A Reconsideration of Modernization Theory: Contribution to ICT4D’s Research

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ABSTRACT

Since evolving into an established science in the 1990s, the field of information and communication technologies for development (ICT4D) has seen unprecedented and fast-growing rates of publication, curriculum venues, and development projects around the globe. To this effect, ICT4D’s development literature is informed by a variety of theories (e.g., capability approach, livelihoods, participatory development, etc.). In the process of asserting its body of knowledge, however, ICT4D has tended to dismiss the theory of modernization. For example, under theories such as technology fix, technology transplant, a computer per child, etc., the theory of modernization has been equated with the failures of and threats against development. Consequently, reduced to one aspect of its myriad applications, the theory of modernization has lost its value among development practitioners and theorists. This paper traces the theory of modernization. There is no such thing as a developed society/nation without modernization. The paper derives some points of interest for ICT4D’s research and managerial skills.

Keywords: Development, Infrastructure, Modernity, Modernization Theory, West, Westernization

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, ICT4D has seen its body of literature grow at an indescribable speed. From a vast array of disciplines, various theories have been imported and implemented in an attempt to best accommodate the goals, scopes, and benefits of development in our poverty-plagued world. Chief among imported theories are the capability approach, livelihoods, participatory development, and modernization theory (Clark, 2006; Heeks, 2009a, 2009b; Heeks & Molla, 2009; Gurumurthy & Singh, 2009; Kleine, 2009; Kleine & Unwin, 2009; Potter, Binns, Smith, & Elliott, 2008; Unwin, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2009d; Geldof, Grimshaw, Kleine, & Unwin, 2011). In the meantime, modernization theory has come to represent the failures of and threats against development practice. Before we begin our discussion, we need to clarify two concepts central to the paper, namely: modernization and development. Modernization has preoccupied humans under different circumstances, at different times, and in different spaces. In more ways than one, the concept development has been envisaged as the endeavor to modernize people’s lives.

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Besides the literary meaning reserved for the historical period of Modern Times, The Oxford American dictionary (1999) defines the verb modernize as the endeavor to adapt to modern needs and habits, and the adjective modern as that which is of the present and recent times. To modernize simply means to improve and/or adapt the conditions of societies. The word modernization comes from the Latin adjective modus, meaning: of the present, of just now, etc. or modernus, meaning: things or institutions of the present. Several Latin words derive from this adjective, such as the noun moderamen, meaning: management, direction, control, etc., the verb modero, and its participle moderatus, meaning: to manage, moderate, keep within due bounds, etc. The underlying meaning (Lewis & Short, 1879) is that of management, order, bounds, extent, etc. Interestingly, the Greek word μέδομαι [medomai] from which the Latin words cited above derived has stronger connotations. Medomai (Liddell & Scott, 1843/1996) means to provide for, be mindful of, to plan, contrive, devise, etc. With these etymologies one can get an idea of what modernize tends to imply. Modernization is the extent to which one manages, provides for, and plans welfare in response to people’s needs and habits. As seen below, however, this fundamental view of modernization will be supplanted by the success and imitation of Western societies. Reduced to one aspect of its myriad applications, therefore, modernization theory loses its potency and becomes a recipe of mere replication, regardless of local realities and needs. At varying degrees, the connotations drawn from the etymology and semantics of the word modernization resonate in the discussions that have characterized the efforts of development over time.

The second and last theme to define is development. Although it is better left to the discretion of the researcher to address selected questions and proposed theories, clarification of the term is needed for our discussion. A thorough analysis of social science literatures reveals four key conceptions of development: (a) psychological, (b) infrastructural, (c) philanthropic, and (d) economic. The psychological conception defines development as the unfolding and the optimal manifestation of human personality (Greve, 2001; Lerner, 2001). The infrastructural conception describes development as the product of urbanization and/or infrastructure and facility construction (Perry, 2001). The infrastructural conception has led to the English word developer, which means constructor. Third, the philanthropic conception, most common in development studies, takes development to mean humanitarian and/or rural work undertaken with new digital technologies for the welfare of people in developing countries (Clark, 2006, 2007; Elliott, 2008; Heeks, 2006, 2009a, 2009b, 2010; Heeks & Jagun, 2007; Heeks & Molla, 2009; Jagun, 2007; Kleine, 2009; Mohan, 2008; Potter, Binns, Smith, & Elliott, 2008; Thirlwall, 2008; Unwin, 2009a). Fourth and finally, the economic conception of development requires development practice to satisfy rigorous economic measures (Weil, 2007, 2012; Henderson, Storeygard, & Weil, 2012). In the meantime, history shows that economic measures can occult deep-rooted inequalities concerning under-class social groups, as has been the case in major cities of most developed countries with the Occupy Movement in 2011 (Berkowitz, 2011; Davies, 2011; Yardley, 2011). To add to this quandary, while it figures among the best nations per economic calculations, the US has seen poverty rise from 14.3 percent in 2009 to 15.1 percent in 2010 (Yen, 2011). Development cannot bear its best fruits in a poverty-stricken society. This paper is not addressing poverty in developed countries. Inexplicably, the four definitional conceptions are defended in silos. In other words, all too often, these conceptions remain buried in separate bodies of work, which do not cite nor learn from each other.

As noted below, the realm of development and its corollary modernization proves to be multifaceted and cross-disciplinary. Development is taken in this paper in a broad sense to mean people’s holistic and integrated welfare. Put differently, development “simply suggests improvement in the conditions and quality of life of the population. Greater
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