Developmental Idealism

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For centuries, the related systems of modernization theory and developmentalism have dominated scholarship by giving scholars models for understanding social change. This model has specified the elements considered to be modern and has indicated that high levels of development and the good life were located in northwest Europe and its diasporas. With its causal theories, the model specified both the factors that produced development and the consequences of development for various aspects of life.

My starting point is the recognition that modernization theory and developmentalism have been globalized so that they affect not only scholars but other elites and ordinary people throughout the world (Thornton 2001, 2005). Developmental idealism is a set of beliefs and values that has emerged from modernization theory and developmentalism and that provides models or schema for people living in and dealing with the world. This ideational framework has been disseminated widely around the world with the potential to have many effects at both individual and societal levels.

I originally formulated the concept of developmental idealism to focus on family matters, although I understood that it was applicable to "almost every dimension of life, including the political, psychological, economic, familial, cultural, and social" (Thornton 2005, 134). The basic idea was that the globalization of modernization theory provided individuals throughout the world ideas specifying new goals to be achieved, new methods for achieving goals, and statements about fundamental human rights. More specifically, developmental idealism, as it relates to families, suggests that modern families—including the attributes of individualism, intergenerational independence, marriages at mature ages, courtship as part of the process leading to marriage, gender equality, and planned and low fertility—are good and attainable.

Developmental idealism also states that modern society—including the attributes of being urbanized, industrialized, highly educated, and wealthy--is good and attainable. It also indicates a reciprocal cause and effect relationship between modern society and modern families, giving individuals and communities guidance about means to achieve developmental goals and about expected consequences of development. Developmental idealism also specifies that freedom, equality, and consent are basic rights. Also, by locating development and the good life in northwestern Europe, developmental idealism suggests that life there could serve as a useful model for the less advanced.

Modernization theory also specifies free markets, democracy, pluralism, secularism, science, and the separation of church and state as elements of modernity that are good and should be attained. Modernization theory also specifies that these elements of life are interconnected in cause and effect relationships with various other aspects of society and family defined as modern. Consequently, a broad definition of developmental idealism includes each of these dimensions of life and the ways in which they influence and are influenced by other factors.

The developmental idealism framework recognizes that modernization theory has received numerous critiques and has fallen out of favor in many sectors of the academic community. However, the diminished enthusiasm for modernization theory in academia does not mean that modernization theory and developmental idealism have no relevance among policy makers and ordinary citizens around the world. Furthermore, the issue is not whether the ideas and values of developmental idealism are true or false, or good or bad. Instead, the issue is whether or not the beliefs and values of developmental idealism are endorsed, modified, or rejected by people and how this influences decisionmaking and behavior.

As numerous scholars have observed, globalization has disseminated the ideas of modernization and development widely around the world where they are powerful forces affecting the lives of scholars, policy makers, and ordinary people (Pigg 1992, 1996; Ferguson 1999; Ahearn 2001; Abu-Lughod 1998; Thornton 2005; Osella and Osella 2006). There have been many mechanisms globalizing developmental idealism. Among these are the distribution of modernization literature, colonialism, mass media, mass education, and industrialization and urbanization. Other dissemination mechanisms include social movements for political democracy, Marxism, civil rights, women's equality, and controlled and low fertility. Elements of developmental idealism have also been embedded in governmental and non-governmental organizations, including the United Nations, and are encouraged through various foreign aid programs.

Of course, the people of the world have had their own long-standing belief and value systems, and developmental idealism has been in conflict with these indigenous ideational frameworks in many ways. Consequently, the ideas and values of developmental idealism frequently generated tension, opposition, and conflict when they came into contact with indigenous belief and value systems. In fact, the tension between developmental idealism and indigenous worldviews and value systems is an important source of conflict in many places. Consequently, contact with developmental idealism is infrequently followed by simple adoption, but is more frequently resisted and modified. The result is different or alternative versions of modernity in different locales. Nevertheless, the extent to which developmental idealism has been accepted or rejected in various countries has influenced health practices and outcomes, educational decisions, democracy, human rights, migration, elder care, women's status, and marriage and childbearing.

References and Further Readings

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