Postmodernism in development studies: The last bastion of the noble savage

Ravi Bhandari
Saint Mary’s College of California

Introduction
Postmodernism (PM) has had a massive influence throughout social science; in development it has taken the form of post-developmentaldisms (PD’s). It has become increasingly intellectually fashionable and has, in fact, created many “new” lines of inquiry -- gender studies and social capital, just to name two -- that are assumed to be academically acceptable without any serious critical analysis. If the theory is fundamentally flawed, then what follows in its applications is also fundamentally flawed, and we note some examples in development with respect to Nepal, which has become the “academic development poster child” with a plethora of self-help fantasies driven by the astronomical ninety-seven thousand INGO’s and NGO’s exclusively residing in Kathmandu. This paper argues that the ideology of neoliberal globalization is the ideology of PM itself, despite its self-proclamations of being critical to the processes of continuing imperialism, expanding capitalism, and neocolonialism. This extended abstract only outlines the argument drawing on a review of current scholarship on Nepal in gender studies and social capital.

Origins of Post-Developmentalisms and a Critique
Dependency theory as an alternative explanation for underdevelopment, popular in the 60’s and 70’s in Latin America, has seen a resurgence given the deepening of the current global economic and its ill effects on the Third World which was already suffering from several crises in food, energy, peace, and the environment. The economic remedy for the continuing colonial and imperial economic relations between the core and periphery was commonly known as delinking. But what became...
popular was not delinking from the many and in fact increasing political, economic and social dependencies Third World countries face today mainly through international finance capital, but rather the supposedly more “radicalized” version couched squarely in PM epistemology of delinking cognitively. Cognitive delinking is a critique to the worldwide cognitive dependency on Western modes of knowing and science.

One major critique of PD is focused on the fundamental flaw of this theory: cognitive relativism and its Eurocentric foundation. While there is a history of solid criticisms of PM in development studies for its romanticism and neopopulist ideas, these critiques, to my knowledge, are not equally critical of its cognitive premises.

The main characteristic of PM is the negation of the uniqueness of truth. For PDs, scientific knowledge and reason are forms of imperialism within the cognitive sphere. Therefore, Foucault is celebrated as an intellectual hero who is virulently anti-Marxist. PD has gained popularity with anti-Marxist theorists, as PM is considered less reductionist than Marx, despite the fact that these assertions have never actually been proved, and if anything, shown to be the opposite, as this paper argues. In Foucault’s view, power is everywhere, which divorces his theory from any analytical value. Unlike Marx, however, Foucault offers no solution to the human condition.

As evidenced by the natural sciences, universal reason is applicable everywhere. Under this universal reason, people must be treated equally, but cognitions cannot be. Given that every individual has his or her own cognition, this multiplicity of cognitions cannot all be regarded as equal or, to extend this logic, conflict between essential components of these varying cognitions is inevitable. Therefore, a logical toleration of all cognitions is theoretically impossible. PD theorists conflate these notions of “equality,” despite their logical distinction. Equality of individuals and equality of cognitions need to be separated, and yet PDs deliberately confuse and intermingle the two notions in order to bolster their façade of tolerance, anti-essentialism, anti-orthodoxy, anti-determinism, and anti-homogenization.

Once we come to the realization that devaluing cognitions does not necessarily imply the devaluation of the individual, we can appreciate, without corresponding feelings of PM guilt and “intolerance,” that it is simply impossible to tolerate all forms knowing. For example, is a
colonial and racist ideology an acceptable form of knowing? Should it be as tolerated and credible as other ideological paradigms? Accepting this position in true PM form results in the legitimization of bigotry and recurring colonial ideology as merely another way of knowing. What is even worse is that these forms of knowing are assumed to be as intellectually valuable as any other!

A growing contradiction within PM’s own logic emerges. Adherence despises the superiority of science and cherishes all the oppressed cognitions or non-Western ways of knowing. But they do this within a Western epistemology and based on European thinkers such as Foucault and Derrida, two thinkers who not only have no relevance to understanding the complicated dynamics of the Third World, but whose theory exclusively serves the interests of late capitalism, as many call PM the “new spirit of capitalism” and the ideology of neoliberal globalization of gigantic transnational oligopolies.

Paradigmatically, is it possible for a man embedded culturally, geographically, and intellectually in Europe to develop a globally transferable methodology to understand the world in its entirety? Foucault’s understanding of the world and its interactions derives from French and German philosophy. Foucault takes his understanding from such cultures which have historically systematically colonized the entire planet, and uses those same understandings to analyze the Third World regions they previously colonized. Is this analysis of Third World dynamics based on French discourse not epistemological imperialism in its most crude form? Is systematically ignoring non-Western philosophy and ways of knowing yet another form of subjugating and minimizing the contributions of non-Western ways of knowing? Is this not epistemological imperialism/colonialism itself?

PM is still more Eurocentric than modernity itself. For example, the overbearing PM obsession with demolishing grand narratives such as religion, tradition, national liberation, democracy, communism, and history is detrimental to the very existence of the non-Western world and countries like Nepal. Yet such narratives form our definition of ourselves; our understanding of ourselves is captured in those grand narratives. The cultural constructions that have taken literally thousands of years to evolve are the very things PM’s are so keen to destroy.
PM does not make this radical critique to promote the emancipation of individuals and of society through socialism or communism. Instead it proposes a return to pre-modern, pre-capitalist alienations. The forms of sociability that it promotes are necessarily in line with adherence to a ‘tribalist’ identity for communities (para-religious and para-ethnic), at the other extreme from what is required to deepen democracy, which has become a synonym for the ‘tyranny of the people’ daring to question the wise management of the elite who serve the economic and geopolitical interests of Western imperialism. The critiques of the ‘great narratives’ advanced by PM do not look to the future but return to an imaginary and false past, which is romanticized. As Samir Amin puts it eloquently, PM is not a way forward but a dead end.

The exclusionary morality of PM thus becomes dangerous by taking cognition for granted, because this necessarily implies passive acceptance of the morals and overall worldview of that cognition. Thus, according to Christianity evil men will disbelieve in Christianity. According to bastardized Marxism, class enemies will disbelieve in Marxism. According to psychoanalysis, disbelief in psychoanalysis is the equivalence of admitting some form of neurosis. And, more to the point, according to PM and its PD offshoots, only the evil imperialist or “Hindu fundamentalist” (as I often get called at conferences by white feminists) will disbelieve in PM and the importance of identity politics in understanding the world. Ironically, in true fundamentalist fashion, PD directly evades confronting the problem of cognitive relativism by elevating relativism to an intellectual virtue in itself.

**Gender Studies and Social Capital in Current Nepali Scholarship**

Gender studies in Nepal, a flourishing field and development industry in itself with countless NGO’s funded by Western monies, is one of many applications of this intellectual GMO, which exemplifies the need to liberate Nepali women from their backward cultures, from their backward fathers, from their backward husbands. The field claims a commitment to cultural sensitivity and pluralism while resting entirely on liberal white (Western) feminism as the universal norm. The Third World’s destiny is liberal development because the West is liberated and has a moral Christian imperative of self-imposed obligations to save others. The number of expats and experts on gender in Nepal is truly astounding. They more or less have the same profile: they visit Nepal, learn the language, have a few Nepali friends, etc.—all enough to verify their authenticity (of course, only to their own community).
Western feminism claims to act for the benefit of Third World women, denying all of the contradictions of imperialism and complete external dependence. Western feminists flourish in the developing world by depriving women in developing countries of their view. They flourish because poor women’s perspectives are viewed as backward, inferior, and unliberated, developed in oppressive regimes that deny women the freedom of thought that would necessarily lead them to Western liberal feminist ideology!

It is equally true that the family and professional success of white educated women depend on the ill paid and exploited labor of Asian and Latina women in America who serve them, and the indigenous and marginalized lower-caste women in Kathmandu who serve the luxurious expat elite who function as new missionaries. These women who are severed from their own families, severed from their own children, severed from their own possibilities of love. But those women are never discussed. Not surprisingly, these very women’s experiences are never privileged in this de-privileging, de-centering idea of PM. And when Nepali women and structural problems such as neoliberalism are discussed, the misappropriation of gender takes on an even more ugly and brutal form. Within these so-called critical gender studies and anti-neoliberalism positioning, progressive posturing and do-good attitude form a narrowly construed dichotomy of good versus evil, imbued with a profound undercurrent of western interventionism into the lives of Nepali women (as if Western intervention has a positive track record in the history of Nepal!)

Social capital theory is another example of how PM in development is synonymous with colonial ideology and discourse through its glorification of the individual removed from the geographic, economic, and social confinement the majority of the world finds themselves in daily. Social capital theory, as a product of PM, is another self-help fantasy, claiming that the chronic underdevelopment plaguing the Third World could be cured if individuals simply had more trust, reciprocity and community spirit, no different than mainstream neoclassical economics and their solution to the infamous Prisoner’s Dilemma. This position, of course, rather glaringly blinds itself to all the economic dependencies that exist in the world today. Even if social capital theorists acknowledge that economic dependency may have some influence on developmental
progress, these concerns are seen as peripheral to the main issues of social capital.

The idea of social capital has been referred to as the McDonaldization of the social sciences. As Ben Fine (2008) argues, one should not consume it unless one is prepared to be consumed by it. First, there is no such thing as social capital; it is but another illusory and fictitious concept created within an illusory and ideologically-driven paradigm of PM. Social capital itself implies that there is some capital that is not social. That is another myth. All capital requires a social relationship, in some way or another, regardless of one’s views on Marxian economics and political economy. However, taking the concept of social capital and placing it on the right hand side of every equation as an independent variable to explain something on the left hand side, is a gross misspecification. Everything in the world is social capital.

Take for example, the adage “it’s not what you know, but who you know.” What social capital theory ignores is that what you know is a function of multiple objective constraints and privileges. Ignoring this robs social capital of any explanatory power. The very concept of social capital is amorphous because every interaction, object, relationship is social capital. If social capital is everything (like their view of power), then there is no analytical explanation of what such capital can be and what it can differentiate in data. Social capital theory is yet another panacea developed by the World Bank and endorsed by academics in an attempt to avoid discussion of substantive redistribution of wealth. It does not have a methodological, theoretical or empirical leg to stand on.

Within social capital theories, practitioners claim to be using nonmarket variables and thus demand recognition for bringing the social into economics. This demand ignores the obvious: economics has always used nonmarket variables. Social capital theory, however, avoids a critique of economics itself. Instead, it glorifies the individual by theorizing about nonmarket variables, while assuming perfect competition and an affirmation of the universal rights of man (not woman!) through bourgeois individualism, again concealing the dynamics and contradictions of US imperialism, which very much shape the possibilities and constraints of the popular (not populist) classes.

The “consensus politics” of rallying to gender equality or advocating the neoliberal solution of building social capital in communities (and
countless other nuances to these themes) relies on an unchallenged American liberalism, a PM liberalism that is necessarily accompanied by the complete devaluation of different paths of other nations. All revolutions are seen through the lens of “identity politics” and hence denigrated (French, Chinese, Russian, and Nepali!) for their totalitarian tendencies, and so on and so on.

The glorification of the individual in PM (ideologically indistinguishable from neoclassical economics and neoliberalism) gives rise to a “multitude” (Hardt and Negri) of “collective subjectivities” and “identity politics.” Many popularizers in Nepal join the gender studies and social capital industry with minor variations to Manuel Castell’s networked society, Rifkin’s notion of “exclusionary politics,” Robert Reich’s use of social democracy, and so on and so on.

Conclusion

It is in this way that present PM scholarship in Nepal (and developing countries in general) facilitates the fragmentation of the majority of the population, making them accept adjustment to the domination logic of Western imperialism. This fragmentation hardly undermines that domination; on the contrary, it makes it far easier. The glorified individual embedded in all of this scholarship does not become a conscious, lucid agent of social transformation, but the slave of triumphant merchandization. Rather than the empowered and liberated self PM seeks, the real citizen disappears, giving way to the consumer/speculator, no longer a citizen who seeks emancipation, but an insignificant creature who blindly accepts submission to present day US-led imperialism in Nepal.

It is truly remarkable how ideologically driven this so-called scholarship is when it is impervious to the reality of the historic revolution underway in Nepal, the most advanced in modern times, as if there were no Maoists or they were all gone. In this way, PM scholarship becomes a form of intellectual genocide by silencing the experience of the majority of Nepali citizens who reside outside KTM, where the imperative of immediate survival is much too hard to escape and much more demanding than the promise of social nirvana dangled by Western feminism and social capital theories.

References


