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Aram Ziai. Development Discourse and Global History: From Colonialism to the Sustainable Development Goals.

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Aram Ziai, Professor of Development and Postcolonial Studies at the University of Kassel and Executive Director of the Global Partnership Network, has dedicated a large part of his academic career to understanding the claim that 'development' constitutes a politically neutral path to prosperity. The second edition of Development Discourse and Global History — first published by Routledge in 2015 and now substantially revised and expanded — constitutes his most comprehensive effort to trace the career of 'development' as a historically constituted discourse, from its colonial antecedents to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The author's work in this book consists of previously published articles, book chapters, and original chapters written specifically for this book.

Building on the foundational contributions of Arturo Escobar's

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Encountering Development (1995) and James Ferguson's The Anti-Politics Machine (1990), Ziai extends the genealogical project into the post-millennium period and opens new analytical terrain on race, gender, migration, and displacement. Whereas Escobar exposed development as a discourse and Ferguson demonstrated its depoliticising effects through the notion of the anti-politics machine, Ziai's distinctive contribution lies in tracing the historical continuities linking colonial rule, post-war development paradigms, and contemporary frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals. In doing so, he situates development discourse within a broader global historical trajectory spanning more than seven decades. Rather than merely updating empirical examples, the second edition expands the analytical scope of the original volume by engaging with contemporary debates on displacement, migration, race, gender, and the SDGs, thereby demonstrating the continuing relevance of development discourse in the twenty-first century. The book is directed at students and researchers in development studies, global history, postcolonial theory, and discourse analysis, and positions itself squarely within the tradition of post-structuralist critique of development.

The book's central argument is that 'development' is neither a self-evident social reality nor a technical instrument of policy, but a historically constituted discourse that organises knowledge, legitimises power, and produces particular representations of the Global South. Drawing on Michel Foucault's concepts of discourse, power-knowledge, archaeology, and genealogy, Ziai frames development as a formation of statements governed by implicit rules that determine what can be said, by whom, and with what authority. The first two chapters (pp. 1–35) establish these methodological foundations before the analysis proceeds to examine the colonial origins of the discourse, its postcolonial transformations, and its extension into contemporary governance domains.

One of the book's methodological strengths lies in its systematic application of Foucauldian genealogy across different historical periods and policy domains, demonstrating the enduring analytical utility of discourse analysis for development studies. Throughout the book, Ziai maintains a careful distinction between the discourse's hegemonic functions and its appropriation by subaltern actors — a methodological nuance that prevents the analysis from collapsing

into a simple story of Western imposition.

The historical chapters (Chapters 3–4, pp. 36–65) offer an incisive reading of the transition from the colonial 'civilising mission' to post-war development. Ziai demonstrates that although the openly racial hierarchies of colonial discourse were expunged from official language after 1945, the underlying epistemological architecture — in which Western knowledge and experience constitute the norm against which others are measured — survived largely intact beneath the new technical vocabulary. The book's contribution extends beyond development studies into the field of global history. By tracing continuities between colonial governance, post-war development policies, and contemporary global agendas, Ziai adopts a genealogical and longue durée perspective that reveals the historical persistence of hierarchies embedded in development discourse. This emphasis on historical continuity strengthens the book's relevance for scholars interested in the global history of power, knowledge, and inequality.

Chapter 5 (pp. 66–83), in which Ziai argues for the outright abandonment of 'development' on grounds of its Eurocentric, depoliticising, and authoritarian tendencies, is the most provocative section of the book and the one most likely to generate sustained debate. Crucially, it is immediately followed by a chapter documenting how development discourse has simultaneously been appropriated by formerly colonised states and Southern movements for emancipatory purposes (pp. 84–100). This dialectical structure — critique followed by qualification — recurs throughout the book and is one of its analytical strengths. The World Bank's shifting poverty discourse (pp. 141–156) and the treatment of development as an 'empty signifier' through the lens of dam projects and microcredit programmes (pp. 157–173) are similarly grounded. The concluding chapter (pp. 266–292) synthesises the preceding discussions by identifying six recurring functions of development discourse: naturalisation, othering, legitimation, hierarchisation, depoliticisation, and appropriation. These categories constitute an original analytical contribution and provide future researchers with a transferable framework.

The most significant addition to this edition is Chapter 16 (pp. 248–265), which addresses race and gender in development discourse through concepts such as 'colonial gaze', 'white expertise', and 'white saviourism', situating development practice within the structures of racial capitalism and patriarchy. The expanded

treatment of the SDGs (pp. 216–230) also adds value, demonstrating that despite the introduction of new themes such as inequality, climate, and sustainability, the continued centrality of economic growth signals the persistence of older discursive commitments. Equally noteworthy is the chapter on development-induced displacement (pp. 231–247), which reveals how forced relocations are systematically legitimised through recurring discursive strategies: appeals to inevitability, invocations of the 'greater common good', and references to property rights. By disaggregating these legitimation mechanisms, Ziai shows that displacement is not an unintended side effect of development projects but a politically and discursively constructed outcome. The updated preface — which ranges across the Syrian refugee crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and the Gaza conflict — grounds the second edition in a sharply observed present.

Among the book's most considerable strengths is the sustained coherence of its analytical ambition. Spanning colonialism, the Cold War, neoliberalism, and the SDG era, the book maintains a theoretically consistent framework while remaining sensitive to historical specificity. The multidisciplinary range of sources — from United Nations policy documents and World Bank reports to postcolonial theory, feminist scholarship, and Foucauldian philosophy — lends the analysis both breadth and credibility. The normative move towards reframing global inequality in the language of justice rather than development (pp. 193–203) is among the book's most distinctive contributions and merits wider engagement in international relations scholarship. Ziai's engagement with Amartya Sen's capability approach is particularly sharp: rather than dismissing Sen, he uses the encounter to demonstrate how even ostensibly emancipatory frameworks can remain entangled with the hegemonic assumptions they seek to revise.

The work is not without limitations. Because several chapters originated as previously published articles and book chapters, certain conceptual discussions reappear across the volume. While this repetition facilitates selective reading and classroom use, it occasionally disrupts the coherence expected of a single-author monograph. The most persistent tension, however, concerns the abandonment thesis itself. The case for discarding the concept of 'development' is persuasive at the level of discourse critique, but the book offers limited

guidance on what institutional or political alternatives might look like in practice. The recourse to 'justice' as a preferred register remains, at the level of abstraction at which it is introduced, underspecified — a difficulty that is itself somewhat ironic given Ziai's own diagnosis of how concepts are appropriated and emptied of critical content. A second concern relates to the treatment of institutional transformation. The book consistently reads the adoption of critical vocabulary — participation, ownership, sustainability — by international organisations as evidence of co-optation rather than genuine contestation. While this scepticism is often warranted, it risks forming a closed interpretive loop: transformations that confirm the thesis of discursive reproduction are registered as evidence, while those that might complicate it are reclassified. More sustained case studies of intra-institutional dissent would guard against this tendency. Third, the new chapter on race and gender, though a valuable and timely addition, reads somewhat as an appendage rather than a fully integrated dimension of the analysis. The earlier chapters, written before intersectionality occupied as central a place in development studies as it does today, could benefit from deeper retrospective engagement with these themes rather than their consolidation in a single late chapter.

Development Discourse and Global History is an important and timely work. It will be essential reading for graduate students and researchers in development studies, international relations, global history, political economy, and postcolonial theory. For those who remain unconvinced that the language of development requires critical interrogation rather than technical refinement, Ziai provides a formidable body of evidence and argument.

For those already acquainted with post-development scholarship, the systematic treatment of continuities and transformations across seven decades, together with the new material on race, gender, and displacement, makes this second edition a substantial advance over the first. Its limitations are real but do not undermine its core contribution: a rigorous, historically grounded account of how the discourse of development has operated — and continues to operate — as one of the dominant frameworks through which global inequality is named, managed, and reproduced.