
*Black and Green*’s first word is ‘capitalist’ and last is ‘other’, and these two poles define the book’s orbit. Within, Kiran Asher asks us to abandon the simplistic notions that development reflects a hegemonic force of Western rationality and that social movements are radically otherwise. One of her central claims is that “viewing … development … and social movements in oppositional terms obscures the contradictory … ways they … intertwin[e]” (p. 1). Herein lies the book’s mandate: to clarify how development and social movements dance together, specifically through a study of the Black social movement of Colombia’s Pacific region.

The resulting analysis offers a critique of ‘post development’ by undermining ideas at the heart of Escobar’s reading of development, resistance, and Colombia (best known from *Encountering Development* [Escobar 1994]). No author is cited more often in *Black and Green* than Escobar. These books are fated to stand against each other on our shelves, and we cannot doubt that they will be compared, as for instance in the first published review of *Black and Green* by Ulrich Oslender (2011) - a review which is neither favorable nor fair, in my view. To cite its central claim:

“*[Black and Green]* critiques post-developmental analysis as viewing social movements as ‘simple manifestations of radical, non-Western culture’, thereby underestimating ‘the degree to which development and resistance are related dialectically’. At no point, however, does Asher theorize the unequal power relations in this dialectic game” (p. 143).

The review concludes:
“[F]or a conceptually more convincing approach [to black mobilization in Colombia]…, the reader may wish to turn to Arturo Escobar’s [2009] … Territories of Difference. Asher even uses … the same map of the region as Escobar” (p. 144).

Given Oslender’s encouragement that we go to Escobar for our theory, I cannot be accused of forcing a debate between Asher and Escobar. It is already underway. However, Black and Green does not contest Escobar’s arguments in detail. Where it comes closest to doing so, the argument is knotty. Let’s consider the key passages.

The opening pages of Black and Green will discourage those who seek good news in Latin America from new social movements against capitalism qua development. We read that development has not brought success but then “neither are alternatives proposed by new social movements … immanent” (p. 1). Neither development nor counter-movements provide us with simple answers to Latin America’s problems, because “political-economic processes and struggles for social change shape each other in … paradoxical ways” (p. 7). Nor are social movements autonomous from the forces they contest: “Black communities were neither outside the discourses of development nor content to remain on its margins. Rather, they were constituted as subjects of prevailing development and ethno-cultural discourses even as they attempt to disrupt them” (p. 8).

We then arrive at the explicit encounter with Escobar (pp. 18-27). This sub-section begins with the comment that the author was partly inspired in her initial fieldwork by Escobar’s work. Yet then we read: “from the outset I ran into methodological and theoretical dilemmas” (p. 18) which led Asher to question her assumptions, such as those surrounding the heterogeneity of the Black communities and their struggles around self-identification. This brings us to the first element of her critique of Escobar:

“I found that contradictions lay not merely in expressing local realities through non-local language [as suggested by Escobar], but also in the complex … ways in which the processes of black cultural organizing, state policies, and … development interventions … were mutually constituting one another. … As my conceptual radar shifted, I noticed that…, black struggles … were … partly shaped by … the very discourses of political and economic modernity they opposed. … [It] appeared that both black movements and state interventions were using similar discourses … to construct their understandings of culture, nature, and development” (p. 20).
Hence the social movements are neither anti-state nor anti-development, and the overlap between the movements and their opponents - in terms of their discourses and conception of the stakes of the struggle - are not as opposed as Escobar suggests.

At this point the text shifts back to discuss the movements’ strategies and clarifies that the argument is not that the social movements were simply ‘co-opted’ by an external force. Then it returns to the critique of Escobar (p. 24). The section begins with the affirmation that Asher “agree[s] with Escobar about [the need for] unmaking the power of development and … for a more culturally grounded political economy”, and yet must “differ with his analysis and post-developmentalist solution”. Three arguments follow. The first is that, “viewing development as an extension of Western colonialism is at odds with [the idea] that the ‘West’ and the ‘rest’ emerge relationally and constitute each other” (p. 25). If I understand it, this might be restated as follows: we cannot equate development with the West because the very distinction between the West and rest is partly constituted by the difference of development. I happen to agree with Black and Green on this point, but in Escobar’s defense I should add that he would also, I think, agree. We face a thorny analytical problem here, which is that while we cannot equate development with the West (since this would fall back into the teleology of Eurocentrism), we also recognize that for many parts of the world - Colombia included - it is impossible to understand development apart from the experience of European colonialism. In any event, there is considerable ambiguity around this point in the critique of Escobar.

The second argument is clearer. It is that development is “filled with ambiguities, not least because of its linkages with … nationalism” (p. 25). As I read it, there are two implicit sub-critiques in this sentence. First, development is not something which can be simply opposed (as in Escobar’s post-development), since it is ‘ambiguous’ and complex. This is suggested by the following sentence: “The search for alternatives to capitalist development … needs to begin by examining how development and anti-development are implicated in one another” (p. 25). Not opposed, but implicated: a subtle but crucial shift. The second implicit critique is that interpreting development requires that we examine nationalism, which is missing from Escobar’s account. I agree; yet, nationalism is not a central theme in Black and Green, either. Thus, to this point in the critique of Escobar, the arguments are relatively weak.

The third part of the critique is most substantive. Here is the key passage:
“[C]ommunities in the Third world … and [their] social movements are not simple manifestations of radical, non-Western culture, as post-developmentalist discourses of difference imply. … [I]t is important not to underestimate the degree to which development and resistance are related dialectically. … [Escobar’s] notion of ‘hybrid’ models of resistance does not sufficiently call into question the teleological direction of development practices and static … representations of traditional and popular culture. … [His] position tells us little about how development practices may be transformed through applications … [for instance,] how local strategies of resistance such as black cultural politics are shaped through their active engagement with, not just against, the development and democratic practices of the Colombian state” (pp. 25-26).

This is the key analytical frame for Black and Green’s central argument. Said otherwise, the point is that the black social movement in Colombia is “neither autonomous nor removed from the project of Pacific modernity and development” but is in fact “located firmly within the contradictions and aporias of capitalist development” (p. 26). This argument is repeated in the book’s final paragraph (a closing which, contrary to its description, cannot be characterized as “a positive note” [p. 188]). Describing the “reality of black communities in the Pacific lowlands” as “grim” and yet another “illustration of how the drive toward capitalist modernity results in displacement and violent dispossession”, Black and Green concludes with the observation that “it is almost a truism to say that unfolding of [the] power [of the state and capital] is inevitably met by resistance” (p. 188). Almost a truism: in other words, only true by definition; thus for intellectuals to proudly affirm that ‘communities always resist!’ is to invoke a meaningless tautology. Asher reiterates that such resistance is, at least in the Pacific, also defined by state power, modernity, and development. There is no final appeal to autochthonous community as radical other. Thus the book concludes by repeating its critique of post-development. Let me conclude with three remarks on this critique.

First, this is one of the most concise, cogent critiques of Escobar’s project that I have read. The fact that it emerges through a study of black social movements in Colombia is noteworthy, though I do not think its validity depends upon this or its empirical grounds. Given the power of the critique, there is an undeniable reticence in the tone. Indeed the critique is presented too judiciously and indirectly for my taste. This may be a matter of style, or a consequence of personal ties between the author and Escobar. Either way, my concern is that it
will deflate the attention given to the book’s central analytical contribution (which is why I have emphasized it here).

My second comment concerns the stakes of this debate between Asher and Escobar. What’s going on here? One answer is that Black and Green offers a critique of the implicit political theory of struggles around development that is found in Escobar’s writings. Escobar’s project validates new social movements as post-development, non-Marxist, autonomous cultural-natural assemblages with radical potential. There is much about this approach that is comforting, such as the notion that subaltern social groups in places like the Pacific of Colombia hold answers to the timeless questions on the Left. Against this view, the interpretation of Colombia’s social movements in Black and Green is more modest, harsh, and yet honest. It emphasizes the ways that the movement is imbricated in capitalism qua development and less ‘other’ than we might wish to believe. Thus what is at stake is how we answer the critical question posed on page 23: “How can one be in critical solidarity with black struggles while eschewing apolitical explanations of globalization and romantic understanding of social movements?” This is a matter of the politics of interpretation and postcolonial solidarity on which Asher adopts a Spivakian stance (one way to interpret the critique of Escobar’s politics here is to read it as an attempt to flesh out Spivak’s [2010] critique of Foucault).

This brings me to my final comment concerning one of the limits of this critique. The book’s accomplishment reflects its postcolonial character. Yet the execution of the critique comes via ethnography. This is not an uncommon approach but one which runs against the spirit of the postcolonial literature that - to summarize a now-old line of argument rather reductively (Chatterjee 2001; Said 2002; Spivak 2010 - for a recent, shattering critical synthesis, see Ismail 2005) - shows that ethnography reproduces a mode of representation, born from colonialism, in which the object of analysis (whether race, ethnos, culture, or people) appears, in the name of an anti-racist discourse, to be or to speak for itself, when in fact the scene of ethnography sustains the privilege of the ethnographer to represent the other. There is more to the matter than this and I am certain that Asher knows these arguments. The tension is that her postcolonial critique of Escobar is principally analytical and conceptual, but may appear to be based upon her ethnographic experience, as if she provides an alternative reading of social movements in Colombia because of her different ethnographic position. That is not, it seems to me, the case.
In any event I doubt that the publication of an excellent counter-analysis of the same movement will influence much the popularity of Escobar’s ideas. Social thinking does not progress in this way. The battlefield of ideas, such as the one where I have interpreted Asher contra Escobar, is never level; it tilts in favor of the text that seems to offer the evidence we are searching for. So while Oslender points you back to *Territories of Difference*, I wave the flag for *Black and Green*. Make no mistake. The map in these two books may indeed be the same, but they orient us differently, suggesting different paths for struggle and different strategies for postcolonial solidarity.

**References**


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