



The contemporary development discourse: Analysing the influence of development studies' journals

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Accepted 4 May 2018

Keywords:
Development discourse
Development studies
World Development
Development and Change
Third World Quarterly
European Journal of Development Research

ABSTRACT

The cross-disciplinary field of “development studies” involves a variety of scientific disciplines, mainly within the Social Sciences. Its cross-disciplinary character implies a complex process of forming a “development discourse” in which different disciplines are simultaneously proposing different—and sometimes contradictory—discourse components, and where there is—still—a “Western hegemony”, despite the fact that research is mainly focused on the so-called “developing” countries.

Based on the theories of Michel Foucault, this paper studies the role and influence of academic journals in shaping the “contemporary development discourse” by means of identifying the main areas of research, the citation networks, and the most influential articles, countries and institutions. Our bibliometric analysis focuses in four “development” journals that are ranked in the *Social Sciences Citation Index* in the “subject category” of “planning and development”: *World Development*, *Development and Change*, *Third World Quarterly* and *European Journal of Development Research*. The analysis for the period 2000–2015 produces four main results:

- i) The four journals coincide on various areas of common interest (related to aid, poverty, sustainability and development challenges), which share the same rules of formation of the development discourse.
- ii) Journals have a limited influence in shaping the development discourse because of their inability to generate “citation bursts”, and the existence of a high proportion of “disconnected” articles that mostly receive self-citations.
- iii) There is a clear preponderance of the Anglo-Saxon academia in the scientific production.
- iv) In comparative terms, *World Development* stands out as the most influential journal in shaping the development discourse.

These results may be useful for authors and editors of development journals in order to paint a broader picture of the contemporary development discourse and to identify important editorial challenges and possible ways to strengthen the journals' coherence and influence in the formation of the development discourse.

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“I don't care who writes a nation's laws [...] if I can write its economics textbooks”.

Paul A. Samuelson (1990: ix–x)

1. Introduction

Development Studies (DS) is a cross-disciplinary field of study that involves a variety of scientific disciplines at different levels.

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While this feature might lead to ambiguity and difficulties in the dialogue across disciplines, it also helps to enable a broader understanding of the complex and multidimensional process of progress of human societies (Baud et al., 2018; Hulme and Toye, 2006; Monks, Carbonnier, Meller, & de Haan, 2017; Sumner and Tribe, 2008; Tezanos and Trueba, 2018). Moreover, cross-disciplinarity involves further complexity in the process of forming a “development discourse”, as different disciplines are simultaneously proposing different—and sometimes contradictory—discourse components.

The increasing integration of disciplines and discourse components in DS has been acknowledged in the renewed definition elaborated by the European Association of Development Research and

Training Institutes (EADI), who considers DS as “[...] a multi- and interdisciplinary field of study that seeks to understand social, economic, political, technological, ecological, gender and cultural aspects of societal change at the local, national, regional and global levels, and the interplay between these different levels and the stakeholders involved” (Monks et al., 2017: 13). Nevertheless, this definition is extremely wide-ranging and is not free from criticism; in particular, from a post-development perspective, the very concept of “development” is criticised as being heavily charged with normative, practical and methodological assumptions that have “Eurocentric, depoliticising and authoritarian implications” (Ziai, 2013: 124; Ziai, 2016: 63). In fact, a distinctive feature of DS is the discursive domination of the conventionally called “Western modernity”, which conveys an ethnocentric vision of development upon the so-called “developing world” (Escobar, 1995; Rist, 2008; Ziai 2016, 2004).

Understanding the features of the contemporary 21st century development discourse is a matter of great interest for development researchers and it can be cleared up from a theoretical and empirical standpoint. Particularly, previous literature has not elucidated the role and influence of academic journals in shaping the development discourse, identifying the main research topics, and detecting the most influential countries, institutions and languages. Some of the matters that arise from this context include the following three unanswered questions: (i) to what degree are scientific journals leading the process of forming the development discourse? (ii) What are the main discourse components of DS in recent years? (iii) To what extent are the top scientific journals publishing research outputs that were produced in institutions outside the Anglo-Saxon academia, and especially those from the developing world?

This paper sheds some light on these questions by analysing the influence of four DS academic journals in shaping the contemporary development discourse. Our sample comprises four journals that are included in the *Social Sciences Citation Index* (SSCI) in the cross-disciplinary “subject category” of “planning and development”. The selected journals are *World Development* (WD), *Development and Change* (D&C), *Third World Quarterly* (TWQ) and *European Journal of Development Research* (EJDR). Following this introduction, Section 2 briefly reviews the formation process of scientific discourses in accordance with Foucault’s pioneering ideas. Section 3 explains the main features of the development discourse and its rules of formation within the so-called “post-development critique”, which rests on the methodology developed by Foucault. It also provides an analytical framework for analysing the influence of academic journals in shaping the development discourse. Section 4 uses bibliometric techniques and qualitative analysis in order to identify the discourse components and commonalities in the four journals analysed during the period 2000–2015. Section 5 identifies the most influential papers within these four journals and explores the consequences in terms of geographic, institutional and linguistic preponderances in the production of knowledge. Finally, Section 6 concludes and summarises the main findings and implications for the formation of the contemporary development discourse.

2. The formation of scientific discourses

The process of forming scientific discourses has been studied since the mid-20th century (see, among others, Foucault, 1972; Cohen, 1973; Foucault, 1980; Gupta, 1982; Östling, Larsson, Sandmo, Nilsson, & Nordberg, 2018). Particularly influential was the break through contribution of the French philosopher, Paul-Michel Foucault (1972, 1980). Motivated by the limited influence of the sociological sphere in the explanation of paradigmatic shifts,

he claimed that the generation of knowledge transcends social factors or any bond with a particular scientific discipline. In his view, a discourse is “[...] a group of statements in so far as they belong to the same discursive formation” (Foucault 1972: 117). Hence the key issue for characterising a discourse is the detection of its “rules of formation”, which are the conditions to which the components of the discourse (object, enunciative modalities, concepts and strategies) are subjected (Foucault, 1972: 38).

Examining this in more detail, the four components of a discourse—following Foucault (1972) and Ziai (2016: 40–45)—can be described as follows:

- The “object” of a discourse is precisely what is actually studied in a specific field of study. In the particular case of DS, the object of the development discourse involves an aspiration to an “ideal” of what we can generically conceive as a multidimensional process of progress of human societies. While the development discourse comprises both the so-called “developed countries” and “developing countries”, the object of discourse has been traditionally associated with the latter group: those countries that experience problems and shortcomings (economic, social, political, institutional, environmental, etc.) that deviate them from the ideal. Thus, the discursive object in DS was originally related to geographic and socioeconomic units (States or regions) classified as “developing” (Ziai, 2016: 41). Nevertheless, the ongoing difficulty to reach the ideal of development, and the greater awareness of the “globalisation” of the development challenges, have motivated the emergence of a renewed discursive object (what we can call “global development”, transcending the narrower focus on “developing countries”, with a comprehensive view of the development problems in a global framework).
- The “enunciative modalities” are features that underlie three operating questions: (i) who provides the discourse? (ii) Where does the discourse come? (iii) What is the position of the researcher and which language does he/she use? Following Foucault (1972: 55), the source of a discourse is not the consequence of any individual person (the “subject”), but the result of a set of discursive practices, which are established at various levels and thus explain the “dispersion of the subject and his discontinuity”. In the particular case of the development discourse, the formation of enunciative modalities has been traditionally linked to “Western experts”, as claimed by Ziai (2016: 31): “[...] the trusteeship for the development of the society is given to and taken over by the new elites of postcolonial states”. This means scholars that are based in developed countries (universities, research centres, think tanks, etc.) and take a public position on how to address a development issue (Easterly, 2013; Rist, 2008). Thus a key element of an enunciative modality is the connection between the expert and their ideological proximity to a certain scientific paradigm of social progress, which implies, to some extent, the subordination of the person to a hegemonic conception of development.
- A “concept” is a particular characterisation of the object through a group of dynamic relations that involve an “interrelation between knowledge, meaning and power” (Sande Lie, 2008: 120). According to Foucault (1972: 56–58), the concept comprises forms of succession (the ordering of the statements), coexistence (interaction to other elements such as institutions, social groups and discursive practices) and interventions (techniques of writing). In the particular case of the development discourse, concepts characterise the object of analysis (the multidimensional process of development), and hence they depend on how the object is formally conceived over a period of time and by a certain group of specialists. Thus, development concepts may be associated with the lack of a dimension that is

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