

Antagonism and development: rethinking the essentialist foundations of development mainstream discourses and practices

Conveners:

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What vision of society we hope to achieve through ‘development’? How do we achieve such an endeavour? Mainstream development discourses and practices have responded to these questions drawing on essentialist ontological foundations and positivistic epistemological tenets. They rely on specific assumptions about what a good life and a desirable society are – generally conceived within a liberal tradition of thought. *Development* — largely understood as modernisation, economic growth and goals such as the MDGs and the SDGs, good governance, human development, etc. — has been posed as a universal aspiration for any society, an aspiration to be achieved through linear expert interventions. Yet, the (neo)-liberal social order has been posited to be what all humanity hopes for and technocratic and managerial practices, the sole way to achieve this end. Indeed, concealed in such a conceptualisation of an ideal society and the processes of social change is its hegemonic (however contingent) nature.

Building on the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, this panel invites presentations that engage theoretically and/or empirically with development discourses, practices and encounters to allow for alternative ways of envisaging and achieving such desirable society. Throughout their writings, Laclau and Mouffe criticise traditional liberalism’s essentialist and positivistic assumptions, and propose an alternative understanding of social and political issues. Their thought relies on an antagonistic conceptualization of the social, in which different and diverse agents struggle to achieve their goals. *From this perspective, every political and social order is contingent and transitory – rather than natural and necessary – and represents a concrete solidification of power relations – not a natural and neutral order that equally benefits all.*

We welcome paper proposals that contend with this perspective. What possibilities emerge through a questioning of the essentialist, consensual and de-politicised mainstream framing of development? How does an antagonistic approach to development offer alternative ways of thinking, naming, seeing and doing? How can it contribute to new formulations in terms of research, policies and practices?