



PATERNALISM: THE 'OUTSIDE' OR 'REJECTED INSIDE' OF PARTNERSHIP?

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Maria Eriksson Baaz revisits here the concluding chapter of her book *The Paternalism of Partnership: A Postcolonial Reading of Identity in Development Aid*, published by Zed Books (London & New York) in 2005. The book explored 'donor' and expatriate development worker identities as one important dimension that informs and shapes development practice. While the articulation of 'donor' and European development worker identities are explored in a more general way, the identities are read in relation to the partnership discourse. The *Paternalism of Partnership* provides an overview of existing research on discourses of development but also examples from a research project conducted in Tanzania in 1998 and 1999, based on interviews with development workers and other representatives of two Nordic NGOs.

One conclusion that can be drawn after reading *The Paternalism of Partnership* is that there is a contradiction between the message of partnership and 'donor' and development workers' images of Self and the 'partner'. Donor' and development worker identification involve a positioning of the Self as developed and superior in contrast to a backwards and inferior Other. In this discourse, underdevelopment not only entails poverty or an absence of a certain type of technology or poor communications but a *general backwardness* manifested in lack of knowledge, malign cultural practices and degenerated morals. This discourse is manifested in the meanings provided to the development worker role. Contrary to the idea of 'specialization', the European development worker in Africa often transforms into an 'omniscient' that provides advice on a number of areas, situated outside of professional knowledge. Hence, there is a contradiction between the discourse of partnership which emphasizes and denotes equality and disavows paternalism, and the discourse of (evolutionary) development according to which the 'partners' are not equal, but instead are situated at different stages of development and Enlightenment.

Moreover, the Partner tends to be discursively constructed as unreliable in opposition to a reliable and trustworthy Western Self. This mistrust

ISSUE 7

Østlind & Geel A

counteracts the policy of partnership, which emphasizes the need for transparency, mutual trust and 'partner responsibility'. This mistrust means that formal organizational changes tend to be undermined by informal structures and practices. It counteracts the policy of transparency and openness and contributes to the formation of informal channels of information where those who are seen as reliable and trustworthy – European development workers – occupy a central position. The imagery of the unreliable Other also counteracts the policy of partnership in which 'responsibility' is to be located on the 'partner'. Instead, those who are seen as reliable tend to function as informal controllers and sources of responsibility.

However, rather than situating the images of the unreliable, passive Other outside the discourse of partnership – as contradicting the discourse of partnership from the outside – these identities must be situated *within* the partnership discourse itself. It could be argued that the partnership discourse is constituted by these identities. Hence, while the image of the unreliable Other contradicts the aims of transparency and openness, it is, at the same time, inscribed within the discourse of partnership itself. The emphasis on transparency and openness can be seen as a reflection of a perceived 'lack' or 'problem' – a lack of openness and transparency, a lack which mainly is attributed to the 'partner'. While the blame for this 'problem' or 'lack' is also located on the Donor Self, the calls for transparency and openness can be seen as reflecting, partly, the image of the unreliable Other. As shown in *The Paternalism of Partnership* the questioning and criticism of previous development efforts often entail a dimension of self-criticism. However, this self-criticism can be seen as presupposing, or as connected to a particular image of the 'partner' (i.e. the 'donor' Self is too idealistic, because 'partners' are corrupted; it is too permissive, because the 'partner' lacks initiative; or it has too advanced projects, since the 'partners' are not yet at that stage).

That the development worker identities analyzed in *The Paternalism of Partnership* should not be seen as situated outside, but inside the discourse of partnership, is especially evident in relation to the image of the passive Other. The notion of aid dependence, according to which 'recipients' have been spoilt by aid, occupies a central role in the discourse of partnership. Just as with calls for a transparent partnership, calls for the need to activate 'partners' agency can be seen as a reflection of a perceived lack – a lack of 'partner' responsibility and commitment. Hence, the imagery of the passive Other – which displays the paternalism of partnership – can be seen as inscribed within the partnership discourse itself.

It could be argued that the most classic connection in the colonial library – that between the colonized Other and the child (see e.g. Nandy 1983;

McClintock 1995; Pieterse 1992) – is still operating in contemporary development aid discourses. The child metaphor is not, except in very few cases, explicitly invoked in the Tanzania material. However, several characteristics that historically have been attached to the child metaphor, such as irresponsibility and a carefree attitude in general, are still often invoked. The partnership discourse itself – through the ideas of aid dependence – reproduces images of a passive Other whose responsibility and agency has to be activated. While the partnership discourse, in this sense, re-cycles long-standing images dating back to the colonial history, it also reflects new ideas of what constitutes ‘proper strategies of upbringing’. The task is to counteract the spoilt attitude by making the object of the educative efforts become responsible. Hence, the partnership discourse itself is still characterized by a paternalism where the ‘donor’ identifies the problem, passivity and dependency, and promulgates the right treatment, teaching the ‘partner’ how to be independent and use their own resources.

Yet, these contradictions do not mean that the partnership discourse (as is often implied in critical development texts) must be understood as ‘empty rhetoric’ or only as a ‘conscious tactic’ masking other motives. While the partnership discourse must not be idealized as reflecting an unambiguous intention to recreate power-relations, it should not be seen as reflecting nothing more than a conscious tactic. As concluded in the introduction to *The Paternalism of Partnership*, such a reading is simplistic, for various reasons. Above all, it is simplistic because outcomes do not necessarily reflect intentions. Hence, that the partnership policy is poorly reflected in practice cannot be taken as a pretext for it being merely or primarily a tactic.

Moreover, these types of conspiratorial, intentional readings of development tend to neglect the ways in which the critique of development has shaped ‘the development aid industry’. As Pieterse (2001, p. 79) argues: “At a time when there is widespread admission that several development decades have brought many failures, while the development industry continues unabated, there is continuous and heightened self-criticism in development circles, a constant search for alternatives, a tendency towards self-correction and a persistent pattern of cooptation of whatever attractive or fashionable alternatives present themselves. Accordingly, the turnover of alternatives becoming mainstream has speeded up” [1].

The long-standing critique of eurocentrism and paternalism in development practice has influenced development practitioners. This influence is reflected in the partnership discourse itself, in its disavowal of paternalism and the new meanings provided to the development worker role. But it is also reflected in a questioning of the meaning and location of

rationality and Truth. The image of a Western superior Self is not securely established. Images of a superior Western Self co-exist with a counter-discourse which questions these very assumptions. This critique displays the influences of a long-standing anti-imperialist critique of development, more recently articulated in the so-called post-development writings. Hence, it could be argued that some post-development writers, by situating the critics of development outside the 'development industry', tend to neglect the workings and influence of their own critique.

This neglect could be explained in different ways. As Pieterse argues, it could be a matter of "institutional lag or ignorance about changes in the mainstream". But the neglect should perhaps, above all, be understood in terms of, as he (2001, p. 94) puts it, "a proclivity to antagonistic posturing in terms of 'us' and 'them', building up the alternative appeal by emphasizing the backwardness of the mainstream". That is, it could partly be understood as a reflection of the ways in which 'the alternative', for its differential identity and claims, is dependent on the 'mainstream'. It can be understood as a reflection of the ways in which the mainstream is the condition for the existence of the alternative. As Laclau (1996, p. 51) puts it: "The basic point is this: I cannot assert a differential identity without distinguishing it from a context; and in the process of making the distinction, I am asserting the context at the same time. And the opposite is also true: I cannot destroy a context without destroying at the same time the identity of the particular subject who carries out the destruction".

Hence, any influential, successful critique which is adopted by 'the mainstream Other' will destabilize the opposing identity (as an alternative inherently different from the mainstream). The neglect of influence and simplistic representations of development practitioners can thus be seen as, partly, reflecting a destabilized, threatened identity, which feeds a need to further distance the alternative, critical Self from the mainstream Other.

If the influence of anti-imperialist or postcolonial criticism is acknowledged, the partnership discourse could be understood in terms of neither a mere 'continuance' nor a 'break'. As I have argued in *The Paternalism of Partnership*, development worker identities must be situated in the context of more general discourses which are constituted and shaped by colonial history. However, this does not mean that the identities should be understood in terms of a simple continuance of the colonial to the postcolonial. Instead of in terms of 'empty rhetoric' or 'a tactic', the identities articulated and the paternalism inherent in the partnership discourse, can be read as reflecting the ways in which "decolonized situations are marked by the trace of the imperial pasts they try to disavow" (Gikandi, 1996: 15). In this perspective, the partnership discourse constitutes, at the same time, both a break and continuance

where the opposed continues to shape the negation.

EXCLUDED MEANINGS

A discourse could be conceptualized as a partial, temporary closure of meaning, a closure which is never fully successful and which implies an exclusion of other possible meanings. Hence, a basic assumption implicated in this perspective is that meanings and identities, such as those analyzed in *The Paternalism of Partnership*, are open to change. They could be different.

A discourse analysis always operates from some discursive positions, from some partial fixations of meaning. Hence, even if I have aimed to analyze how certain truths about the Self and the Other are established (rather than establishing and fixing certain meanings by replacing 'false images' with the 'real' and 'true'), my book has, of course, operated from some discursive positions, suggesting, implicitly and explicitly, what it is that is excluded in the partial fixations in focus in it. While some of the discursive positions have been quite explicit, I would hereby like to elaborate a little more on the question of possible excluded meanings. This should not be read as an effort to present a comprehensive, all encompassing, menu of possible excluded or alternative meanings. It should rather be read as an effort to make the discursive positions in this book more explicit. I intend therefore to present some of the possible meanings that I have come to see as 'excluded' during the course of my study.

One of the most explicit theoretical positions from which the study operates concerns the importance of recognizing hybridity. The dominant perspective, which reads the practices of development in terms of an encounter between separate, bounded cultures is problematic, since it neglects the hybridity of cultures. This perspective restricts possibilities of identification and masks 'similarities between' and 'differences within' the supposedly bounded cultures.

The image of the passive Other can be seen as hiding 'partner' resistance. It masks the ways in which 'partners' resist 'donor' rules and development worker advice. It also hides the ways in which this resistance and the contradictions inherent in development feed a process in which attributing passivity to (and thereby blaming the 'partner') provides a means of protecting the development worker Self from feelings of failure. The stereotype can be seen as a coping mechanism, as an expression of feelings of insecurity and failure and the efforts to deal with and protect oneself from these.

The discourse of passivity does not only hide resistance, it also masks economic inequalities and their manifestations in livelihood strategies. That is, it hides the fact that many people working in 'partner' organizations, in contrast to the expatriate development workers, have to devote time and energy to survival, to searching for other income-generating activities outside work. While most development workers are aware of economic inequalities and their manifestations, the discourse of passivity still shapes processes of identification. It also provides meaning to 'development problems'. Hence, it could be argued that livelihood strategies that reflect activity and innovation are rendered invisible or marginalized by a discourse in which Africans either are presented as 'prioritizing other things in life than money and work', or as 'spoilt by too much development aid'.

The imagery of the passive Other also masks the centrality of the idea of aid dependence in a neo-liberal discourse where the blame for poverty tends to be located on 'the poor' themselves. One irony which is evident in relation to the workings of the discourse of aid dependence is that people who tend to represent themselves as advocates of social welfare and to dismiss the idea of aid-dependence as part of neo-liberal politics, often accept aid dependence as an unproblematic and self-explanatory truth when it comes to development aid and the African recipient.

The image of the unreliable Other hides the ways in which the power inequalities inherent in the aid-relationship imply that 'partners' cannot articulate goals without risking the partnership. In contrast to the message where 'partners' are urged to articulate their goals as if there were no stakes involved, there are risks involved in articulating goals that differ from those of the 'donor'. In this sense, complete openness is impossible if one is to become and remain a 'partner'. Above all, however, the image of the unreliable Other (like the image of passivity) masks the workings of stereotyping. Hence, it hides the ways in which the stereotype of the unreliable Other is manifested in differential treatment that conceals the unreliability of some people: the supposedly reliable Western Self.

As James Ferguson shows in *The Anti-Politics Machine*, development interventions are characterized by a process in which global and political perspectives on development tend to give way to technical and local perspectives. As a result of a need to construct surroundings in which the developers can provide meaning to the interventions and their roles, perspectives which locate development problems in the global political economy tend to give way to a perspective in which development is reduced to technical issues and where poverty is located in local structures. As Ferguson points out, this process must be seen as a reflection of the need for developers to make development interventions and the presence of the development worker Self meaningful [2].

This process of depoliticization was evident in the Tanzania context. While discussing poverty in Tanzania, many development workers located the problems of poverty in the global political economy [3]. However, many development workers also concluded that their understanding of the problems of poverty and underdevelopment had changed while in Tanzania. They concluded that, before they went to Tanzania, they believed that the roots of underdevelopment were located in the global economy, but that they had now, as they put it, developed a more complex picture and realized that many of the problems are located in local practices and attitudes. Hence, discourses emphasizing global structures tend to be replaced by discourses where development problems are located in local traditions and attitudes. As shown in *The Paternalism of Partnership*, they tend to be located in a 'passive mentality where people enjoy relaxing', in 'a superstitious mentality', 'a culture of corruption' etc., or they are located in a perspective in which development proceeds in steps and where high expectations are therefore naive.

THE POSSIBILITY OF CHANGE

A question that arises when acknowledging the ways in which the aid relationship shapes processes of identification is whether there really is a possibility of change. Processes of identification must be understood in relation to the economic and power inequalities which tend to be inherent in the aid relationship itself. However, as I have argued repeatedly, the economic inequalities characterizing the aid relationship should not be seen as *determining* processes of identification.

There are, of course, other similar relationships characterized by conflicting interests and power inequalities, where one party has access to the resources and sets up the rules of the game, but the meanings provided to the 'donor' Self and 'recipient' Other are different. Similar relationships characterize, for example, the relationship between Northern development NGOs and the institutions funding them. While these relationships most certainly are not harmonious or without mistrust and stereotypes, they are rarely, I believe, characterized by images of the 'recipient' as backward, passive and unreliable. While this difference points at the importance of situating identities within a postcolonial context, it also displays that processes of identification are not determined in a fixed way by the economic relationship between the parties involved. It points at the possibility of change. It shows that identities are constituted through discourse – partial, temporary closures of meanings –, which could always be different.

In this perspective, the possibility of change is primarily located in the

question of representation, in providing alternative meanings. The question of which alternative meanings to provide is, however, not a simple one. Some of the efforts to challenge dominant imagery are characterized by an effort to replace what is presented as 'negative' imagery of Africa or the South with a 'positive' one. In some of these efforts, Africa tends to become a symbol of a 'positive difference', as a symbol of an unspoiled pre-modernity showing the way to 'a happy future'. As argued earlier, these discursive strategies are problematic, since they tend to confirm and support the classic rhetoric where poverty is presented as 'internal problems', located in the culture and mentality of the African Other. They also, by creating an image of a happy, unspoiled Other, tend to relegate questions of poverty and economic inequalities to the margins and de-legitimize demands for economic development as symptoms of dangerous westernization. In this sense, "the man who adores the Negro" is, as Fanon (1952/86: 10) concluded, "as 'sick' as the man who abominates him". Efforts to provide alternative meanings must go beyond and problematize the focus on 'positive' and 'negative' images and instead focus on how stereotypes and discourses are institutionalized in society and support unequal relations of power and social inequalities.

However, it is not only the meanings that are attached to the Self and the Other that can and need to be changed, but also the direction of development activities. The type of organizations studied in my study face several problems in legitimatizing the orientation of present development interventions. One of these 'old' challenges is what MS talks about as "increasing levels of education in the South". This challenge has been dealt with not only through an increasing focus on professionalism, but also through an increasing emphasis on cultural exchange. The latter strategy, however, faces serious problems of legitimacy in a globalized world with increasing mobility of meaning and information. Above all, it faces important problems of legitimacy in a diasporic world where the African Other "has installed itself in the North" (Robins, 1991: 32). In this world, continued efforts to legitimate personnel inputs from the North to the South cannot be seen only as an expression of 'a lack of fantasy', or as 'a failure to adjust to a changing world'. Such efforts do not only neglect other ways in which one can work for 'cultural exchange', 'creating networks between North and South' and 'enhancing knowledge and interest for development problems'. Neglecting the knowledge of, and the 'cultural exchange with', 'the Africa within' –, they also reflect the problem of racism and segregation in the donor countries. They reflect the ways in which images of a superior Western Self are not only manifested in development activities in Africa, but within the donor countries themselves.

The Paternalism of Partnership can be seen as a contribution to a growing body of research that started to investigate the silence of identity in development. It can be seen as a part of the 'discursive' or 'cultural turn' of development studies represented by writers such as James Ferguson, Jonathan Crush, Jane Parpart, G.H. Fagan, Jan Nederveen Pieterse, David Slater and Henrietta Lidchi. Like several of these writers, I have situated development practice within a postcolonial context. I hope that through a study of a particular part of the development industry that has received relatively little attention, I have contributed to an understanding of the complexity of processes of identification in development aid contexts. I also hope to have contributed to an understanding of the importance of addressing the question of discourse and identity –these issues cannot be dispatched as apolitical and irrelevant.

While I hope that *The Paternalism of Partnership* has shown that the question of identity needs to be addressed in development studies, I also hope that I have been successful in pointing at the problematic pitfalls in such efforts. Above all, a cultural analysis is not the same as a culturalist analysis, which ignores political and economic contexts. Processes of identification need to be analyzed in relation to economic inequalities characterizing the development aid context.

There are indeed problematic trends within development theory where, as Porter (1995: 65) puts it, 'development practice' is 'ambushed by relativism' and 'immobilized by nihilism'. Yet, as I have tried to argue, this is not something that follows from discourse analysis or the postcolonial perspective itself. It is something that follows from a *simplistic* postcolonial critique of development. As several postcolonial theorists have argued, the solution is not to revert to a simplistic paralyzing, particularist and relativist position by dismissing values and ideas over which the West has claimed proprietorship such as democracy, equality and human rights. What is important, however, as Spivak argues, is to engage in a critique that questions the *claims to proprietorship* and the *highly selective application* of these values. The solution is not located in rejecting the idea of development as argued by the post-development writers either. Rather, the task is to engage in a critique of the unevenness of development and to challenge the meanings attached to development – to engage in a persistent critique of the eurocentrism, 'trusteeship' (Cowen & Shenton, 1995) and 'lack of humility' (Pieterse, 2001: 106) which characterize present development efforts. Rather than rejecting development, the task is, as Spivak (1993: 284) put it, to 'engage in a persistent critique of what one cannot not want'.

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[1] According to Pieterse, forms of alternative development have 'become institutionalized as part of mainstream development, and in some circumstances have become or overtaken mainstream development, to the point that MAD, or mainstream alternative development, might not be an odd notion' (ibid).

[2] Ferguson (1990). For a recent discussion of this aspect of the work of Ferguson, see Nustad (2001).

[3] The mentioning of the role of global economic relations is mostly evident among the newcomers.

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