calls 'the Imaginary' is what steps in to try to fill the fundamental instability and lack generated in the symbolic so as to stabilize our subjective life. The kinds of concepts and ideas Kapoor describes above (i.e. freedom, God, democracy, etc.) are all used by the subject as attempts to cover over such lack of stability precisely in their attempted, and imaginary, banishment of this fundamental instability and indetermination at the root of both the individual and the social. It is then, the third and final structure of existence, namely 'the Real' that for Lacan, betrays the ideological nature of this supposed - and, again, imaginary - completeness. Kapoor describes this final structure nicely here, writing that it is the real that is the "order of traumas, antagonisms, and contradictions that undermine reality but also constitute its conditions of possibility" (ibid). The Real, in the Lacanian system then, always underlies the symbolic and the imaginary and it is what shows us the ideological nature of the supposed completeness and consistency of those other structures but also that which gives rise to them.

After elaboration of these key Lacanian concepts, Kapoor turns to Žižek's re-reading of these structures in relation to the Marxist conception of ideology and ideology critique as a way to begin to think Lacanian psychoanalysis as a means by which to investigate the theory and practice of international development. As Kapoor shows us, Žižek's claim here is that what the Lacanian concepts of the symbolic, the imaginary, and the real offer us in a Marxian register, is a view that pulls the concept of ideology and ideology critique out of its classical understanding which, as Kapoor argues, "implies a privileged, neutral point from which one can distinguish between 'objective reality' and 'false consciousness'" (19). Instead Žižek's Lacanian re-reading of ideology implies that, as Kapoor continues:

...we are all ideologically produced, so there is no question of being outside of ideology. Rather, what we can do in terms of ideology critique is to try and detect, in the manner of the psychoanalyst, the gaps of ideologically constructed reality, gaps which...show up as slips, blind spots, symptoms, irrationalities. Ideology critique is therefore possible only from within the belly of the beast. (Ibid)

Ideology in the Lacanian sense then is the symbolic order itself, and as mentioned above, it is what constructs our felt desires. Though as we also know for Lacan, Žižek, and Kapoor, what we desire and seek out for enjoyment at the level of the symbolic/ideology can never satisfy the fundamental lack and trauma that is forged at the center of our being (both individually and socially) in the process of subjective creation. And it is here that we are able to begin to see the application to International Development. Lacanian critique serves as a ground from which to offer an analysis of development as it is symbolically constructed in the present. Lacanian analysis's goal of foregrounding the Real, can show us what traumas, gaps, and blind spots development attempts to smooth out and cover over. Or, as Kapoor argues:

...to put it another way, that development is a linguistic/discursive/institutional/socioeconomic construction is proof that it is replete with unconscious desires that "speak." In fact, following Lacan's thinking, to identify the unconscious thusly, helps to underline that trauma is not an "inner" condition to development and its subjects, but it is externalized and materialized in development institutions. (8).

Searching out, understanding, and clarifying both those traumas and those structures that are laid over them in the symbolic and imaginary registers as a way to cover over their existence is for Kapoor, the essence of a proper critique of development's ideology.

In chapter two of the book then, armed with this Lacanian/Marxist conception of ideology critique, Kapoor deepens his analysis of the dominant Foucauldian underpinnings of development and post-development theorizing. Setting his sights on the latter in the form offered by thinkers like Arturo Escobar and James Ferguson. Here Kapoor demonstrates to the reader the importance of Lacanian inflected ideology critique as offering a critical supplement to those views. Kapoor is careful to point out here that the Foucauldian orientation of these post-development thinkers is not without merit, that such theorization does in fact yield important insight into the ways in which development's discourses and institutional apparatuses engage and reinforce uneven and unequal power dynamics by centering "hierarchic and Eurocentric categorization" and, like Kapoor's Lacanian orientation, is also able to offer a way to make sense of the "production of development subjects" via various forms of biopolitical institutional and professionalized structures and practices (35). It is just, according to Kapoor, that these orientations do not go far enough- because of their sole focus on this kind of biopolitical governmentality, they are unable to make sense of "the unconscious underpinnings of power" in their analysis of development's problems. This, in Kapoor's view, also "leaves them unable to explain why development discourse persists" and thereby leaving them without the ability to offer a radical political alternative (33). So, such theories end in a kind of "surrender to global capitalism" according to Kapoor (ibid). The problem here is one we should be familiar with given what has been said so far: these post-development thinkers are missing the ways in which, as Kapoor argues, development's power persists through the engagement and reorientation of subjective desire and libidinal attachment (ibid).

The crucial thing to see, and what makes Kapoor's analysis so good here, in my view, is that it clarifies what is at stake in the differences between the Foucauldian orientation and the Lacanian one: For the former, there is no gap between the symbolic and the real- all there is for these analysts, to put it in Lacanian terms, is the symbolic.

Ideology is total and totalizing and so we cannot think a kind of alternative beyond one that is limited and localized. This ultimately leaves the larger structures – of say, global capital – always in place and untouched. The Lacanian orientation, with its focus on recognizing the gaps and traumas that emerge in the intrusion of the real into the symbolic and the failure of the imaginary to smooth those intrusions out (even if, ever momentarily), offers us something more – the opportunity to see the entire edifice – development itself, but more importantly, the background structures that development relies on in the form of rapacious capitalism – for what it is, namely historically generated and determinative of development institutions and subjects, but also historically contingent, and ultimately, something which can potentially be, once understood in this way, overthrown in favor of a different set of social structures and organizations that are more egalitarian, liberatory, and non-oppressive.

Once all of this background is in place, Kapoor turns to a more fine-grained elaboration of the ways in which the Lacanian orientation can help us see the unconscious in development across a host of topics that are central to development's theory and practice. This marks the transition to the second half of the book as mentioned above where Kapoor, in dictionary-like fashion offers the reader a series of Lacanian concepts as frames for investigating these topics. These concepts/topics include; antagonism, drive, envy, fetishism, gaze, gender/sex, perversion/hysteria, queerness, racism, and symptom. Each of these concepts are first described in relation to their Lacanian roots and then applied to cases and issues central to development. This part of the book is by far the most clarifying and innovative and readers who are familiar with development studies will find themselves learning much from this approach. While it is impossible to go into detail for all of these topics/concepts in this short review, I will highlight a few of them as examples.

In the essay on the Lacanian concept of 'drive', Kapoor begins by helping the reader understand the distinction in Lacan between desire (which we have said much about above) and drive. Recall that, as described above, desire is captured and reoriented in the symbolic and its aims become satisfaction and enjoyment at the level of the symbolic. This means, again as noted above, that desire seeks satisfaction in the ways prescribed by language, culture, tradition, and practice. As also described above, however, desire's symbolic object can never fully satisfy. The deeper need that desire is always after, and always unable to fulfill, is the satisfaction of the fundamental lack which emerges in our entrance into the symbolic order. So, desire is characterized by failure- failure of satisfaction, failure of enjoyment, and the ever-seeking of new objects that might come to fill this void and end the failure. Drive, however, as the counterpart to desire, while also ever-present at an ontological level, always gains enjoyment (or *jouissance* in Lacanian parlance)/ It comes to do so precisely through the failure of desire's satisfaction- so drive here converts failure into success, but in doing so, drive endlessly circulates, stimulating us to continue to seek satisfaction at the level of desire, knowing that satisfaction at this level will fail and in order to achieve enjoyment. As Kapoor writes here, "there is a sadomasochistic dimension to drive, which sees the subject unconsciously delighting when attempts at moderation and rationality are undermined and self-sabotaged" and he gives the example of the feeling of enjoyment one gets in transgressing one's own limits in say, having more drinks in an evening than one had planned even though one knows the consequences (77).

It is here that the application of drive to development comes in- given that we know that the Lacanian orientation toward desire is to see it as captured and reoriented by the symbolic, and we know that the symbolic is made up of socio-cultural, traditions, practices, and meanings, and we also know that those traditions, practices, and meanings are caught in political-economic histories and structures, desire is, in this moment, capitalist. That is, it is oriented and stimulated by socio-cultural notions of capitalist accumulation. But we also know that such accumulation fails to satisfy, and in this failure, drive experiences enjoyment- so drive's ever-present circulation goads the subject to seek ever more forms of capitalist desire satisfaction that are doomed to failure. Here Kapoor describes drive in this socio-political register as the ever-present capitalist drive to over-accumulation as any amount of capitalist accumulation at the level of desire is never enough. Applied to global development, this comes to operate as an explanation of the continued seeking of new markets and services by global capital and its subjects, and the continued domination of the global South by the global North in the North's seeking of those new markets to fulfill its economic and political desires for continued economic 'growth' which is really a euphemism, as Kapoor sees it for drive's endless seeking of "accumulation for accumulation's sake" (81).

The drive for capitalist desire fulfillment (and its ever-present failure to satisfy) takes many forms in the global capitalist order, but here Kapoor is interested in thinking the ways in which drive pushes, and helps us make sense of, the continued practice of what Marx called 'primitive accumulation' and what David Harvey refers to as 'accumulation by dispossession' (Harvey 2004). We can see this clearly how accumulation by dispossession operates in continuing capitalist privatization and land-grabs in the global South by industries based in the global north in order to fulfill the desire for things like resources, capital, and other goods (82-85). As is well known, such privatization and land-grabbing for extraction (for example) "in many countries (e.g., Mexico and Brazil) ... has entailed the eviction and displacement of millions of peasants and indigenous communities from communal and ancestral lands, creating a sizable class of pauperized and landless people." (84). Here Kapoor offers the Canadian mining industries extractive operations in Latin America as one set of examples of this, but also and importantly, he points to the ways that 'intra-Third World imperialism' is stoked and provoked by this process as well, arguing that we must see it all as "a part of the *global* logic - or drive - of late capitalism" (85).

This discussion of drive as the source of the endless desire for accumulation, and the drive that undergirds much of the discourse and practice in International Development also offers a primer and set up for Chapter Five's exploration of the idea that part and parcel of capitalist development is the production and reproduction of envy as the "dominant affect" of Capital at the level of subjection and institutions (95). Here Kapoor argues that we should see envy, rather than egoism, as the primary thing that orients desire, claiming that:

...the social inequality inherent in capitalist accumulation in the Global South (and North) breeds a mix of coveting and malice, so that it is not just that those on top of the social hierarchy must win but equally that those on the bottom must lose, generating enjoyment (*jouissance*) on both sides. (Ibid)

This is the structure, Kapoor argues, that drives accumulation and consumption based-lifestyles as in it, one comes to desire via envying what others might have that one does not, but also desires being the one who is envied by others for what one has. This

also allows Kapoor to introduce and preview, another Lacanian concept, namely the notion of the 'Gaze' – which will get its own chapter later in the book – as that through which envy is induced. In looking at, or 'gazing' as others and their perceived enjoyment and fulfillment in what one does not have, we come to be envious and seek to have those things also. And for one who has what others do not, enjoyment is found in being seen-as-having, or seen-as-fulfilled by others (even though we know such enjoyment, given the structure of desire, is doomed to failure). This, as Kapoor will show us later also plays a role in the multitudinous ways that whiteness, racism, and neocolonialist institutions and ideas structure conceptions of who is developed and who is not and in need of development:

Development's dominant fantasy bears an idealized, positive side and darker, negative side. The West as we know all too well, is conjured as a space of wealth and fortune, virtue and civilization, unity and harmony, while in contrast the Third World is portrayed as the space of poverty and underdevelopment, superstition and servility, fragmentation and disorder. Not only is this fantasy evolutionist—it posits the West as the goal toward which the Third World must aspire and move—but it also justifies the mission of development. To develop the Third World and make it in the West's image. (247)

We can see here how the Western, white supremacist gaze structures this relation and how the capitalist inducement to envious desire for accumulation as that through which one (and one's society) is redeemed, helps cultivate and sustain the very idea of development. Kapoor continues, "This dream of development is an unmistakably supremacist one, mirroring at least to an extent the colonial civilizing mission and mapping on to the earlier mentioned white fantasy of mastery and domination" (ibid.).

This is, of course, just a sampling of what the second part of Kapoor's analysis here has to offer. There is much more— the Chapter on the Gaze sets this concept in the context of participatory development and Kapoor offers a substantive critique of that idea, showing how participatory development is still structured by oppressive epistemologies that value Western knowledge over subaltern and other forms of knowing. He also points out here how sexism and racism continue to persist in participatory development in problematic ways (this chapter is one of the most important in my view as many tend to think that such processes decenter Western power/knowledge nexuses and Kapoor does a nice job explaining how this is also a fantasy).

The chapter on Fetishism takes on and explains how the ideas of GDP and economic growth as the sole measure of neoliberal capitalist development are two of the central fetishes in development, the chapters on Sex/Gender and Queerness offer substantial critique and analyses of the roles of these structures in development discourse and practice. And the chapter on the Symptom makes use of Žižek's reading of Lacan's claim that Marx was the first to invent the symptom – read here as the notion that poverty is the symptom that exhibits the failure of capitalist (but also other) socio-economic systems – but also, and importantly, that such a symptom is integral to (and necessary for) the functioning of the capitalist system itself (just as the analysand's symptom is integral to their self-conception and to which the analysand clings in order to try and stabilize the self). So even when development's stated goal is the elimination of

poverty, this cannot be achieved within the economic capitalist system as globalized forms of inequality and poverty are themselves that which fix and guarantee the system within which development operates. This then, is the power Kapoor sees in the application of Lacanian psychoanalytic critique to development – it allows us to see the system for what it is, and it also, as mentioned at the outset of this review, allows us to begin to think our way out of it.

As can be hopefully seen in this short review, Kapoor's book offers new and exciting analyses of well-studied topics in international development and though not everyone will agree with its conclusions, the book should be required reading for anyone who is interested in these topics. It also is written in such a way that the specialist and the novice alike will be able to get much out of it and Kapoor is to be commended for his clarity in bringing to light both the complex Lacanian language and conceptual apparatus, and also the many and expansive list of topics in development studies that are engaged across its pages.

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