

Making Sense of Development

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The Third World's sociocultural disintegration and the demise of modernity are issues development theory in the 1980s must confront if that academic pursuit is seriously contemplating rescuing itself from intellectual oblivion. The prospect of a radical re-orientation lurking just around the corner could, conceivably, mobilize a creative self-critique of the unarticulated premises that have brought the discipline so much grief in the past, but if P.W. Preston's *Making Sense of Development* (1986) accurately reflects current trends in development theory that day is a long way off.

The countries of Southeast Asia, P.W. Preston's particular area of inquiry, have seen just about every type of development theory European imagination has ever devised operationalized in their immediate vicinity. The unquantifiable sum of pure human suffering unrestrained social experimentation has inflicted on the region is not the bone of contention here, where the whole question of development is reduced to a conceptual abstraction embedded in the discourse of political economy. Like the medical profession development theory buries its mistakes and what is significant in Preston's study is what is left unsaid.

Any attempt to reconcile or even review competing theoretical approaches is certain to annoy someone – development theorists are notoriously chauvinistic – so it may have been Preston's intention to proceed diplomatically. His cautious appraisal will offend no one and on this level he succeeds in presenting an extremely lucid introduction to contemporary theories of economic development.

Preston's sociological preface is a pean to the myth of modernity and given the fervour with which Asian nations have embraced the myth *Making Sense of Development* probably makes a lot more sense contextually situated. Written to assist oppositional students and urban planners in Southeast Asia construct viable models of social change *Making Sense of Development* defines itself in terms of the interests and aspirations generally associated with these groups. In countries where indigenous debate and criticism is actively discouraged *Making Sense of Development* will be read clandestinely and influence the search for rational counter-strategies.

Preston is a secular missionary, "an emissary of pity, and science, and progress"¹ following in the footsteps of his illustrious nineteenth century predecessors, and although his theoretical maps are up-to-date his ultimate destination is only vaguely outlined. While Preston believes that "these broader speculations can be safely set aside"² it is precisely here that the historical linearity his discussion presupposes first reveals its metaphysical heart of darkness.

"Mistah Kurtz – he dead"

Emerging nations in the postcolonial world were, in all respects, poorly equipped to deal with the realities of economic competition with their former colonial masters. Blatant economic inequalities – a third of the planet was wallowing in abject poverty – eroded the stability of governments. The decision makers in these countries were trapped in a blind alley with potentially disastrous social upheaval breathing down their necks. An interdisciplinary effort to extract these nations from their predicament crystallized in the early 1950s. A wide ranging social, political, and economic analysis, carried out by western experts, led directly to the implementation of policies designed to alleviate the situation.

Development theory's infancy coincides with the outbreak of the Cold War. Emerging nations were transformed into ideological battlefields and during its formative years development theory and

US foreign policy were virtually indistinguishable. The discipline's normative activism was undoubtedly a product of considerations more politically profound than mere altruism.

Modernization theory was elaborated in the context of Cold War competition for allies in the Third World. Where the USSR offered "socialism", the USA offered "modernization".³

As much as the two adversaries would hate to admit it they shared an evangelical dedication to similar projects, both of which entailed forcibly weaning the Third World's "ignorant millions from their horrid ways".⁴

The co-sponsors of the Cold War had similar background schemes which located the source of all the trouble in the same place. Third World nations were prisoners of their own antiquated forms of social organization. Latently dynamic economies were fettered by the cultural demands of local forms of kinship and custom. Traditional modes of life were "unproductive". Inefficient and out-moded methods of cultivation and land tenure, inherently conservative customary obligations, and rampant tribalism, among other things, prevented these societies from feeding huge urban populations. Without an expanding urban industrial production the capital required for rapid economic growth could never be generated internally. If the country in question was also lacking in natural resources which could be bartered on the open market the arbitrariness of local custom guaranteed social and economic stagnation.

The resulting cultural petrification upset the historical applecart. All the promises of progress and social evolution being peddled in Europe's intellectual market place were fraudulent if basic "improvements" in the standard of living failed to materialize. World-views, world peace, and prospects of future world domination, hung in the balance.

The conventional Marxist solution to the very real problems Third World countries were facing involved radical social surgery. Marxist theoreticians were not going to sit around and let world history unfold all by itself; they were going to get out and push. The western response was to shove right back. Caught in the middle were millions of unsuspecting individuals who were as yet unaware of the historical importance being attached to their collective fate.

Ironically enough the western effort to revolutionize life in the Third World began as an experiment in planned economy. Encouraged by the success of the Marshall Plan (the European

Recovery Plan—ERP) a policy of deliberate government intervention in the economy, as suggested by John Keynes in his critique of neo-classical economic theory, appeared to offer hapless Third World nations a perfect avenue of escape. Retrieving Europe's shattered infrastructure was a profitable venture and the United States hoped that the same miracle could be repeated in non-European countries.

The modified versions of Keynesian growth theory that laid the economic groundwork for subsequent development programmes, inadvertently, polarized societies throughout the Third World. A capitalist economy, especially one constructed from scratch, required institutions which could sustain the momentum of economic growth once it got started. Societies in the Third World which neither possessed a sophisticated infrastructure nor the cultural skills needed to create one had to acquire a new set of core institutions just to get off the ground.

When the foreign aid to fuel this structural transformation began to arrive in sizable quantities Third World countries began to fragment culturally. Two disparate cultural spheres were readily discernible; one was "traditional" and contained all those "standardized modes of co-activity"⁵ the "other" actively sought to displace. In effect, the displacement process (modernization) denied a society access to itself. Severed from the national destiny, traditional institutions were to be left behind in the cultural dust as the pace of social change accelerated (the further behind the better). Traditional institutions were cultural anachronisms in an elaborate evolutionary scheme wherein all societies were seen to be "converging towards a common destination by the technical organizational imperatives of advanced industrialization".⁶ The Marxist scenario plotted a similar course for humanity and this reinforced the cultural dichotomy.

The sociological naïvety of the interventionist strategy was eventually criticized by a group of "revisionists" led by Gunnar Myrdal. These "neo-institutionalists" formulated their own interventionist goals. They argued that "the concepts of orthodox economics are not applicable to the economies of the Third World"⁷ and they proposed alternative models of social change to cope with the capriciousness of local custom. The "neo-institutionalists" were uncompromising in their commitment to interventionism but they were not as ideologically rigid as the orthodox representatives of development theory. Whether it was inspired by a genuine concern for the welfare of others or not the interventionism of the "neo-institutionalists" provided development theory with a common sense approach to modernization. They recognized the global diversity of

culture and they took this into consideration whenever the modernization process elicited dysfunctional structural reverberations.

Students of development theory in the early 60s were often dismayed when they discovered postcolonial governments responsible for administering the massive grants of foreign aid had in many cases embezzled these funds to consolidate their own political power. Staffed with indigenous retainers, repressive police states were economic "insurance policies" that guaranteed "internal stability" for foreign investment.

Nominal political independence and modernization had benefitted everyone but the poor and needy and since they were rarely consulted anyway no one had thought to lodge a complaint. The inequity repelled development theorists who saw their efforts to improve social conditions thwarted by ruthless and corrupt officials. The shock of waking up in the real world rent the whited sepulchre of development theory from top to bottom and precipitated a major re-evaluation of developmental stratagems.

Marxist theoreticians in Latin America found the decontextualized interpretations of Western interventionism historically naïve. The Western contention that underdevelopment was a culturally specific phenomenon completely disregarded the historical factors that had originally produced poverty in the Third World. Latin American theorists of dependency (C. Furtado, T. Dos Santos, and A.G. Frank) who were personally acquainted with modernization's negative reality thought that these wretched conditions of life had been consciously called into existence. Growth theory was a political instrument; its economic prognosis was a clever ploy to draw the wool over the eyes of the oppressed (cheap labour) while international finance picked their pockets. The "traditional" societies of modernization theory were a figment of the imagination. The poverty stricken nations of the Third World were historical remnants of colonial exploitation. There were no inherent cultural factors impeding social progress, these were an invention of the modernization theorists themselves. The global expansion of capitalism had irrevocably altered the social structure of every society to come within reach of its tentacles and Third World nations were the stillborn offspring of this economic penetration. "Traditionalism" was a social form that had been foisted upon Third World nations by their exploiters. "The distinctive 'national economy' does not exist – instead, there is a collection of 'residues' and 'enclaves' and various 'parasitic forms'"⁸ each contributing to general economic malaise. "An underdeveloped country is underdeveloped precisely because it

consists of different structures each with a specific type of behavior".⁹

The rural impoverishment of the Third World was a corollary of macroeconomic relationships of dependency established during Europe's colonial expansion. "Modernization" was just another plot to maintain the status quo. Paul Baran, one of guiding lights of the dependency school, even insisted that industrial development was a hoax. According to Baran the West was systematically extracting so much wealth from its clients in the Third World that these nations would never be able to refurbish their gutted economies.

Dependency theory dismantled the western model of development in one fell swoop and Western interventionism responded with a non-academic exercise in socioeconomic subversion that toppled a democratically elected government that was attempting to implement a neo-marxist fiscal policy.

By the time students of development theory in Santiago, Chile finally learned exactly how unpopular their neo-marxist curriculum was in Chicago their government had been overthrown and many of their fellow scholars were either dead or in jail.

A belated justification – postmarked in Chicago – arrived and it proclaimed – if you haven't already guessed – that the USA was not going to subsidize any more macrosociological experiments in planned economy and that a new method of solving the Third World problems had recently been discovered – in Chicago! Chile had been chosen as the country most likely to succeed by a unanimous vote of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the National Security Council and they managed to persuade some of the "Chicago Boys" to fly down to Chile and give the new government some expert advice.

The "monetarist" viewpoint is relevant to a discussion of development theory chiefly because the "Chicago Boys" and their mentor Milton Friedman rejected the liberal reformism of John Keynes as dangerous meddling in the free market system. The monetarists thought Keynesian experimentation squelched capitalism's evolutionary potential. The economies of the West could recover that potential and pass some of it along to the Third World if monetarist policies were strictly adhered to. They did not believe government spending could stimulate economic growth.

The money supply was the key to the monetarist programme. The money supply regulated the rise and fall of prices and their anti-inflationary policies sought to reduce the amount of money circulating within the "system" in order to restore the market to its original pristine states of "equilibrium". This, in turn, would insure

optimal economic growth. They recommended that government spending be cut to a minimum.

A national state that adopted monetarist policies was absolved from any responsibility for the welfare of its citizens beyond perfunctory measures for defense and the preservation of civil order.

Advanced industrialization had never been a charitable enterprise but you don't have to be a dependency theorist to comprehend what a sudden withdrawal of government subsidies can mean to a hungry Third World family. The radical scaling back of government programmes advocated by the monetarists removed industrialism's window dressing. The authoritative interventionism of the modernization theorists was disavowed in the process. The monetarists pursued a policy of "benign neglect".

In the 1980s the Chilean economy was on the verge of collapse. The economies of Singapore and Malaysia were not collapsing and P.W. Preston's survey of Southeast Asia examines the economic development of these two states in some detail.

If one studies the figures of average annual growth of real GNP per capita between 1960 and 1977... one finds that Singapore had the highest growth rate among Third World countries.¹⁰

The prosperity of the city-state is an advertisement for the free enterprise system and its successes intrigue modernization theorists. Preston's admiration is unmistakable despite serious reservations about the political future of the city.

Singapore's transformation from a backward colonial outpost into a modern metropolis is a text-book example of the type of development modernization theory has been predicting for every country in the Third World for the past thirty years. The only comparable Marxist triumph in the region is mainland China (the Cambodian Catastrophe is another story altogether and Preston, mercifully, does not attempt to analyze that sad chapter in the history of development)

Sociologists from Singapore are given space to present their analysis of the city's development before Preston conducts his own summary and they reaffirm prevailing monetarist prejudices about what role the government should play in the modernization process. Dependency theorists who believe Singapore's economic achievements in the postcolonial era to be an accident of geography are unimpressed by the explanation of the city's sociologists which attributes their good fortune to political continuity and stability. But then again, you don't have to be a dependency theorist to detect a

rhetorical trope. The positivistic syntax of developmental sociology has been supplying grammatical camouflage for political persuasion ever since the days of Auguste Comte.

Singapore is a Chinese-dominated trading center on the Malay coast. Formerly a British colony, the city-state boasts a democratically elected government. Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's People's Action Party furnishes the political continuity the city's sociologists are so proud of,

Indeed the ruling PAP has been so successful that for three general elections the various oppositional parties have failed to secure a single seat in Parliament.¹¹

The state apparatus has developed

...a highly authoritarian character, disallowing actions and programmes that do not fit in with a state or elite-defined social reality...¹²

but Singapore's sociologists agree that this is a negligible price to pay for a growth rate that is the envy of the Third World, the country has, consequently, been able to

close the gap between the rich industrial nations and herself. External trade balances have been – thanks to "invisible trade" – good and the currency stable or appreciating.¹³

Still, it is difficult to understand why Preston has chosen Singapore to represent regional development. Nearly 70% of Southeast Asia's total population is rurally based. The industrial plague Preston touts as the cure-all for the diffusely defined "poverty" he wishes to eradicate will only aggravate the region's sociocultural decomposition. Draconian legislation enacted to preserve a semblance of civil order cannot disguise or resolve the cultural crisis the modernization process has triggered in Southeast Asia. That Preston can review Southeast Asia's recent economic and social development and fail to mention the name of the commodity that has made the region famous to international law enforcement is simply incredible.

In Singapore alone 12 drug traffickers (including one woman) have been sentenced to death since the Misuse of Drugs Act was enacted in 1975. Last July two young Australians, Brian Chambers and Kevin Barlow, were hanged in neighbouring Malaysia. Both nations have been – and are – major transshipment points for the 60 tons of heroin the Golden Triangle produces annually. Located on the northern border of Thailand and adjacent areas in Burma and

Laos, the Golden Triangle harbours – in addition to its poppy fields – what is believed to be the highest concentration of heroin laboratories anywhere in the world. Death sentences for trafficking are mandatory in six nations; Thailand, The Philippines, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, and Singapore but law enforcement officials willingly admit that drug addiction in Southeast Asia's urban centers has increased dramatically throughout the 70s and 80s.

Preston is not concerned with the eclipse of culture in Southeast Asia neither is he interested in discussing how often the miserable illusion of progress has been deceptively manipulated to entice whole nations to immolate themselves. Thirty years of developmental theorizing has not appreciably improved the quality of life for anyone in the Third World. To argue to the contrary – as Preston does – is, of course, what “the business of making sense of development”¹⁴ is all about. His blind faith is contagious and nothing is going to dissuade him from embarking on his rescue mission.

Eco-doomsday theorists can go sit at the back of the bus with the cultural anthropologists. Never you mind, though. Somewhere up ahead in the darkness the radioactive fable of our age is going to incinerate itself and Preston is going to realize he might as well have stayed at home because, “Mistah Kurtz – he dead”¹⁵ and it was an overdose of progress that killed him.

Notes

- 1 Conrad, Joseph *Heart of Darkness*, London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd. 1973, p. 55
- 2 Preston, P.W. *Making Sense of Development*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1986, p. 70
- 3 Ibid. p. 70
- 4 Conrad, op. cit. p. 39
- 5 Nadel, S.F. *The Foundation of Social Anthropology*, London: Cohen & West 1951, p. 108
- 6 Preston, op. cit. p. 90
- 7 Ibid. p. 101
- 8 Ibid. p. 128
- 9 Ibid. p. 128
- 10 Ibid. p. 191
- 11 Ibid. p. 192
- 12 Ibid. p. 246
- 13 Ibid. p. 191
- 14 Ibid. p. xxi
- 15 Conrad, op. cit. p. 112

