
Special Section

The next 10 years in development studies: From modernization to multiple modernities, in theory and practice

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European Journal of Development Research (2009) 21, 4–9. doi:10.1057/ejdr.2008.3

Recently I had the opportunity to deliver a capstone lecture in a course on poverty for the staff of Google. Given that I was speaking to a large gathering of people at one of the biggest and most ambitious new entrants into the field of development, I framed my remarks around the imperatives that drive the key actors in contemporary development, and offered some thoughts on whether the technologies, resources and sensibilities of a company whose distinctiveness lies in innovative computer programming and marketing was likely to reinforce or qualitatively alter those imperatives. In the end, my answer was ‘both’. On the one hand, imagining that all manner of complex issues in development could ultimately (or potentially) be reduced to ones and zeros was likely to reinforce imperatives that strongly favour rapid, standardized, technocratic responses, no matter what the problem actually is. On the other hand, embedding new information technologies to facilitate transparency and accountability within an entirely different operating system for thinking about foreign aid and the development process had the potential to be truly revolutionary. The question was which outcome would prevail?

In this essay, I want to explore some of the dynamics behind these issues in more detail, and consider the implications for the academic field of development studies in the coming decade. It is my somewhat provocative contention – on the basis of career spent at the awkward nexus of scholarly research and active engagement with development policy and practice – that too many of the substantive contributions from scholars in ‘development studies’ focus on being ‘critical’, whether of international organizations (of which they often have little direct knowledge) or of the development process more generally, while also being too far removed from the problems that practitioners actually confront. Variations on this critique have been around for at least twenty years (see Edwards, 1989), but here I want to propose that the core problem is not so much methodological, but philosophical.

Correcting these limitations will require taking the interdisciplinary challenge seriously and making a more concerted effort to bring ideas, evidence and practice into dialogue with one another. But even if this were to happen, we would be only refining the existing software; we would end up, if you will, with Development Studies 2.0. This would be a significant accomplishment in itself, of course, but it seems to me that a scholarly field worthy of the name should have a coherent (if not consensual) philosophy that helps to frame the contours of fruitful debates and enquiry, and that provides the intellectual basis for imaging plausible and supportable alternatives. At present, however, the absence of such a philosophy¹ frequently leaves us asking important but second-order questions: we debate whether growth is good or if ‘neoliberalism’ is bad, if this poverty measure is better

than that one, if ‘planning’ is more likely than ‘searching’ to enhance human welfare, if states or markets offer the fastest route to national prosperity, if this intervention or that will best facilitate faster progress towards the Millennium Development Goals, whether gender should be ‘mainstreamed’ or a stand-alone issue in poverty reports; and so on.

There is no doubt that these questions and the answers to them matter, but to get sensible responses you do not really need a separate field called ‘development studies’; the existing social science disciplines will do just fine on their own. Other than to provide a generic overarching umbrella to accommodate groups of people working on development, and to facilitate interdisciplinary dialogue, what exactly is distinctive, intellectually, about development studies? Answering this question is a necessary prelude to identifying what has been achieved to date and flagging which issues to focus on in the years ahead. Doing so requires a philosophy, and in this short essay I dare to outline the contours of one, drawing upon it to identify three issues of first-order importance for the next decade.

Towards a Philosophy of and for Development Studies: From Modernization to Multiple Modernities

Any philosophy of development studies must begin with a definition of its core concept. It is all too apparent from the outset, of course, that ‘development’ is an ambiguous English word and translates poorly (if at all) into some other languages. Even within English it covers a multitude of issues – for example, child psychology to new housing estates to breaking news – and in our particular field, where it generally refers to the study of issues in low-income countries, it can cover everything from poverty reduction to postcolonialism to globalization to capitalist exploitation to environmental destruction. Even so, in what I think is its most commonly accepted guise, I define development as the internal and external processes that shape, in a given society or for a particular social group, the welfare, justice and opportunities of its members, but especially its poorest and most marginalized. Closely allied to this is a normative belief that material improvements in welfare, justice and opportunities are both desirable and possible, but that the very essence of justice and opportunity means that societies and groups have the political and economic means to meaningfully influence whether, how and by what means that happens.

If this is true, then in many respects it is merely a rephrasing of the founding rationale for ‘development’, which centred on modernization as both subject and object. By stressing the importance of revisiting ‘modernization’, I am categorically *not* calling for a revival of modernization theory (or some variation thereof). Although the institutional imperatives of modernization theory (for example, the search for ‘best practices’ and ‘tool kits’, and before that entire structural adjustment programmes) live on in many of the organizations that oversee development today, modernization theory as such now lies thoroughly, universally and rightly discredited on both empirical and ethical grounds. So it should remain. But in discarding modernization theory, it seems to me that development studies have also largely discarded a focus on the processes of modernity as historical fact and contemporary reality, and with it a clear eye for understanding modernity’s capacities for both fulfilling and undermining ‘development’ as defined above.

If most people agree that ‘development’ has occurred when fewer mothers and babies die from preventable causes, for example, it should not be controversial to argue that this outcome will most likely have entailed (in no small measure) access to medicines, service delivery mechanisms and public health measures based on contemporary science, but also

Table 1: Transitions in modernization

	<i>Pre-modern</i>	<i>High modern</i>	<i>Post-modern</i>
Economic	Agricultural, small-scale, informal	Rise of corporation, low-cost arms-length transactions	~ Zero transaction costs (Google, Amazon), product differentiation, immaterial value added
Political	Fractured, personalistic	Nation-state, democratic	More local <i>and</i> more global
Administrative	Patron(age)-based systems, personalistic	Civil service: merit recruitment, impersonal application of rules, hierarchical	'Reinventing government' or New Public Mgt; More 'civic engagement'
Social	Kith and clan, personalistic	Allegiance to nation-state over all else	Global and local allegiances, virtual networks

Source: Adapted from Pritchett (2007).

a recognition of and serious engagement with local knowledge and prevailing institutional structures. Actually implementing this response elsewhere, however, is not simply a matter of getting the prices and technology 'right'; it will entail invoking a package deal of pre-modern, 'high modern' (à la Scott, 1998) and even 'post-modern' interventions and decision-making modalities that span not just economics and science, but administration, politics and society. Moreover, putting these processes in motion will themselves push or pull transitions in all these domains (see Table 1).²

If classical modernization theory actively called for dismissing local knowledge and dismantling prevailing social institutions in the rapid pursuit of a single, best ('Western') organizational form, the emerging 'multiple modernities' paradigm (see Daedalus, 1998, 2000; Smith, 2006) is far more agnostic as to what the final institutional end state will 'look like',³ even as it stresses the importance of effective performance. Familiar contemporary calls for enhancing 'good governance', for 'building the rule of law', for improving 'service delivery', even for establishing social justice and environmental sustainability as the basis for a new ethics of development, are all, in effect, calls for some variant on what one might call modernization without modernization theory – that is, for bringing about transformations in rules systems, but with an emphasis on grounding processes of reform in local contextual realities and principles of equity, rather than requiring rapid, single-step transitions to a predetermined end state.⁴

In abandoning modernization theory as the intellectual basis for this task, we should nonetheless retain a focus on the processes of modernization and their discontents as the core business of development studies. Put another way, the first-order issue for development studies should be engaging with the achievements, conflicts and contradictions of transitions between (stylistically) 'pre-modern', 'high modern' and 'post-modern' organizational forms. The emerging multiple modernities approach seeks to do precisely this. Specifically, it stresses that (a) a normative notion of progress is mostly desirable (if not always unproblematic to discern, and often entails reconciling conflicting visions); (b) institutional forms and functions are not isomorphic – a broad range of institutional forms can deliver similar performance levels (for example, banking systems are different in Japan and New Zealand, but deliver roughly comparable outcomes), and vice versa (Pritchett and Woolcock, 2004) – and emerge through 'hybrid' processes of interaction between

internal and external agents (Bayly, 2004); (c) that transitions of all kinds, whether a product of ‘success’ (growth) or failure (war), are inherently laden with conflict because they necessarily alter social identities, class relations, political structures and thus the distribution of power (Bates, 2000); and (d) that a core focus of development policy and practice should thus be on facilitating spaces for (more) equitable, incremental reform (Adler *et al*, 2008). Crafting an overarching theory to encapsulate this approach is at the forefront of contemporary social and political theory, and it is precisely a task to which I think scholars and practitioners in development studies should be actively contributing.

On this Basis, the Big Substantive Issues for the Next Decade

This framing of the core development problem suggests three substantive areas that are distinctly associated with development studies – that is, areas on which the individual social science disciplines that comprise development studies would not ordinarily focus (even if they might singularly provide some meaningful input). These three areas are aid modalities, prioritization mechanisms and governance. Aid modalities refers to the mechanisms shaping the manner in which rich and poor countries interact; prioritization mechanisms refers to the processes by which development problems and solutions are defined, identified and prioritized; governance refers to the institutional structures, procedures and precedents that shape how transitions are managed. Let us briefly consider each of these in more detail, in reverse order.

Governance is widely accepted to be a priority issue in development, but the volume of the chorus calling for its improvement is matched only by the paucity of coherent theory informing how exactly it might be undertaken in specific contexts. A disastrous consequence of the original modernization theory was that it justified all manner of attempts to transplant legal and political institutions deemed to be ‘successful’ in one (usually Western) context to another. If that approach and the theory on which it is based lie discredited, the imperative to improve the quality of political and judicial institutions nonetheless remains. A more rigorous and iterative attempt to improve both the theory and practice of institutional reform should be one central pillar of development studies in the coming decade.

For this to happen, we will need stronger and better mechanisms for identifying, prioritizing and responding to problems in low-income countries. At present, however, in a world putatively oriented around the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals and flush with the resources and enthusiasm provided by major new entrants such as Google.org, the incentives are strongest to find universal solutions and then both scale up and replicate them around the world as soon as possible. Whether or not these ‘solutions’ respond to the actual problems as prioritized by developing countries themselves is rarely considered; such countries clearly ‘need’ water, credit, fertilizers, malaria nets and schools, so if ‘the solution’ to these needs already exists, why waste precious time and resources reinventing the wheel?

For two reasons: first, because it is actually often not clear what the most important problem is or, when it has been discerned, what the solution to it might be. And second, because any solution unleashes (and/or entails) multiple forms of modernization, implementation requires an institutional architecture based not on the selling of ‘proven solutions’ and the meeting of predetermined targets, but on identifying and prioritizing those problems – and corresponding solutions – deemed most salient by those who will

be most affected by them. We are not even close to having such an architecture in development, bound as we are by the organizational legacy of modernization theory; and we will not have one unless those who comprise the development studies community give it first-order issue status.

If a wholly revamped theory of modernization is a key part of this agenda, so too is learning from, and becoming more closely engaged with, a new generation of aid modalities which puts local knowledge and decision-making power at the centre of how (and by whom) development resources are allocated. Designed by those deeply frustrated by the onerous time, effort and upfront ‘conditions’ typically required by orthodox development assistance, these new initiatives, while not without their concerns, strive to harness local expertise regarding the form, design, location and implementation of projects. They aim to shorten the time lag between promises made and resources provided, to enhance the relationships of accountability and transparency between providers and receivers of projects, and to establish readily accessible channels through which grievances associated with (and/or conflicts generated by) a project can be addressed in an effective and timely manner. Examples include (a) the Kecamatan Development Project, a nation-wide community-based programme in Indonesia designed to both disperse targeted development resources and build local civic skills (Guggenheim, 2006); (b) the website www.globalgiving.org, which provides a direct channel for individuals to give resources to poor people’s projects (rather than going through large agencies, with all their attendant high overhead costs); and (c) the ‘Cash on Delivery’ initiative pioneered by the Center for Global Development, which seeks to enable countries to set their own development priorities (in, say, education) and implementation modalities, being giving resources in accordance with whether the country’s goals are achieved (as determined by an independent body) – the objective being, in short, to reward the *ex post* achievement of internally decided goals rather than (as is usually the case) *ex ante* promises to uphold externally mandated conditions.

Concluding Thoughts

A revamped and revitalized theory of modernity, together with closer engagement with a new generation of aid modalities, is thus needed in the coming decade to give development studies the vigour, rigour and relevance worthy of a scholarly field that addresses many of humanities’ greatest and most vexing challenges. In concluding my Google lecture, however, I stressed that although ‘upgrades’ of current practice would be good, and that the emergence of entirely new ‘programmes’ (aid modalities) would be even better, the wholesale transformation of development studies would only come with the design and implementation of an entirely new ‘operating system’. A silver lining of the current global financial crisis may be that it pushes us in this direction, but no matter what ultimately triggers such a response, it must come eventually, and one can only hope that when it does it will in fact provide a more equitable basis for global interaction and exchange, and in so doing reflect the dynamics of a world simultaneously more universally modern than in 1945 but with each country now more distinctly modern in its own way, and thus (in principle) better placed to address the domestic and international challenges this will generate. In the coming decade, this should be, as it has always been, the first order challenge for development studies.

Acknowledgement

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author alone, and should not be attributed to the University of Manchester. My thanks to Dennis Rodgers for helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

Notes

1. Some would argue that the capabilities approach of Sen and Nussbaum constitutes one such guiding philosophy, but if this approach boils down to stressing that poverty is multidimensional and that finite development resources should be disproportionately allocated to health and education (especially for girls), it seems to me just sensible welfare economics, not a basis for an entirely distinct scholarly domain.
2. I am indebted to Lant Pritchett for this deft encapsulation of the broad challenges of modernization. This approach is different from what might be called the 'neo-modernization' perspective on development as articulated by (among others) Stiglitz (1998), which also stresses the importance of understanding institutional transitions but continues to assume, implicitly or explicitly, that these transitions tend to converge on a single ideal end state and that getting there is largely a matter of mobilizing 'political will'.
3. Philosophically, the emerging multiple modernities approach is grounded in critical realism (see, among others, Manicas 2006).
4. Although often remembered as a conservative theory, at the height of its influence modernization theory was endorsed across the political spectrum, from socialism (China's 'great leap forward', Tanzania's 'villagization') to capitalism ('structural adjustment', 'shock therapy').

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