

Encountering the Puritanism of Post-development Populism

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ABSTRACT This paper challenges assumption of post-development and anti-development cities such as Arturo Escobar (1995) and Wolfgang Sachs (1992) that imply that Third World people are themselves anti-development rejectionists. Drawing on field work encounters in Matabeleland (Zimbabwe) and Namaqualand and Northern Province (South Africa), the researcher argue that development “beneficiaries” tend to have highly selective and situational responses, and development packages are resisted, embraced, reshaped or selectively accommodated depending on the specific situation and intervention. Moreover, villagers are seldom passive victims of western imperialism and hegemony, but tend to exercise agency in their complex negotiations with external social forces and agents. While they may not have “free choice” in their encounters with exogenous interventions, they are either not simply docile bodies enslaved by the tyranny of western development. Ethnographic case studies suggest that responses to development tend to be neither wholesale endorsements nor radical rejections of modernity and its fruits. Moreover, even when resisting and subverting modernist discourses, rural people do not generally do so on the basis of either radical populist politics or in defense of pristine and authentic local cultural tradition, as Escobar and Sachs et al., seem to imply. Finally, the researcher argue that Escobar and Sachs’s focus on development charters and plans privileges the “development speak” emanating from the offices of the World Bank and IMF, thereby reifying text and obscuring human agency. Finally, the Zimbabwe and South African case studies suggest that anti-development critics tend to romanticize the realm of the local community by fetishizing cultural autonomy and cultural resistance to western imperialisms on every front.