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Critique and the Coloniality of Being: Rethinking Development Discourses of Encounter

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Abstract
Fleur Johns argues that the contraposition of a 'bottom-up' approach of politics of prototypical technique rather than the 'top-down' politics of the master plan or normative principle no longer seems as straightforwardly radical as it appeared when James C Scott posited the value of local knowledge or métis against grand plans of high modernization, just over 20 years ago. This paper seeks to follow Johns' call, 'to capture and probe some of the effects of sensibility, rationality or style widely reproduced in the details of development work'. It draws upon fieldwork in Nairobi to open up a discussion of a shift in sensibility from a 'bottom-up' or 'postliberal' approach to a framing of open-ended encounter. The paper critiques this imaginary of relational encounter by engaging contemporary work in critical black studies. It suggests that the problem of critique is that it reproduces the problems of governing imaginaries, continually seeking to rework the human subject via adaptive capacities, sensitivities to difference and openness to alterity, while leaving intact the coloniality of being, the antiblack world.

Keywords Encounter · Development · Critique · Coloniality of being · Antiblack world

Introduction

James C Scott's *Seeing Like a State* (*SLAS*) provided a classic exposition of the ways in which the coercive power of structural violence was mobilized to impose the hubristic imaginaries of 'high modernity'. This work chimed well with both academic and broader popular sensitivies. In the late 1990s and the 2000s, in line with Scott's arguments in *SLAS*, discourses of development hailed a new policy framework: the so-called 'bottom-up' approach, which was to overcome the limits of overly prescriptive and generic international programmes that assumed that 'one

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size fits all' (there is an extensive literature, summarised in Bennett et al. 2016; Collinson 2016; Chandler 2017a). Paradoxically, the immediate success of Scott's intervention was an indication both of shifts in governmental thinking and the need for critique to move beyond the framing outlined in the book itself. Both these aspects, in terms of governmental approaches and the implications for critique, lie at the heart of the contributions to this forum. The paradox was not one that Scott himself was blind to. As he was completing the work, he recognised the potentially untimely nature of the posing of the problem, i.e., that by the time of writing 'states with the pretensions and power that I criticise have for the most part vanished or have drastically curbed their ambitions' (1998, pp. 7–8).

Fleur Johns has drawn attention to the fact that: 'The how of Scott's analysis remains instructive, even if the usefulness of the what (the content) of that analysis may have expired.' (2019, p. 862) Central to this forum is the question of what it might mean to rework this analysis to address contemporary governance approaches which seem to avoid the 'top-down' and universalising agendas of 'high modernity'. In fine, this paper will suggest, via a reading of work in critical black studies, that the coercive violence of modernity can be understood ontologically, as baked into liberal governance, rather than as an exception, associated with 'high modernist' drives seeking to force through social transformation from above. Scott's analysis fails to fully address the racializing construction of modernist ontology itself as a precondition for 'seeing like a state', intimating that it is the state as an institution that reduces the world to representations amenable to calculation and regulation from above. He problematises the state in its more extreme forms, of national mobilisation in accord with planning and direction from above, but not the imaginary of the world in which hierarchies of command and control are possible.

Where Scott's analysis remains instructive (as concerns the mainstreaming of his ideas in development policy interventions since the publication of *SLAS*) is in his assumption that the problem is one of 'seeing', i.e., one of perspective. That it is a matter of knowledge construction. Perceiving the world differently, appreciating the importance of being in context and relation, the importance of differences and their power to make further differences, could enable more localised and sensitive understandings. The world itself provides alternative ways forward, but sensitivites and affordances to this potential need to be developed either through ethnographic or technological means. It is precisely these assumptions of Scott's that have relegitimised development discourses and, as we shall see, are articulated in development practice. Thus, Scott contributes to, what will be argued here, is a myth of an 'alternative world' of lively interaction which escapes the epistemological grasp of external development agencies trapped in *SLAS*. What is problematic in Scott's *SLAS* (and will be argued here, enables a reworking of hegemonic external agencies of intervention) is the ontological assumption that beyond the fictional representations, constructed by the homogenising metrics of the state, the reality of the world can be grasped by other metrics generated via practical, experiential, and contextual understandings. It is this set of assumptions that prepares the ground for the policy-making and governance journey, captured well in Johns' trope 'from planning to prototypes'.

Starting from Johns' framing of the policy and discursive shift, this paper seeks to explore an alternative empirical angle, of development discourse, from which to open up analysis of the problematic. It engages development discourse as it seeks to negotiate barriers and opportunities of applying new technological advances in Big Data analysis and the Internet of Things to enhance and enable 'bottom-up' or localised approaches to knowledge. The paper will concur with Johns' argument that:

> Scott's suggestion that those engaged in development policy and practice pay more attention to informal innovation, and take small, reversible steps rather than large ones, may make him seem to be reaffirming, rather than proposing any alternative to, the way that states and international institutions now aspire to see and to govern. What might once have seemed like quite a radical project now reads like […] projects of minimalist optimisation, or even affirmation, leaving the conditions and inequities that precipitated that critique quite undisturbed (and, indeed, potentially reproduced). (Johns 2019, p. 862; p. 836)

The focus of this paper is the analysis of how these 'conditions and inequities' are 'reproduced' in discourses which claim to reject traditional development hierarchies of power and knowledge. The paper seeks to describe a process of reflection upon development as a policy practice, whereby the need to focus on local context and relations, in order to take problems seriously, acts to further undermine confidence in the project of development assistance. In other words, the 'bottom-up' approach, advocated by Scott, ends up intensifying the crisis of policy practices of development—rather than helping to resolve them. It is argued that the way out of this crisis seems to be found in the rejection of the aspiration to know from a position of a 'problem-solving' external authority. Instead, international development practitioners shift towards post-epistemological or post-rationalist framings, seeking to transform the practices of intervention into opportunities for open-ended encounter. This focus upon the need to pluralise knowledge would seem to signal the end of development as a top-down project, however development actors and agences still reproduce colonial hierarchies and exclusions via the post-epistemological imaginaries of the subject, particularly its capacities for an open encounter with otherness.

This paper draws partly on material from the author's field investigations with leading international agencies in Nairobi. The interview material is taken from unstructured interviews with a number of international agencies working in the field of rights, development and conflict management and is informed through earlier fieldwork also concerned with the rearticulation and re-envisioning of policy problems (Chandler 2017b). The Nairobi material is used purely illustratively of the reflections of policy actors and agencies on the ground, as they grapple with the need for deeper access to, and understandings of, problems and how they see or imagine the limits and alternatives.

This paper is in three sections. The first draws on empirical material which suggests that for intervening policy actors, the search for the local, the 'bottom-up'

or the inclusive reveals the lack of ground for an alternative metric based on practical contexts of difference rather than the universality of equivalence. The second section analyses how this lack of ground has fed into an extension of this approach to an affirmative, post-epistemological imaginary that sees international policy interveners as undertaking a journey of discovery and mutual engagement in open-ended encounters. The third section re-reads this imaginary of encounter as a reproduction of colonial and Eurocentric tropes of transcendence, which disavow and reproduce colonial hierarchies. While much policy work since Scott's *SLAS* seeks to find the alternative ground for policy understandings, this paper draws upon work in critical black studies to argue that post-Scott solutions at the level of different 'perspectives' cannot enable development discourse imaginaries to escape their imbrication within the ongoing colonial and racial structurings of power.

From 'Top-Down' to 'Bottom-Up'

There has been a growing policy convergence along the lines advocated in James C Scott's *SLAS*. This can be observed in international approaches to development policymaking, increasingly covering the fields of peace and security, development and environmental sustainability, and humanitarian emergency (UN 2015a, 2015b, 2015c), cohered through the United Nations' 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda (UN 2015d). The UN Secretary-General argues:

> We must [move][…] beyond short-term, supply-driven response efforts towards demand-driven outcomes […] international providers will need to set aside such artificial institutional labels as "development" or "humanitarian", working together […] to assess what skills and assets they can contribute in a given context, at a particular time (short, medium and long term) and towards a specific outcome. (UN 2016a, p. 29)

This trope of moving beyond 'supply-driven' responses problematizes the established frameworks and institutional arrangements of international development and breaks down the silos of expertise and authoritative knowledge that are key to legitimizing international policy prescriptions. However, the UN Secretary-General goes further in terms of recommending a positive agenda replacing the traditional role and hierarchies of interventionist agency:

> A common understanding of context, needs and capacities should then lead to a common "problem statement". The problem statement should identify priorities in meeting immediate needs but also reducing vulnerability and risk over several years; the capacities of all available actors, particularly national and local, to address those priorities; and where international actors can support existing capacities, complement and scale them up, and improve the circumstances of the most vulnerable. (UN 2016a, p. 33)

This alternative agenda confirms the radical challenge to the previous 'top-down', institutionally-driven or 'supply-centred' policy approach because the 'problem' is not necessarily seen as amenable to resolution through any existing set of institutional skills or policies; Andrew Lang and Deval Desai (2020) capture this challenge well in their concept of 'un-governance' (see also Van Den Meerssche and Gordon 2020). The need to start engagement with a concrete context or problem on the basis of the priorities of the 'most vulnerable' and a clear view of the capacities of all the actors is in direct agreement with Scott's advocacy of local 'bottom-up' alternatives. However, the 'bottom-up' approach challenges and complicates any idea of a quick fix or a simplistic provision of pre-packaged solutions. More than this, it will be argued here that this shift to questions of difference and differentiation revealed that much more was at stake for development practitioners.

As the Overseas Development Institute has highlighted, the shift towards 'bottom-up' approaches was driven by the perception that international agencies faced a deep crisis of legitimacy; one that went to the heart of their identity and the belief that international policy interventions can be neutral or objective in the desire to problem-solve and to capacity-build, 'regardless of context or culture' (ODI 2016, p. 5). Over recent years, there has been a refocus on a deeper, longer-term engagement with on-going issues, such as extreme poverty amongst the 'most vulnerable'. This is often based on designing indirect forms of intervention for community engagement and empowerment rather than traditional 'top-down' policy assistance at the level of state institutions. As one interlocutor in Nairobi (the programmes director for Concern Worldwide, Kenya) explained, the shift in perspectives to a 'bottom-up' approach begins to transform the relationship between international agencies and the societies they are engaging with.

These societies were now revealed to be much more densely rich and differentiated—much more lively—than in the hierarchical, traditional approaches, which worked with broad and reductive categories which only touched the surface of the problem:

> It was the issue of addressing extreme poverty which really changed things for us. We could no longer act as if we could just solve problems. It forced us to engage with outlying areas of risk and inequality, which before we were not interested in. We were just saving lives […] Now we needed to develop contextual analysis: to really drill-down to the community. To ask: "What are the differences here?" To really delve into the risks, vulnerabilities and mitigating factors. This really broadened the way we understood communities. (Personal interview, programmes director, Concern Worldwide, Nairobi, 9 May 2016)

This shift, towards starting with an understanding of context and local community interaction, sought to refocus perspectives and to challenge the subject-centred or Eurocentric positionality of international interveners (on the 'epistemic avatars of Eurocentrism', see Sabaratnam 2013). Starting from drilling-down to the specific concrete nature of the relational interactions through which problems and vulnerabilities emerged—for example, pockets of extreme disadvantage or vulnerability to particular price or climate changes in areas which may otherwise have coping strategies—enabled a new set of interconnections to be mapped out and described:

opening the 'black box' of the societies intervening agencies engaged with. This framing comes close to the observations made by Johns on the orientation towards 'emergent patterns' in the shift from 'planning' to 'prototypes' (2019, p. 850).

International agencies and lead operatives then jumped at the chance to shift from exporting policies, already fixed externally, to in-depth and open-ended engagements with the aim of long-term community empowerment (see UN 2016b). However, experience showed that it was not so easy to turn 'bottom-up' thinking into a viable form of problem-solving. The essential difficulty appeared to be overcoming barriers to access and understanding, despite an increasing awareness of the need to differentiate and prioritise by drilling-down further (getting more micro-level information) and enabling interventions to be more aligned with complex processes of interaction both within and between different local actors and agencies. Again, this fits well with Johns' analysis of the shift to protypes with: 'a succession of rapid-fire snapshots resulting from automated dives into vast and shifting oceans of data… to sate their appetite for contact with the Real' (2019, p. 850). This promise is the reason why new digital technologies are often held to be key to the reform of international practices (UN 2014; Meier 2015; Mayer-Schönberger and Cukier 2013), highlighted in the fact that the need to integrate new technological innovations is a constantly recurring theme for international agencies. The UN Secretary-General, for example, has urged that: 'Data and joint analysis must become the bedrock of our action. Data and analysis are the starting point for moving from a supply-driven approach to one informed by the greatest risks and the needs of the most vulnerable' (UN 2016a, p. 31).

Methodologically, the attempt to overcome the problems of international development mirrors broader philosophical and political concerns, within politics and international relations, over the narrowness of the modern Western episteme.[1] In this regard, Bruno Latour has done much to flag up the radical consequences for knowledge of the application of digital technologies in constituting the world in much more concrete ways that are essential for the grasping of complex interactions. This is achieved by drilling down to the specific context without reducing reality to broad categories in which differences and distinctions are submerged from vision (Latour et al. 2012). As Venturri and Latour note: 'The advantage of the new methods is that they allow tracing the assemblage of collective phenomena instead of obtaining them through statistical aggregation. The question of representativeness is thus posed in an entirely different way' (2010, p. 94). They make a valuable point regarding the ability of digital approaches to enable concrete contextual relations to become clearer, no longer relying on reductive categorisations and generalisations. Drilling down to understand how problems emerge in context is not about producing 'representative' knowledge that can be generalised but engaging with the context itself through 'tracing the assemblage' (see also ALNAP 2016). Here, knowledge

[1] The modernist or Eurocentric episteme, which is being rejected, is usually understood as deterministic and reductionist, assuming Cartesian divisions (between subject and object, mind and matter, and culture and nature) and seen as exemplified in the fixed deterministic laws of classical Newtonian physics (see further, Barad 2007; Mitchell 2009).

is held to be situated and context-specific, enabling external actors and agencies to trace and to design 'bottom-up' interventions in processes of interaction.

The difficulty is that it seems, whatever level of technological drilling-down or deeper forms of surveillance and information-gathering may be deployed, it is not possible to capture all the potential variables within any given assemblage of interaction. It appears that any system of data-gathering could never be complete or able to grasp processes of interaction in their emergence. It is therefore little wonder that many commentators doubt that the aspirations for digitally—enhanced modes of access to relations, in order to fully understand a problem from the 'bottom-up', can be fulfilled (Read et al. 2016; O'Grady 2016). As one of the managers of Ushahidi (a major digital platform provider in Narobi) informed me, technology itself can only ever be part of the solution to international interveners attempting to access the processes and interactions revealing hidden vulnerabilities. She suggested that 90 percent of the answer lay with enabling community knowledge rather than with digitally enhancing external capacities. Data-gathering, no matter how far it drills-down, still needs to have the knowledge of the variables to be traced, measured or monitored and can only reach those individuals or communities which are open to such techniques: just working at the level of community leaders or requiring the use of smart phones for digital tracing is not able to overcome the limits of these 'bottom-up' methodologies of intervention:

> We need the appropriate use of technology; who the audience is, is very important and has to drive strategy […] maybe the use of radio programmes or focus groups, we need to innovate our own approaches based on things that people have access to already, not just fancy dashboards and smart phone applications. (Personal interview, programme manager, Ushahidi, Nairobi, 11 May 2016)

On the ground, it seems that international development agencies have much less faith in the promise of Big Data technologies than the boosters in the media and academia (Chandler 2017b). Sharing the sceptical mood of policy agencies are those commentators who suggest that even with new data-generating approaches the most vulnerable will be missed or the problems will only be flagged when it is too late, indicating that 'external' approaches of knowing more about the processes of 'bottom-up' interaction and emergence will always be limited. As Nat O'Grady writes, the data categories used for cross-checking risk factors will always be too wide in scope and not targeted enough, thus increasing rather than ameliorating 'the problem of rendering invisible those most vulnerable' (O'Grady 2016, p. 78).

Open-Ended Encounter

It seems to be logically inevitable that any attempt to start from the perspective of the knowledge and technical mechanisms of international agencies and policy actors will constitute new forms of exclusion and marginalisation. Even if not starting from 'supply-centred' approaches, which assume Western superiority, these approaches nevertheless assume the objective knowledge of these intervening agencies. In other

words, their subject-centred perspectives (of their own role as the active agents, acquiring greater, more varied or more interactive knowledge) is not (as yet) problematized. Thus, policy failures and shortcomings inevitably continue to expose external actors to accusations of being too Eurocentric or Western in their views and not being open enough to the systems and societies in which they are engaged. The critique of earlier 'top-down' or 'supply-centred' policy approaches as well of those of the alternative 'bottom-up' or 'demand-driven' solutions is precisely that both remain based on projections of Western understandings: of a liberal, modernist or Eurocentric episteme, which makes 'God's eye view' assumptions that the epistemological barriers to problem-solving can be overcome while ignoring the possibility of barriers to knowledge (Chandler 2015b).

This problem, of ignoring other perspectives and understandings, closer to emergent reality, is often termed 'correlationism', a problematic, first coined by Quentin Meillassoux (2008, pp. 5–7), which is seen to stem from Kant's transcendental idealism. Barriers to knowledge are not taken seriously as it is assumed that we never have access to the inner world of experience of other subjects or objects, only to the world as we perceive and experience it, trapped within our own world of perception. The key problematic for bottom-up or postliberal forms of intervention, is thus that of how to take difference, alterity and otherness seriously enough (Candea in Carrithers et al. 2010, p. 175): the study of different local relations and interactions from the God's eye view of a Western observer or governance agency appears to risk affirming the modernist worldview rather than questioning the hegemonic Western assumptions about the objective or scientific nature of knowledge; i.e. that the world is single and uniform and only socio-cultural understandings and responses differ (Holbraad in Carrithers et al. 2010, p. 181). The perceived need to recognise these limits has been increasingly raised by decolonial approaches (Mignolo 2011; Mignolo and Escobar 2010; Shilliam 2015; Wynter 2003) and these fit well (in this regard) with the concerns of posthumanist and relational theorists.

It would appear that these forms of criticism, by both policy and academic commentators, cannot be avoided by seeking to develop and innovate technologically, whether it is through Big Data, open-source mapping technologies or other means, as whatever the nature of the innovation and no matter how extensive its application and how efficient it may be in delivering information, real and complex life can never be adequately captured.[2] This fear of failing to capture the reality, a reality that is always just that tiny bit further out of reach, is what drives the seemingly religious faith in seeking for data solutions (see Johns in this special issue). The application of new technologies increasingly reveals the nature of the problem to be different to how it was previously imagined: they reveal communities to be much more differentiated and reveal that causal chains are often much more mediated and less linear than previously understood. Acquiring

[2] Critics have argued that new scanning and mapping technologies may distance humanitarian actors even more from these societies (Scott-Smith 2016; Duffield 2016; Meier 2015) or that they may reproduce epistemological blind spots and exclusions in different forms (Read et al. 2016; Kitchin 2014; Aradau and Blanke 2015).

greater knowledge of depth, intricacy and complexity inevitably questions previous knowledge assumptions as well as bringing attention to the epistemological limitations of external attempts to know societies and processes from the 'bottom-up' (Finkenbusch 2016). The density appears overwhelming for those tasked with accessing and tracing these mediations and 'path dependencies' (North 1999). The problem for international actors tasked with policy intervention is that discussion and reflection upon the epistemological limits of knowledge is bound up with their own external, Western positionality (Bargues 2016).

The shift to imagining policy problems beyond the existing capacity for understanding possessed by international development agencies increasingly enables a shift to recasting problems as ones of access and alterity, dependent on ways of knowing not necessarily open to universalist appropriation. It is here that limitations of knowledge begin to produce 'flatter' and more distributed conceptions of agency. Increasingly it appears that alternative ways of knowing and adaptive capabilities remain at least partially 'locked' in local actors and constituencies, constituting a problem of access and appropriation. The problem is then no longer constructed in the abstract, in terms of the incapacity of data drilling to capture relational complexity, but also a mater of practices, of embodied being in the world. As Cristina Rojas argues, in her summary of the development of decolonial approaches, the conceptions and perceptions that arise from different ways of engaging the world are not equivalents (2016, p. 377). This means that there is no Archimedian point from which to translate between understandings, instead translation becomes dislocated and 'an activity of openness to the other', weakening the fixed subject position of the development actor (Rojas 2016, p. 377). As a programme manager for Ushahidi stated:

> Especially marginalised groups are very important to the data revolution, with their buy-in and their opinion, we will really be able to make a difference. Design-thinking needs to emphasise the need to place ourselves in her [the vulnerable or 'at risk' subject's] shoes – what are the language barriers, what tools does she have access to? (Personal interview, programme manager, Ushahidi, Nairobi, 11 May)

Thinking about what it would mean to place oneself 'in the shoes' of others opens up the need to be open to alternative ways of seeing the world, appreciating how it appears from other perspectives (on perspectivism see Viveiros de Castro 2014; Kohn 2013). As stated above, this shift begins to challenge Western or universalist epistemological assumptions: extending the range of ways of knowing and pluralising perspectives. Considering how the world might be perceived and questions articulated in different ways, with different tools and techniques, begins to raise questions about the nature of the subject (see Johns in this special issue). It is at this point that international development agencies perceive the need to push beyond Scott's advocacy of 'bottom-up' approaches as the difficulty of designing problem-solving interventions appear to become much clearer. Attempting to resolve 'the problem' is then no longer a purely a matter of extending modernist forms of knowledge deeper into social and cultural processes of interaction by

fine-tuning techniques of data gathering and breaking down categories of analysis or speeding up the feedback from digital recording and sensing equipment.

Drilling down, in attempts to meet the aims of 'bottom-up' understandings, leads to international development actors being forced to confront the problem of alterity. The dominant approach is one that seeks to assimilate local knowledges and other ways of knowing into pre-existing schemas of problem-solving. Once this approach is questioned it is no longer possible for ethnographic or technological techniques to mediate, to enable international interveners to put themselves 'in the shoes' of those they seek to empower or capacity-build. A fundamental gulf opens up between the cognitive capacities of the international policy-actors and the problem itself. Or rather, the understanding that there can be a universal framing of 'a' problem constitutes a fundamental gap between the intervener and the society concerned, which is continually apparent when the intervener needs to acquire knowledge in order to address the problem through providing information and assistance or in terms of knowing more about capacities, choices and needs. These policy interventions have emphasised the need for intervention to be 'bottom-up' but it increasingly becomes apparent to international agencies that there is no 'bottom' to be found; no solid ground for external problem-solving knowledge and expertise.[3] With this shift, inevitably, governing and knowing agency necessarily becomes understood as more widely distributed.

The barriers revealed by the 'bottom-up' approach appear as the barriers of the modern or Western episteme itself. The object of analysis seems increasingly to depend upon the relational context of its emergence—to withdraw or exceed the grasp of the universal approach to knowledge of the external development agency. The more that the external intervening agency or actor thinks that it grasps the problem in bottom-up approaches—understands the processes involved, locates the most vulnerable, finds the mechanisms of mediation, interpretation and translation—the more the problem recedes or disaggregates; and it is clear that what was mistakenly taken as knowledge of 'the problem' was merely a self-projection of the categories and understandings of the external actor itself. Rather than coming closer to the problem, to addressing causes and removing barriers, the problems appear to be further away, or, more precisely, to have much more relational depth. Thus, the shift to 'bottom-up' or 'postliberal' policy interventions (Chandler and Richmond 2015), appears to have had the implication of making societies and 'problems' much more

[3] I first came across the problematic of depth or of adequately 'drilling-down' in 'bottom-up' discourses, in November 2009, when I took part in an ESRC funded seminar series 'Changing the Subject: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Emotional Well-Being and Social Justice', at Nottingham University in the UK. The problem at issue was the sub-optimum choice-making of teenage boys and girls from economically deprived areas of the city of Nottingham (such as the high levels of teenage pregnancy and low levels of university take-up). It was argued that the problem stemmed from low levels of confidence and self-esteem and early school years intervention was advocated for. One of the Labour Party MPs from the area contributed his view on the problem, highlighting its depth, and suggested that pre-school intervention might be better, and that it would be better-still, 'if intervention were possible while they were still in their mother's womb'. The audience agreed. Apart from the poisonous view of a working class cultural environment, the view of how to tackle social and economic problems is notable in the desire to trace causation downwards in a never-ending ontology of depth.

opaque, or rather infinitely complex, than initially imagined, thereby forcing problems to be increasingly recast.

A universal approach would understand a problem as solvable through an expansion of existing frameworks of knowledge, from the subject position of an external actor (in this case, the international agency concerned). The shift to grasping situations as essentially beyond the instrumental understanding of external actors transforms the positionality of external actors, removing the hierarchy of knowledge upon which their authority relied. This shift also makes the problem itself less clear, even knowing what 'the problem' is cannot be resolved through such an extension and requires indirect access to the ways of thinking and relating internal to the policy target or situation itself. In fine, problems begin to dissipate as discrete entities as Big Data and Internet of Things 'sensing' is imagined to enable readings or registrations of fluid and ungraspable processes of emergent, relational entanglement. This is well illustrated in Johns' contribution to this special issue and in the work of Antoinette Rouvroy, who has also argued that such sensing technologies are post-representational or post-epistemological in nature (Rouvroy et al. 2013).

In this framing, there are no truth-claims made to be verified or tested but only correlational forms—fluid patterns only aimed at temporary actionability and partial knowledge (Chandler 2015a). In this sense, the epistemological problem might be understood to disappear altogether: there is no need to 'understand more', since 'understanding' is not the aim or orientation. As David Blaney and Arlene Tickner state: 'difference is not about engaging across perspectives on or in a single world. Rather it is about struggling and working to craft encounters across ontological difference' (2017, p. 298). The key point is that, in this shift two transformations are in play, firstly the shift in the imagined positionality of the development worker, towards one of equality, mutuality and co-constitution, and secondly, the space of mutual encounter becomes reconstructed as a post-epistemological space. Post-epistemological understandings place the 'other' as always already present, as possessing knowledge or knowing capacities even if these cannot be directly accessed. There are always forms of knowing available partially and indirectly if development actors are attuned to encounters with the other. Big Data then becomes one way of opening to, registering, or 'seeing' the other in a sensed relational network.

In fact, as articulated here, it becomes clear that there are two stages of the opening up of the problem. The first stage, external and subject-centred, seeks to drill-down, operating within the legacy of the modernist episteme, à la Scott, pluralizing the variables and localizing the factors (as described above). The second stage begins to shift to a less modernist framework that gives priority to speculating upon multiple ways of knowing, perceiving reality and being in the world. It is at this point that a post-epistemological space comes into being as an affirmative realm of open-ended encounters with the 'other', with the 'local' or with 'grass-roots communities' (Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013). The fact that the other can never really be known is not a problem but, on the contrary, positive and enabling, and 'expands possibilities for opening to "new" understandings of difference' (Brigg and Muller 2009, p. 136) where external actors can 'value cultural difference independently of claims to have or know culture, attend directly to the process of constituting culture, and open to other ways of knowing human difference' (Brigg and Muller 2009,

p. 138). Thus development workers and agencies can immerse themselves in societies without the baggage of problem-solving responsibilities. Here they can be open to encounters but do not have to problematize the world that they are called on to engage with. The problem-solving tasks which drove both 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' approaches to development policies are deferred to the indefinite future (Bargues and Schmidt 2021). The upshot is the legitimisation of open-ended journeys of discovery that supposedly dissolve hierarchies of being and power. The next section shows why this is not the case.

The Coloniality of Being

The ethics of encounter, of openness to the other and to alterity, seeking a mutual ethical engagement in becoming with others presents a clear alternative to 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' universalist assumptions. However, the assumption that approaches of open-ended encounter achieve a break from discourses of control and domination has been contested both in the policy arena (Torrent 2021) and by contemporary theorists in critical black studies who argue that this imaginary still assumes a transcendental subject while bracketing questions of ontology (Judy 2020, pp. 122–129; Gordon 1995, p. 15; Moten 2013, p. 749). As Nelson Maldonado-Torres eloquently states, building on decolonial and critical black studies traditions: 'it would be best to distinguish between an epistemic colonial difference that allows one to perceive the contours of the coloniality of knowledge, and an ontological colonial difference which reveals the presence of the coloniality of being' (2007, p. 254). It is the coloniality of being which enables international governance imaginaries to move beyond the 'human' of development hierarchies of knowledge without destabilising the 'world'. The world of modernist space–time, divided between beings and non-beings, structured socio-historically via the global 'colour line'—the antiblack world—remains in place, while the human as subject is reimagined in more humble terms. Denise Ferreira da Silva terms this the 'racial grammar' of the 'modern text', dependent on the ontological principles of separability, determinacy and sequentiality (2016, p. 61).[4]

As Sylvia Wynter argued, the contemporary framing of modernist Man or the Human is not the only way of articulating colonial powers of hierarchy and exclusion. Wynter (2007; 2003) analysed how racializing, Western or Eurocentric understandings of Man have changed over the history of colonial exploration and domination from the fifteenth century to our contemporary period. In particular, she highlighted the importance of what she called 'Man 1', the secular Renaissance imaginary of Man as a rational and autonomous political subject, and 'Man 2', the *biohumanist homo oeconomicus* (2007, p. 9) of capitalist competition and accumulation, essential to the constant reworking (and planetary extension) of the global

[4] As Ferreira da Silva states: 'we need another account of racial subjugation, for the one we have cannot comprehend a demand for decolonization, that is the unknowing and undoing of the World that reaches its core' (2014, p. 85).

colour line (2007, p. 10; Du Bois 1903). In this spirit, the human attuned to becoming with others could perhaps be productively read as Man 3. As Axelle Karera states (following Claire Colebrook) the key to the new imaginary of the human is the capacity for openness to relational encounter, providing a redemptive opportunity 'to finally dispose of the solipsistic Cartesian individual for a future eco-oriented humanity acutely aware of its "geo" co-constitution with other forms of earthly entities' (2019, p. 38).

Zakiyyah Iman Jackson argues that the call to move beyond universal rationalist understandings of Man can be interpreted as 'an attempt to move *beyond* race, and in particular blackness' (2015, p. 216). Post-rationalist assumptions of open-ended policy-intervention clearly risk becoming instrumentalized as an escape from accounting for the modernist and colonial dynamics of development discourses, undermining any claims it might have as an ethical alternative of encounter. This escape is a peculiarly Eurocentric one. As Zakiyyah Jackson states: 'a call for movement in the direction of the "beyond," issued in a manner that suggests that this call is without location, and therefore with the appearance of incognizance regarding its situated claims and internal limits, returns us to a Eurocentric transcendentalism' (Zakiyyah, p. 217). This reworking of the transcendental subject, supposedly rejected with the move 'beyond' the human as knowing and directing subject, necessarily understands coloniality as merely a problem of knowledge or epistemology. While the human may be reworked in imaginaries of mutual, co-constititutive and open-ended encounters, the subject and the world remain.

It could be argued that the reframing of development assistance in discourses of post-epistemology—of the open-ended ethical encounter with alterity or otherness—is a reproduction and extension 'to a planetary level', of the global colour line. In narratives of encounter, developmental assistance is no longer an expression of colonial hierarchies and exclusions but a mutual meeting, allegedly challenging the international intervening agencies as much as those on the ground. Diana Leong's powerful intervention in this discussion reminds us that, in this context, the forwarding 'of an ethics of relation or affect… further legitimizes the reduction and dismissal of race' (2016, p. 6) as the coloniality of the relation of intervention is placed in the background. This problem becomes clearer in thinking with Franco Barcheisi, in his essay on social death and the staging of the encounter (2019). In the experience of those on the receiving end of colonial power, the encounter or the relation is not empowering but the opposite, based on the denial of capacities rather than their extension (Barchiesi 2019, pp. 52–53).

Fred Moten explains that discourses of 'encounter' already presume 'an expression of power, structured by the givenness of a transcendental subjectivity that the black cannot have but by which the black can be had' (2013, p. 749). Essentially, the question of the affirmative nature of the encounter depends upon whether it takes place in a liberal imaginary of equality and mutual constitution—on the deck—or in a world that gives the lie to the fetish world of disavowal—in the hold—where the fragility and violence constitutive of a relational imaginary is exposed (Barcheisi 2019, p. 58). A similar point, methodologically, is made by Marx in the contraposition of the visible world of the contract, of the meeting of capitalist and worker as equals in the marketplace, and the disavowed structural violence of primitive

accumulation, the precondition for the appearance of mutually constitutive equality of the 'encounter' (Marx 1954). Tiffany Lethabo King argues: 'Both the human and the posthuman are causes of suspicion within Black studies' (2017, p. 166). In part, the reason is that slavery and colonialism are so inextricably bound up with the modernity and the understanding of the human that attempts to move beyond the human without acknowledging this would seem inadvisable.

King gets to the heart of the problem of posthuman developmental narratives when she highlights the disavowal implicit in Deleuze and Guattari's rhizomic and nomadic imaginaries of self-actualisation in open-ended relations of becoming: 'Therefore, their own and others' self-actualizing, free-form whiteness can proceed unhindered. The rhizomatic West—*terra nullius*—is without a people, history, or a cosmology to navigate' (King 2017, p. 171). For King, as for other critical black feminist authors, this shift away from a rationalist episteme is merely a 'ruse of subjectlessness' (2017, p. 178) attempting to resurrect the human as a relational subject, free from the baggage of coloniality. In these critical black studies framings, the move beyond the Enlightenment 'human' does not move beyond the subject, and it is this subject-position (reinscribed within post-epistemological approaches) that is problematic and problematized. This was clear in the fieldwork in Nairobi where the division between the development practioners and those who they sought to engage with was never overcome. Instead the development workers were the ones empowered, through their imaginaries of developing their own experiential capacities for openness (for a similar perspective in peacebuilding, see Bargues 2020). Development interventions could continue while, as Johns states, and as cited in the introduction to this paper: 'the projects of minimalist optimisation, or even affirmation, [leave] the conditions and inequities that precipitated that critique quite undisturbed (and, indeed, potentially reproduced)' (2019, p. 836).

Conclusion

This paper has sought to productively work with Fleur Johns analytical engagement with the shift from 'planning' to 'prototypes', in terms of declarations of development agencies to be practicing a 'bottom-up' approach to international development assistance in contraposition to the 'top-down' universalist political assertions of earlier global governance regimes. This contraposition owes much to the path-clearing work of James C Scott's *Seeing Like a State*, which posited the value of local knowledge or métis against grand plans of high modernization, just over 20 years ago. This paper has endorsed Johns' perspective that the critical repertoire that Scott inspired is no longer fit for purpose. It has suggested that critique which is focused on epistemological questions of access to knowledge cannot itself go beyond the problematics of postliberal governance and dependency on new technologies to grasp the fluid and emergent Real (Bratton 2021). Drawing on the author's field work in Nairobi, this paper has sought to elucidate some of the difficulties experienced by development agencies, initially keen to engage in a 'bottom-up' approach that drew them into an engagement with local contexts and forced them to rethink some of their assumptions.

The key finding presented here is that in what initially appeared to be an invitation to greater engagement—the 'drilling-down' to what were hoped were key relations and interactions—epistemological limits of access became increasingly clear despite the enrolment of new digital technologies of tracing and modelling. It appeared that the grounds, so essential for 'bottom-up' understandings, were continually shifting, exposing the limits of external developmental legitimacy and efficacy. In response, it was noted that developmental discourse shifted to the 'perspectivism' of different ways of accessing the world and the inevitable gap between the knowledge of intervening actors and local understandings on the ground. The inability to bridge the gap between external interveners on those on the ground was increasingly represented as an opportunity for more mutual and equal engagements. Discourses of open-ended encounter increasingly displaced those of postliberal or bottom-up attempts to extend access to the most vulnerable or excluded. This imaginary of mutual encounter between equals, increasingly hegemonic in development discourses, was then placed in question through drawing upon contemporary work in critical black studies.

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