

The Role of the Privileged in Responding to Poverty: perspectives emerging from the post-development debate

SALLY MATTHEWS

ABSTRACT *The debate between post-development theorists and their critics has raised several important questions, one of them being the question of how relatively privileged people may respond meaningfully to poverty while not perpetuating the flaws of past development practice. In this article I build upon the ideas of several contributors to the post-development debate in order to suggest three ways in which we who are relatively privileged may play a role in struggles against poverty. I argue that we can work to rethink the concepts informing development practice; that we may find ways to give our support to popular initiatives, and that there are aspects of our own societies which we may change in solidarity with the struggles of distant others.*

One of the most prominent and fruitful debates in recent development theory has been that between post-development theorists and their critics.¹ Post-development theorists provide a scathing critique of past development theory and practice, suggesting that the promotion of development can no longer be regarded as an adequate response to poverty. Critics of post-development theory accept that past development theory and practice may have been flawed but warn that we must be careful not to allow our disillusionment with development to prevent us from responding meaningfully and in a timely fashion to poverty. An important question raised by the debate between post-development theorists and their critics is the question of how privileged people are to respond meaningfully to their own situation of privilege and to the contrasting situations of poverty experienced by so many. While much of the post-development debate is more generally about how to address poverty, inequality, oppression and related problems, several of the contributors to the debate have focused particularly on the question of what role we, who are relatively privileged, can play in the alleviation of poverty. In this article I explore some of the responses that have been provided to this question and

Sally Matthews is in the Department of Political and International Studies, Rhodes University, Grahamstown, 6140 South Africa. Email: smatthews@ru.ac.za.