Review Forum

Reading Joel Wainwright's *Decolonizing Development: Colonial Power and the Maya*


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Entering Wainwright's aporia in *Decolonizing Development*

Paul Robbins

It is widely acknowledged that the history of development is littered with astounding errors born of the very best of intentions. Joel Wainwright's (2008) *Decolonizing Development: Colonial Power and the Maya* is a carefully crafted history of development in Belize that seeks to explore why this is so. At bottom, Wainwright argues, it is the inevitable complicity of the most high-minded practitioners of modern development with capitalism and the territorial state that makes bad things happen to good people. These practitioners include many of the targeted readers of the book, especially researchers and academics.

In brief, *Decolonizing Development* offers a well-plotted trip through the history of the invention of a number of things that are often considered uninvited: Belize, the Maya, and milpa agriculture, among other categorically accepted realities. As such, the book is populated by explorers, academics, advocates, officials, and institutions who all participated in their creation. Wainwright fills the account with episodes where their efforts to research, develop or support the Maya ended in precisely the opposite of their intentions. Indigenous communities are more fully hedged-in by their would-be recorders and emancipators by the end of the volume than they are at the outset.

Following an introduction that lays out Wainwright's theoretical roots in Karl Marx and Gayatri Spivak, part one provides three chapters on early efforts to both colonize the lands of the Maya and to come to grips with their agricultural and cultural practices. The field of Mayanism in archeology and history is shown to develop a phalanx of ideas that present, define, and effectively capture the Maya. Part two details complementary contemporary efforts in three further chapters, especially examining the relationship of work in the field of cultural ecology in anthropology and geography to land claim efforts and political struggles of local communities. Here again, creative and sympathetic development ‘alternatives’ are shown to effectively limit the Maya, in the way they delimit them in space and time.

The repeated theme, therefore, is the persistence of governance and governmentality that mark colonial history as well as the repetitive political rhythms of these in the colonial present. The conclusions insist on acknowledging the ultimate colonial violence that emanates from geographic knowledges and liberal development efforts, enacted against people who have come to be called Maya. One cannot simply outfox the contradictions that lie at the core of development, Wainwright argues, no matter how good one's intentions. Development is a trap.

As a result, the strategy of the book, apart from its cautious effort never to pretend to speak the voices of the people of concern, is to show a series of contradictory impulses into which geography must travel if it wishes to imagine a progressive alternative. These Wainwright calls *aporias*, a term which becomes critical to the volume (and which is invoked repeatedly in the essays that follow). Following Derrida (1993), Wainwright understands this term to refer to spaces or passages that are “non-passages” and so become “the experience of the impossible” and produce “radical doubt” (Wainwright: 10–11). The book is filled with such aporias.

Secondly, the book strategically invites the reader into these "non-passages", positioning themselves within the framework of the critique. To do so, the book boldly presents critical claims framed in the first person plural, “we”. Included among these is a claim that may long be wrestled with: “we cannot not desire development” (p. 10). The intended result is to directly address...
and disorient the reader and so allow a new perspective on the very real problems stemming from development history.

Precisely for this reason, the book is also likely to do challenging and claustrophobic work on geographers. The paths Wainwright leads the reader down in his text are, after all, necessarily familiar, since their signposts are those of the history of geography (e.g. farming systems, land settlement, surveying, indigenous people’s struggles, counter-mapping). But in repeated moments of epiphany, once the dark impasses of these routes have been reached, geographers are likely to be dismayed by the absence of easy egress. It is a difficult emancipatory political text that writes into apparent dead ends, but Decolonizing Development suggests this may be the only direction to travel. Wainwright explicitly suggests that it is only by entering these impasses (aporias) that fundamental transformation of political practice is possible. It is not Wainwright’s book, after all, that has trapped geography in an unending series of shadowy oubliettes, but development itself. The engagements that this conclusion inspires in each of the following essays are testimonies to the provocative work the book seeks to do.

**Disorienting development**

Anna Secor

This is an odd and fascinating book. Decolonizing Development begins with statistics of global inequality collected by the World Bank and regionalized into self-evident categories such as ‘Latin America’ or ‘South Asia’. These statistics, which speak angrily about inequality and poverty, are, without irony the opening salvo of a text that deconstructs the “will to develop” and the territorialization of nations and economies. To understand how this text works, and it does work, one must recognize that it does not follow expected routes. Development, bound up with the extension of capitalist relations and the territorialization of ‘nations’ and states, becomes an un-orientable figure. Like a Möbius strip – a topological figure formed by twisting a narrow piece of paper and gluing the ends together front to back, producing an object for which it cannot be said which side is the outside and which forms the inside – development is an object whose exterior is a passage to its interior and vice versa.

The key that unlocks the passage from one parallax view to another (Zizek, 2006), is the Spivakian/deconstructive statement that Wainwright returns to several times in the text: “We cannot not desire development” (Wainwright, 2008: 10). The argument here is powerful and brave: “rejecting development is neither morally possible nor desirable,” he writes. Yet “we cannot pay the debts of our responsibility with development dollars” (Wainwright, 2008: 11). In Deconstructing Development, Wainwright’s repeated call is couched in the first person plural. “We” are the subject who cannot not desire development. My understanding of this we is that it speaks inclusively of all those who approach the question of development. In the comments that follow, I continue to use Wainwright’s language and the first person plural to refer to this subject who desires (development). In that sense, Wainwright suggests, our only option is to doubt and to struggle in the aporetic space of development. This book is a witness to that struggle.

Questions overflow. Why can we not not desire development? It is surely true that we cannot not desire. But the object of our desire, this seems to be something negotiable; substitution seems possible. Why must we desire development? Is the key to this in Wainwright’s insightful analysis of development as “the rational unfolding of presence,” in other words, of time and being? If so, desiring development becomes a necessity for the continuation of desire itself.

Answers to these questions come in a form of careful repetition. The book itself is not repetitive, but the subject positions of the “developer” and the “Maya” are shown to be staged repeatedly throughout the territorialization of the problematic.

First we encounter the arguments for and institution of Indian reservations in the area of British Honduras in the 19th century, and the shape of relations between the Indians and the British colonial state through the great depression. Here we are confronted by astonishing quotes from documents that show how little value was given to these lives and livelihoods. The following chapter is devoted to showing how the “Maya farm system” emerged as an object of knowledge and a system that called for development. Wainwright shows how in the Spanish archives the Indians were portrayed as seamlessly and effortlessly part of their environment, living off of its abundance, while only later did their agricultural practices become considered a “system,” one at odds with their environment, destructive, wasteful, and inefficient. Jarringly, the question of Mayan perspectives is posed and answered for the first time on page 209: “their voices could not be heard.”

It is from this point, when the field of knowledge (“the Maya farm system”) has been enframed, that the book begins to take us through a series of “experts” who come to ‘know’ and ‘help,’ that is, to fulfill the analysis of development as the key that unlocks the passage from one parallax view to another. In his treatment of Wright and Owen-Lewis, Wainwright shows that they care about and are interested in the Maya (Wright in the long run more than Owen-Lewis). Further, he argues that this caring and knowledge are not in contradiction but instead intimately bound up with the roles that these experts played in transforming the Maya into governable colonial subjects.

The fourth character occupying the position of the development expert in the text is Ann Osborn, a British anthropologist who, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, became involved in a development project in two villages in Southern Belize. Through her story, which is, one is of capitulation to the hegemony of development modalities, Wainwright further prosecutes his argument that “the desire to know and speak for the other does not challenge in any fundamental way the settlement between capitalism and development” (p. 217). Wainwright thus demonstrates the necessary ambivalence of the orientalist relationship: It doesn’t matter if one adores or reviles “the other.” What defines the colonial relationship is the structure of difference and the problematic into which it is inserted. In this case, the problematic remains that of development – how to develop the Maya, to settle them and improve their agriculture, to extend the tendrils of trusteeship into their communities.

In the remainder of the book we meet two more such experts, and one is Wainwright himself. In the same chapter that we encounter Osborn, the anthropologist, we find Wainwright engaged in collaboration with farmers to undo some of the damage done by the development projects in the area. The campaign for debt cancellation and the granting of land titles to the peasants was successful. Wainwright is not uncritical of the program – he
notes the role of this initiative in the consolidation of male power in the community, the regime of private property, and the Maya as state subjects. He concludes: “For marginal, indebted peasants, faced with the threat of landlessness, a campaign for landownership is something that one cannot not want. And yet the routes open to such campaigns are paved by relations of state and society, law and property, forged in the crucible of colonial capitalism” (Wainwright, 2008: 228). Turmoil! Why is one boxed into not being able not to desire this, in particular? Might one not desire something else, something better? And yet, this is a profoundly honest assessment. What occurs as a result of this movement is not justice. But there is justice in the struggle, the ordeal. The outcome cannot be called just.

Things get only more complicated in the next chapter, where the reader encounters the final representative of development and knowledge, the cultural ecologist and Berkeley geographer, Bernard Nietschmann and the counter-mapping movement (Nietschmann, 1995). Again, Wainwright is involved in this project, and at first this chapter seems to be a celebration of the Maya Atlas as the counter-point to the colonial territorializations of the Maya. Indeed, as I read this chapter I was crying out to the text: But this is simply the culmination of all of the colonial territorializations. At last the Maya territorialize and develop themselves. They no longer require much outside assistance in this project. They have been ‘empowered.’ They have become subjects of developmental power. Why, if they will work to make their own spaces and subjectivities visible, all the better! The idea that the purpose of this Atlas is to pass on their culture or knowledge to their children is strange in the extreme; it implies the need for such a method, for a rational and gridded representation of themselves to themselves, as though they have become capable to understand themselves in any other way. And yet, nothing is so simple. Wainwright does not spare Nietschmann’s cultural–ecological assumptions a searing critique. And in a powerful double-take, Wainwright notes that the base map for the project was a Royal Air Force map of British Honduras.

Decolonizing Development not only shows how development is constructed on the ‘base map’ of a colonial project but also raises profoundly troubling questions about the politics of our desires as researchers and political agents at work in the world. I am left ambivalent – not fully willing to cede my desire to his formulation, and yet also aware of the twisting logic that prevents escape from the Möbius strip. Decolonizing Development is at once an oddly enigmatic text and a deep cut into the problematic of development.

A victim of geography

Sarah Moore

“I long to let our love run free, but here I am a victim of geography. And oh you can not hear me. Oh you cannot hear me. Can anybody hear me, out there?”

“The Only One,” Billy Bragg, Workers Playtime

Researchers, writers, and thinkers working in the broadly defined area of development geography, but simultaneously immersed in insights from subaltern and postcolonial studies, face impasses about which they would not seem to require reminding. To write development geography as ethnography and so to make audible the voices of those who are not heard, actually results in their silence. Yet, Joel Wainwright’s Decolonizing Development returns straight to the heart of these dilemmas, tightly knitting postcolonial theory with violent development histories to show, the immense utility of postcolonial theory on one hand, but some of its limits on the other. It does so by working in several directions at once.

First, the book is an example of carefully crafted postcolonial account, which challenges the reader to question assumptions about otherness, representation and ethics. This is hard work, to write an account of the history of a place, while thoroughly committing to a Spivkian notion of ethics, and so never giving in to the urge to write ethnography (to write “the other”). Gayatri Spivak, on whom Wainwright draws heavily, eschews the notion of abstract ethics in favor of an ethical singularity where person–to–person communication is both as intimate as possible, but also always inevitably distanced (Spivak, 1995). In Decolonizing Development then, it is clear that Wainwright indeed cares deeply for the people with whom he has worked, even if he refuses to give into speaking for them. As an alternative to speaking for the Maya, the book offers a reading and spacing of the key texts of Mayanism to demonstrate the way these remain active in the materialization of the state–nation–territory triad at the center capitalism qua development.

Second, the book represents a specific argument, that capitalism qua development is, in itself, a problem that demands critical attention, and that its history is both seductive and carries with it a feeling of inevitability, despite unpleasant outcomes. Of course, many scholars have argued that the current practice of development as the expansion of capitalist social relations is problematic. What Wainwright further painfully demonstrates, is that this practice of development materializes in perverse victories. The Maya win land rights, Decolonizing Development records most notably, but only by privatizing previously commonly held ground. These outcomes also problematically expand nationalism through territory and trusteeship.

Third, Wainwright invites the reader to consider how the topics of his or her own research might be put under the kind of scathing critical scrutiny that Mayanism receives in Decolonizing Development. How is my own work, the reader is prodded to ask, precisely ordered in this same problematic way? The success of that prodding comes from the mastery Wainwright exhibits in the historical and fieldwork chapters, which carefully document the academic work of familiar actors. This produces a text that is so internally coherent as to be claustrophobic. Given that anxiety is probably the most productive emotion a text can provoke, this is not necessarily a negative quality.

The text is filled with ambivalences, however, which make it potentially frustrating. Specifically, Decolonizing Development, in content and form, reflects some of the tensions produced at the nexus of postcolonial theory and subaltern studies, with respect to key common problems: the question of language and that of the subject.

In terms of a tension within the book’s language, the reader first encounters ambivalence in a critique that the Wainwright launches against post-development scholars. Here, he argues that such work is “insufficiently dialectical” (Wainwright, 2008:10) and that writers like Escobar, who begin from a deconstruction of development, end up reifying it as a totalizing structure. Leaving aside the somewhat unfair effort to let Escobar largely stand in for all post-development scholars, and so to lump James Ferguson’s (1994) more careful Foucauldian analysis of development as an anti-politics machine with it, Wainwright’s point is important. In their efforts to dethrone development, post-development scholars arguably reify it. Yet throughout Decolonizing Development, capitalism is imbued with precisely this same kind of agency and totalizing structure. Capitalism and its sister, colonialism are constantly “soliciting” (in Wainwright’s terminology) development, territorialisiation and nationalism. Derridean language notwithstanding, the question is how, precisely, does capitalism solicit anyone to do anything? Does it enroll us in a project (through socialized capital, for example)? Does it interpellate? And, more importantly, does ignoring these processes cause us to miss a crucial insight to the
project of spacing capitalism qua development? While using a careful critique of the logic of post-development scholars and their animation of development, *Decolonizing Development* mobilizes surprisingly similar characterizations of capitalism.

As a further minor note on language, it is odd that here that (as is the case with perhaps too-many ostensibly post-structuralist texts) dictionary definitions are periodically invoked to stop the flow of *differance* in texts under analysis, as where Wainwright resorts to the Oxford English Dictionary to adjudicate the true or hidden meaning of a term, concept, or phenomenon. True, many possible competing understanding are provided for words like “settle.” For example, but Wainwright concludes, at base, that term is a synonym for “to win colonial hegemony” (p. 203). Here again, in a text that exemplifies ambivalence about the historical creation of meaning through power, all ambivalence is erased in favor of stressing only the dominance of capitalism and colonialism.

The second question is that of the *subject and biography*. This is raised not only in the author’s treatment of Mayanists, but also is provoked by the presence/absence of the author himself in the text. Specifically Wainwright describes this project as one that has solicited him (and not the other way around). This raises the question of the relationship between biography, subjectivity, and reflexivity. On the one hand, Wainwright argues that biography is dangerous in the sense that it relies on the assumption of a contradictory identity and implies linearity. As he demonstrates clearly with the example of Beethoven in the conclusion to the book, an analysis of Mayanism, or any other such “ism,” must center on, in Beethoven’s case the music, and in the case of this book, the texts that create and aid in the materialization of the territory–nation–state triad.

At the same time, however, the book is filled with characters whose (linear) biographies are critical to the study. Take the case of Nobel Prize winning Latin American novelist Miguel Angel Asturias. Wainwright argues that Asturias’s work switches perspectives from what Wainwright characterizes as eugenics (where the Maya can only be saved by being assimilated and thereby eliminated as an independent culture) to Mayanism (where Mayan culture should be preserved through the retelling of authentic Mayan stories). This is a personal transformation that can only be explained by biography. And, indeed, Wainwright does attribute a change in Asturias’s position in part to a visit to a European museum. But, the real punch line to the story comes when we learn that Asturias’s romantic pre-capitalist notions of *Men of Corn* come from his childhood identity as the son of a commercial wheat seller. We can only read Asturias’s novels about the Maya as ironic (and inevitable?) retellings of his own past, as the product of biography.

At another point, Wainwright describes the work of Charles Wright, a prominent Mayanan. Here, the author, argues that his job is not to write the essential Wright, but he goes on to say that he will briefly summarize the *pertinent* facts. The obvious question is, who gets to decide which facts of an author’s life are pertinent? *Decolonizing Development* eschews biographical explanation but cautiously invokes it at its convenience.

This might further be asked of Wainwright himself. How and when does he make himself appear in the book? Here, there is no need for recourse to some mode of reflexivity that introduces the kinds of tiresome and dangerous ethnography that Wainwright trenchantly criticizes. Indeed, the author is very present in the text – particularly in its very compelling style of argument, and in its structure (only someone who reads every footnote could bury that much information in them). However, most of the book goes by without any reference to Wainwright’s presence on the ground. Yet on page 200 he arrives full blown, engaging with indigenous people in Belize. Here, the reader is left to wonder, how did the author come to be here in the first place, and more importantly, how was Wainwright himself produced and disciplined as a subject who works with the Maya? How did he become a Mayanist (though he may reject that label)? There is in *Decolonizing Development*, therefore, an ambivalence surrounding language and subject/ biography/agency that is problematic in places.

A final concern stems from the relationship between political and scholarly work, reflected throughout *Decolonizing Development*. Wainwright makes the case that his writing is separate from political risk-taking, and so eschews any portrayal of a hero author that collapsing one into the other might create. But, does insisting on this division not, in a way, reinforce the separation between the world and representation? The larger question, however, raised by *Decolonizing Development* is: what are the ethics of saying that one cannot not want development? If the term and practice of development have no positive referent, why hold onto it? Is this not the very sentiment that allows the World Bank to solicit the aid of many well-meaning academics like the ones that have contributed (despite their best intentions) to the disenfranchisement of the Maya? In the same way, what are the ethics of arguing that one cannot not desire counter-mapping, given that the practice, even as it is described in this book, is inevitably fraught with uneven power relations and the domination of western epistemologies? Is this “irresistibility” of counter-mapping not what produces and justifies an urge for some researchers to help map indigenous territories, even if they resort to questionable funding sources and methods to do so? The author asks whether the subaltern can map, but a prior question seems equally important in this context: why should the subaltern want to map?

Wainwright does not come to these conclusions lightly. They are clearly provoked by a need to work through the aporia of capitalism qua development and to carry on doing the hard work of connecting researchers and marginalized groups across the epistemological and material divides created by colonialism. As the opening quote from radical musician Billy Bragg suggests, especially when considered in the light of Wainwright’s critique, the silencing of the Maya and the well-meaning researcher is simultaneous, and occurs across a gulf produced by development, along with its intellectual practices within ethnography, geography, and allied communities. *Decolonizing Development*’s largest contributions, therefore, lie in taking steps to unite “victims of geography”, those separated by the experience of colonialism, in an ethical project of reconceptualizing development.

### Troubling development: aporia in the shadow of ontology

**Najeeb Jan**

In his preface to *Remnants of Auschwitz*, the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben (1999: 13) describes his commentary on the *place* of testimony as laying “signposts” which might allow “future cartographers of the new ethical territory to orient themselves”. In this brief essay I would like to highlight the ways in which Wainwright’s work charts a potential course into this new ethical space. Following one of Heidegger’s most obdurate truisms regarding the primacy of ontology over epistemology, I will engage with Wainwright’s primary thesis; that “capitalism qua development is aporetic” (Wainwright, 2007: 18). Of course, much of the elegance and substance of *Decolonizing Development* lies in the patient and meticulous empirical work that in almost every chapter exposes the inevitable complexity between even the most well-meaning development practices and the silencing of the very subaltern subject that development seeks to ‘liberate’ and ‘empower.’ However, it is the figure of the *aporia*, which carries the central
burden of the analytic. The aporia is also the Trojan horse that makes it possible to interrogate development as an ontological, rather than a merely violent epistemological category. In my view, this disclosure of development as a regime of truth, as an epistemological universalism, constitutes the significant achievement and originality of Wainwright’s work.

Wainwright’s multi-layered project begins with a series of problematizations. Why is it that despite its overt colonial lineage and its manifest failures, “neoliberalism holds sway in discourses about development?” (p. 4) More importantly, why was it “only development – not civilization, not modernity, not progress – that was universally taken up after the end of colonialism to define and organize the nation-state-capital triad everywhere”? (p. 12). What accounts for the normalization of development and the extent to which it enjoys such universal “epistemic-ontological privilege”? (p. 12). To tackle these questions Wainwright begins with a meditation on language, signification and etymology. After a brief genealogy of its multiple resonances – as nature, as progress, etc.— “development” is shown to bear the stamp of “a particular ontological quality that is expressed through the process of unfolding” (p. 6).

Wainwright’s effort to expose the sedimented layers of metaphysical baggage that have accrued under the sign of development should not be read as merely some kind of preliminary philosophical brush clearing. By locating the problem of development squarely within a discussion of ‘potentiality’, Wainwright is indicating that the interrogation and critique of development must proceed from within the post-structuralist/post-foundational critique of the metaphysics of presence (Marchart, 2007). Development, Wainwright reminds his reader, is one of our “most entrenched, inherited, ontological signs for indicating essence. In Western metaphysics “nature” and “development” both express essence by proposing a relationship between temporality, spatiality, and ontology. […] Development thus binds temporality and ontology via the rational unfolding of presence” (p. 7, emphasis mine). Thus if development has an onto-theological structure (Elden, 2002), if it resembles what Martin Heidegger called technology (or Gestell) (Rayner, 2007), then we can no longer rely simply on representational models to expose the ruse of development.

Wainwright further roots this argument in history and suggests that the articulation of development with capitalism signaled the articulation of development with development practices called for capitalism to take up its ontological attachment upon to do; thereby articulating the episteme of development. He seeks in this way to disclose and “unsettle” the spatialization of the objects of imperial regulation (pp. 71–72) and to uncover the ways in which colonial forms of knowledge constitute “forms of subjectivity and worldliness” (p. 14). Therefore, as with liberalism, lurking behind the secularized, universalized and therefore sanctified lineaments of development lies an entire political theology, a nihilist metaphysics, whose structures and complicity with power the geographer must attempt to recognize and disclose.

Wainwright’s novel invocation of the aporia, therefore, forces our consideration of development into the shadow of ontology. As a result, when encountering claims like “development consequently became, via imperialism, not dialectically but aporetically, both inside and outside of capitalism” (p. 11), we can hear the distinct echoes of Agamben’s reading of the “logic of the ban.” For Agamben, as for Wainwright, sovereignty is rooted in the law’s exclusion and banning (abandonment) of some from the polis, i.e. their exclusion through inclusion (Agamben, 1998, see especially 28–29). Consider for example Wainwright’s reading of Spanish territorialization in Chapter 3, where he describes the establishment of Indian territory in Alta Verapaz, which simultaneously configured the Maya both as constitutive of the nation-state while excluded (i.e. banned) from the polis.

It is perhaps within this topological contextualization that we can make sense of the remark that has irritated many of Wainwright’s readers: “We cannot not desire development. Development remains an absolutely necessary concept and also absolutely inadequate to its task” (p. 10). And this irritation is a clue to the experience of the aporia, which “consists in the radical doubt encountered by all those who would wish to criticize development. On one hand, “development” is a site of great epistemic violence; on the other, development remains absolutely necessary for us” (p. 11). This aporia he reminds us, is not a logical conundrum or a dilemma, it cannot be resolved by ‘rational’ consensus. The aporia is an “impossible passage,” “disclosed in effacement, [as the] experience of the impossible” (Wainwright quoting Spivak p. 10).

Based upon this, let me suggest two points of critical engagement with Wainwright’s work, engagements which are situated within a shared broadly left Heideggerian framework. Firstly, I would suggest that Marxism and the postcolonial are necessary but not sufficient to the possibilities inherent in the thought of the aporia.
Any such interrogation of development will be hamstrung by the anthropological machine of Saidian (humanist) postcolonialism on the one hand, and the largely historico-political ethos of subaltern studies on the other. The postcolonial critique seems to operate within a conception of the West (Gasché, 2009) that privileges if not essentializes the spatio-temporal moment of capitalism/colonialism as an originary and destructive force. What the postcolonial critique of Spivak (following Foucault) misses is that the remarkable grammar of power it relies upon (principal the apparatus and the biopolitical), have ontological and not merely historico-political resonances; resonances that are then radicalized by Agamben. Thus Wainwright’s deployment of spacing is limited by the biopolitical limits of postcolonial Marxist discourse.

And secondly, with our feet now firmly displaced on the terrain of ontology, one can stress the ethico-political dissonance between Agamben and Derrida that has a significant bearing on the question of the aporia of the aporia (Mills, 2008; Thorschwell, 2005a, 2005b). With reference to Franz Kafka’s parable “Before the Law” Agamben takes a que libre aim at deconstruction:

Our age does indeed stand in front of language just as the man from the country in the parable stands in front of the door of the Law. What threatens thinking here is the possibility that thinking might find itself condemned to infinite negotiations with the doorkeeper or, even worse, that it might end by itself assuming the role of the doorkeeper who, without really blocking the entry, shelters the Nothing onto which the door opens (Agamben, 1998: 54).

Simply put, Agamben suggests that the Derridian aporia perform this infinite negotiation, and so inadvertently threaten to mimic the structure of the ban (Agamben, 2000). Elsewhere Agamben explicitly likens deconstruction to a “petrified or paralyzed messianism”, a nihilism that “nullifies the law, but then maintains it as the Nothing of Revelation in a perpetual and interminable state of exception, …” (Agamben, 2000: 171). Like the Heideggerian idea of abandonment, deconstruction takes the aporia of sovereignty to the limit but is unable to completely free itself from its ban (Agamben, 1998: 48). The experience of the impossible then, the aporia, must only be regarded as a moment within the larger struggle to bring the developmental apparatus to a halt. And what we may ask is the call of the development apparatus, if not Gestell?

**Aporia, apparatus, oscillation: a reply to the critics**

**Joel Wainwright**

Within these distinct reviews of Decolonizing Development lies a common question, one that haunts the world today: what is development? What is this concept that defines so much of what matters for politics, economics, and life? This is not simply the central question of development studies. It is also one of the great political and ontological questions of our time. And it is a question that these readers have asked back to Decolonizing Development, sounding out the limits of the book’s answer—which is that development should be conceptualized as an aporetic condition called ‘capitalism qua development’. In what follows I reply – not so much to the individual reviews, but back into our collective thinking – by restituting the book’s argument in the illumination of three concepts that should help us to answer to the question, ‘what is development?’: aporia, apparatus, and oscillation.

As all three readers demonstrate, to argue that capitalism qua development is an aporetic condition, as I do, leaves us in a resolutely difficult political-ethical situation. To go directly into the heart of the matter, consider one of Jan’s criticisms: he argues that my turn to Derrida’s analysis of aporias limits the capacity of Decolonizing Development to work through its problematic. He further contends that – measured against its ambitions – Decolonizing Development falls short because it is insufficiently Heideggerian, unfair to Foucault, and over-reliant on postcolonial Marxism. As regards Heidegger, I essentially agree. As for Foucault: his work partly inspired the book and provides the method (archeology) for chapter two. Yet it could not be central to Part II (the analysis of aporias of development in the colonial present) because, to paraphrase Spivak, Foucault’s strength as an analyst of power-in-spacing was not, alas, met by careful attention to the European provenance of his concepts and their entanglement with colonial worldlines. (This is not to deny Foucault’s strengths, nor to say that his approach cannot advance postcolonial research: on Foucault, Derrida, and postcoloniality, see especially Spivak, 1992). As regards postcolonial Marxism, a just defense exceeds the space of this essay, but the following remarks should clarify one key point, i.e. I avow neither humanism (as suggested apropos Said) nor historicism.

One clear point of agreement is that Agamben might further strengthen our conceptual understanding of aporia, development, and capitalism. Agamben’s thought has reshaped debates in political geography, particularly regarding sovereignty, law, territory, and terror (Baran, 2009; Elden, 2007; Gregory, 2006; Minca, 2007). Not so economic and development geography. Perhaps because ‘the economy’ and ‘development’ as such are thematized in his work, in these fields Agamben’s ideas have been largely ignored. A careful reading of his masterpiece Homo Sacer (1995) reveals that his analysis of sovereignty has important consequences for our understanding of capitalist social relations. In the introduction, Agamben offers a series of brief remarks on “modern democracy” (9). He writes: “If anything characterizes modern democracy,” it is that it “presents itself … as a vindication and liberation of zoé, and that it is constantly trying to transform its own bare life into a way of life” (9)—and perpetually failing, through a series of productive failures that deform life itself. Crucially, Agamben goes on to define what he calls “modern democracy’s specific aporia: it wants to put the freedom and happiness of men in the very place – ‘bare life’ – that marked their subjection” (10). Today, development is one of the signatures of this desire to enhance “the freedom and happiness of men” via biopolitics. This is not to chide those who ‘do development:’ That would be a facile gesture in the face of a profound aporia. As Agamben writes:

To become conscious of this aporia is not to belittle the conquest and accomplishments of democracy [nor capitalism qua development—JW]. It is, rather, to try to understand once and for all why democracy, at the very moment when it seemed to have finally triumphed over its adversaries and reached its greatest height, proved itself incapable of saving zoé, to whose happiness it had dedicated all its efforts, from unprecedented ruin (10).

The same could be said of capitalism qua development, which has achieved an almost-uncontested sway only to culminate in the abysmal call of Gestell (as Jan rightly concludes). Thus, notwithstanding the fact that my book’s problematic – the Marxist-postcolonial critique of the metaphysics of capitalism qua development – was not inspired by Agamben, I think he and I were digging through the same ruins at the time I wrote the analysis of the aporia called ‘capitalism qua development’.

A passage from Homo Sacer’s introduction allows us to appreciate an element of the book’s abrupt and enigmatic conclusion. There, Agamben writes:
Our age is nothing but the implacable and methodical attempt to overcome the division dividing the people, to eliminate radically the people that is excluded. ... The obsession with development is as effective as it is in our time because it coincides with the biopolitical project to produce an undivided people (179).

Two paragraphs later, Agamben draws the following damning conclusion: “today’s democratically-capitalist project ... not only reproduces within itself the people that is excluded” – such as the Maya that are included differentially in (that is, excluded from) the modern polis – “but also transforms the entire population of the Third World into bare life” (180). What is the name for the project that produces the entire “population of the Third World into bare life”? Agamben has already signaled to us that the contemporary obsession with development is one of its basic forms. With this, we arrive at Homo Sacer’s remarkable conclusion:

Only a politics that will have learned to take the fundamental biopolitical fracture of the West into account will be able to stop this oscillation and to put an end to the civil war that divides the peoples and the cities of the earth (180).

In what, precisely, does this ‘oscillation’ consist? It is, in Agamben’s terms, an oscillation “between two opposite poles: on the one hand, the set of the People as a whole political body, and on the other, the subset of the people as a fragmentary multiplicity of needy and excluded bodies; ... an inclusion that claims to be total, ... an exclusion that is clearly hopeless” (177). The total inclusion here is the promise that everyone in the entire world can be captured by development: the ideological condition that everyone should be developed. And the essential hopelessness of this oscillation lies in the fact that this world-development is capitalism qua development, that is, the structural exclusion of many.... To which we should reply that our response to such an oscillation should not be to fix it, which is impossible, but to fight our way all the way through this hopelessness. Consider Agamben’s comment in a 2004 interview, where he responded to the charge of pessimism by quoting the young Marx: “the desperate situation of the society in which I live fills me with hope.” “I share [Marx’s] vision,” Agamben explained. “Hope is given to the hopeless. I don’t see myself as pessimistic” (2004: 123).

I invoke these conclusions from Homo Sacer’s to reply to Jan’s critique of my emphasis on Derrida’s conception of aporia (on which see Derrida, 1982, 1993). Agamben’s analysis of sovereignty and bare life in Homo Sacer is framed by his argument about the aporetical nature of the “democratically-capitalist” world. And the conclusion of Homo Sacer explicitly reiterates Agamben’s argument that “until a new and coherent ontology of potentiality ... has replaced the ontology founded on the primacy of actuality and its relation to potentiality, a political theory freed from the aporias of sovereignty remains unthinkable” (p. 44). I understand this to mean that a new ontology is needed, and for this task the concept ‘aporia’ is indispensable. In this sense, the rhetorical work of ‘aporia’ in Homo Sacer could be compared to its place in Decolonizing Development.

Reading Decolonizing Development today, I interpret the references to Agamben in chapters three (p. 111) and six (pp. 270–271) as a pair of parallel culminations, two points revealing geographical instantiations of capitalism qua development. (The book’s two parts are constructed in parallel to show that colonialism has not been overcome, but lives on; thus, the repetitiveness noted by Moore is structural to the argument.) Chapters three and six repeat differently the analysis of the worldliness of capitalism qua development: the first time as Mayanism, the second as a Maya Atlas. Agamben appears in chapter three in the discussion of the constitutive formation of law and territory after Las Casas, and in chapter six analyzing the challenge of superseding the trinity of capital–nation–state. Upon reflection, Agamben is cited at these two junctures to make essentially the same argument. We meet him twice on a Möbius strip (see Secor) staged in a gambit to make a non-empiricist argument about modernity’s colonial worldliness.

Clearly these remarks only begin to summarize the implications of Agamben’s studies for capitalism qua development. His recent work has been concentrated around a similar problematic: see particularly, “What is an apparatus?” (2009). In this essay Agamben examines this key concept of Foucault’s late work to argue that we are witnessing the “proliferation of apparatuses”: “It would probably not be wrong to define the extreme phase of capitalist development in which we live as a massive accumulation and proliferation of apparatuses” (2009: 15). Later in the essay, Agamben elaborates on the relation between these apparatuses and capitalism: “capitalism and other modern forms of power seem to generalize and push to the extreme the processes of separation that define religion. ... Modern apparatuses differ from their traditional predecessors in a way that renders any attempt to profane them particularly problematic” (19). What makes these apparatuses so problematic?

What defines the apparatuses that we have to deal with in the current phase of capitalism is that they no longer act as much through the production of the subject, as through the processes of what can be called desubjectification. A desubjectifying moment is certainly implicit in every process of subjectification. [...] But what we are now witnessing is that processes of subjectification and processes of desubjectification seem to be reciprocally indifferent... (20–1).

This reciprocal indifference can be seen in the simultaneous insistence today on the ‘crafting’ of each development around the particular cultural or social group targeted—even as the essential strategy is treated as universal. The production of subjects of development discourse (in a Foucaultian sense) is thus marked by this desubjectifying moment. As other critics of development have powerfully shown – see especially Tim Mitchell (2003) and Vinay Gidwani (2008) – capitalism qua development functions as an apparatus (complete with its own forms of expertise) in profound indifference to those who are its object. As I hope to have clarified, to the extent that capitalism qua development names one of these “modern forms of power,” its sway not only recapitulates colonial power relations, but also is rooted in an essentially colonial worldliness. We might even say that the power of development is rooted in the fact that it defines modernity as such (see Dussel, 1996: 66). And this power of development remains to be profaned, that is, decolonized.

I would venture to draw one further parallel between Agamben’s argument with one of the underlying arguments of Decolonizing Development, on the necessity of linking Marx’s theory of capitalism and postcolonial critique. Some Marxists have criticized Agamben for his failure to explicitly connect his critique of sovereignty to capitalism. Clearly, this is a weak critique. In fact, Agamben’s analyses only make sense against the background of Marx’s analysis of value and capital (Barkan, 2009). (If I were writing Decolonizing Development today, I would give greater emphasis to Marx.) By the time he finished the third draft of Capital in December 1865 (on which see Dussel, 2001), Marx had discovered, through his value theory, a way to adequately the analysis of particular capitalist social relations (i.e. competing social classes, in all their heterogeneity) with the analysis of the social production and consumption of surplus (i.e. critical political economy). The hinge between these two is capital’s value form (Marx, 1976: 138–163), the emergence of
which cannot be construed as a ‘natural historical development’ (or, worse, development itself!). The global expansion of value form proceeded through a largely unaccounted series of catastrophes that cannot be understood as progress, at least after Benjamin’s visceral critique (see Jan). As Kojin Karatani (2003) explains:

The ideology of what economists refer to as the ‘healthy market economy’ denies the previously existing ‘naively brutal ways’ [colonial expropriation, for instance], but it sits on top of them. Hence, in the style of Hegelian Logic, Marx describes the ‘development’ of industrial capitalism, from commodity to money, from money to merchant capital, from merchant capital to industrial capital. Nevertheless, when one reads it, one should do so backward. In [Marx’s] description, the development is not a sublation of contradictions, as commonly believed, but the development as a repression of contradictions (2003, 158).

Not sublation, but repression: in other words, no resolution, no Aufhebung. And still the prevailing conception today of the positive therapy (i.e. undoing-of-repression) for capitalism’s contradictions is ‘development’! Development is seen as the very thing that is needed to produce a humane or ethical response to the failures (read: contradictions) of capitalism. Herein lies the aporia of capitalism qua development, or if you prefer, the repression of contradictions that cause the proliferation of apparatuses. But this is only to repeat the book’s argument, and this repetition brings us to Secor’s incisive questions: why must we desire development? Could it not be otherwise? What would it mean to desire something radically other than development? I think these are exactly the questions we should be asking. My reply is to say: to not desire development, we would need to live in a world that is not defined by capitalism qua development. This means that we would need to live in a world not organized by capital’s value form. This is not to say, of course, that capital’s drive is the only force in the world. On the contrary. One of Derrida’s and postcolonialism’s contributions to Marxism is to clarify how the world is riddled by the violence of metaphysics, law, and so on. The “civil war” Agamben cites at the end of Homo Sacer is not only a war between classes; the apparatuses are plural.

Consider again the place called southern Belize. The period in which I conducted the research for this book was one of fervent political activism (some of which I was involved with) in the Maya communities of the region. One part of this activism took the form of a legal case that dragged on for many years but eventually resulted in a favorable decision by the Supreme Court of Belize on October 18, 2007 (shortly before Decolonizing Development was published). The Supreme Court ruled for two Maya communities that filed cases against the Government (called Santa Cruz and Conejo), finding that customary land tenure indeed exists and that the communities do have “such interests” in the form of usufructuary, community-based rights to property. Chief Justice Conteh (2007) wrote in his decision:

[Extreme] extensive documentary evidence, expert reports and Maya oral tradition, establish that the Maya communities presently in Southern Belize exist in areas that had formed part of the ancestral and historic territory of the Maya people since time immemorial, and certainly since prior to Spanish and later British assertions of sovereignty.... I therefore conclude that the villagers of Conejo and Santa Cruz, as part of the indigenous Maya people of Toledo District, have interests in land based on Maya customary land tenure that still survive and are extant.... [The] claimants’ rights and interests in lands based on Maya customary land tenure are not outweighed by the protection afforded by the Belize Constitution, but rather, constitute “property” within the meaning and protection afforded to property generally, especial...here of the real type, touching and concerning land—“communitarian property”, perhaps, but property nonetheless, protected by the Constitution’s prescriptions... (2007).

In short, the Court decided in favor of the Maya communities. It found that they do own their land, that colonial “assertions of sovereignty” post-date the existence of their ancestral and historic territory”. The colonial settlement – where the state and Church collaborated to fix the Maya in settled communities within tightly-regulated Indian Reservations (Wainwright, 2008, chap. 1; also Wainwright, 2009) – would be unsettled. The law, it seems, undid itself; the excluded would be included.

Yet this judgment has not brought an immediate transformation of southern Belize, nor created the conditions for the realization of geographical justice (see Wainwright & Bryan, 2009). Initially the Government indicated its acceptance of the ruling—for all Maya communities. But in early 2008 the Government stated that the Court’s ruling only applied to the two communities that brought the case. The vertretrieb – in the space between the 2007 ruling and the clear achievement of Maya land rights – has seen the emergence of greater ambiguity (“Who owns our village lands now? ‘Where are our land papers?’”) and morbid symptoms (intra-village boundaries conflicts; threats upon Maya leaders). In short, the 2007 Court decision has replaced one unjust situation with another one—which is also rooted in the colonial experience that inaugurated the Mayas’ differential inclusion within the nation–state–territory called ‘Belize’.

Challenging the character of this differential inclusion means running the risk of engaging with living forms of colonial power. Consider: I am implicated in Chief Justice Conteh’s reference to the authoritative “expert reports” that support his conclusion, since I wrote one for the Maya side of the legal case (Wainwright, 2007). The first sentence of my ‘expert report’ states: “I am a professional geographer,” a performative claim to be sure. (The vita attached to the expert report mentions, of course, my book.) Without denying the necessity of these gestures, allow me to underscore their complicity. Here we have Decolonizing Development – on one hand, the result of geographical research about colonialism in Belize; on the other, a postcolonial critique of geographical knowledge (and Mayanism in particular) – authorizing my capacity to stand before the law and speak as an ‘expert’. The postcolonial critique of expertise is unavoidable, urgent, and possibly endless; but this is no alibi for political inactivity, nor liberalism. (Here I would invoke the second sentence from Spivak’s (1988) “Can the subaltern speak?”: “Whatever powers these meditations command may have been earned by a politically interested refusal to push to the limit the founding presuppositions of my desires, as far as they are within my grasp” (1988, p. 271)).

Thus while I emphatically do not see myself as a Mayanist, I applaud Moore’s question. She clarifies a line of questions that I hope Decolonizing Development provokes: how might we geographers who labor to understand the world put our knowledge to work toward radical ends—without repeating the colonial modality called ‘expertise’? How might postcolonial geography play with authority? Spacing geographical authority: is it imaginable? The answer to these questions is clearly not to stay home and do nothing in the vain hope that geographical authority will be magically redistributed. My gambit has been to abide by Belize (Ismail, 2005) and transnational social movements via learning by dislocating-unlearning. This implies living a double life as scholar and activist (unphyphenated) while hanging out in the ruins of colonialism: in other words, ‘doing fieldwork’, understood catachrestically. But this does not resolve these questions as much as it etches them into productive relief.

Decolonizing Development is thus an effect of a practiced hanging out, an enactment of an attempt at writing without representing. This may explain why the argument in Decolonizing Development...
might appear to be written as if independent of my so-called ‘personal experience’. I could not have written the book without living for years in southern Belize, but the argument presupposes a certain decentering of the sovereign ‘I’ (one that pre-dates ‘me’ and who has, since Descartes, authorized European geographical knowledge). That this strategy fails in certain respects – as these readers attest – is inevitable. These limits provide no justification for a return to ethnographic empiricism. They should instead be taken as a provocation to continue a few steps farther along a path called Marxist-postcolonial thinking. This path may provoke feelings of claustrophobia (as for Moore and Robbins) or produce a text such as Decolonizing Development that is “oddly enigmatic” (Sear). To which I can only reply: yes and yes! For how else might we glimpse the truth, and the limits to truth, save through the enigmatic experience of thinking our oscillations within the aporias of our time?

References

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