Whose Development? Theories of Development and the Concept of Agency

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Indiana University

Developing countries face many different definitions of success from international financial organizations, the United Nations, and citizens' groups both domestic and foreign. How do constituencies in developing countries decide what steps to take? How do they define their own development? I consider modernization theory, dependency theory, and theories of world systems and globalization, and find that none offer an adequate understanding of the agency of stakeholders. I argue that theorists should seek a greater understanding of the agency of political actors in choosing development paths, and of the domestic and international discursive environments which form the context for their decisions.

Developing societies participate in multiple political discourses, each of which constructs development differently. For example, the IMF assesses economic adjustment policies. The UN Millennium Development Goals focus on increasing the range of "choices" available to individuals, as indicated by their health, literacy, and life expectancy (UNDP). Yet another set of priorities is suggested by the "alternative development" movement, with its emphasis on "grass roots movements, local knowledge, and popular power (Escobar 215). Developing countries cannot, with their limited resources, realistically pursue all of these objectives at once. Stakeholders must identify their most urgent priorities and situate them with respect to international and domestic practices and expectations. How do they do this? I argue that extant theories of development do not place enough emphasis on the agency of stakeholders in
choosing development paths. Theorists of development should seek an understanding of the agency of political actors, and of the domestic and international discursive environments that form the context for their decisions.

Modernization and development remain ill-defined concepts that lie behind increasingly expensive state and international programs. The literature on development reflects the attempts by scholars to define these terms, both theoretically and empirically, and to determine the effects of development programs on political entities such as the state and civil society, and processes such as democratization. Development has been studied variously as "modernization" and "dependency" (though it might entail both of these and more); and it has been theorized as a conjoined process with democratic transition, as its antecedent, and as its product. In what follows, I sketch out the parameters of current development research, and summarize how it relates to my study.

Modernization theory represents the first attempt to investigate the peculiar situation of Third World states, the "new states" that appeared on the international scene as a result of World War II and decolonization. The extreme Eurocentrism of core modernization theory has been criticized, and alternatives have been proposed for the underlying dichotomy of "underdeveloped" vs. "advanced," but many of the assumptions of modernization theory have remained a part of successive theories of development. While its original form has been revised and replaced by more sophisticated approaches, modernization theory is significant both in its role as the first unified effort by Western scholars to understand sociopolitical change in "poor" nations, and for codifying what the West understood to be "modernization." Deutsch (1961) sought to make the abstract concept of "development" more concrete through measures of social mobilization. For Deutsch, development is characterized by a certain pattern of
social mobilization whereby people may move to cities and set up new communication networks and lifestyle patterns associated with industrial nations. His definition of development, though only partial, set the stage for much of the development research of the 1960’s through the 1980’s.

Theorists who use the concept of modernization in its broad sense are focused on linking modernization with democracy and stability. For Lipset (1959, 1994) and others, developing societies could achieve democracy and stability by replicating the rapid industrialization and export-led growth of the modernized West. This formulation changed in minor ways over time (Lipset et al. 1993, Lipset 1994), but continued to be accepted as the logical way for poor societies to attain the fruits of modernity. Moreover, while some theorists question the early modernizationists’ endorsement of Westernization policies (Bendix 1967) or its categorical rejection of all things “traditional” (Rudolph and Rudolph 1967) and some even assert the possibility of a negative correlation between some types of modernization and stability (Huntington 1965), they share a sense of confidence that modernization is a useful concept denoting a desirable outcome.

Modernization theory is fundamentally flawed in its dogmatic endorsement of Western forms as the endpoint of development, obscuring the range of possible or desirable outcomes. The implicit narrative of modernization theory assures a single evolutionary path shared by all societies, and on which all societies can be accurately placed. While this stance renders the theory parsimonious (political models often being judged primarily on that quality, as Blaney et al. 2002 illustrate), supporting evidence for it is lacking and modernization theorists do not sufficiently engage the counterevidence. Why do developing states manifest so many political and social phenomena that contrast sharply with those associated with the transition to modern statehood in the West, and why do some states seem to go “backward” on the
alleged evolutionary path? Moreover, how are some states able to develop without emulating important features of the Western model? To claim that divergent outcomes represent failures of modernization rather than problems with the theory is to preclude the kinds of challenges and new evidence that should move a theory forward.

The second failure of the theory is also structural. Essentially presuming a one-way trajectory of evolution that occurs "naturally," the theory fails to systematically articulate the actors or agents of modernization. The range and impact of human action is left unclear, and the assumption that all societies should modernize casts opponents of modernization as short-sighted, ignorant, or even maleficent. At best, groups or individuals are depicted as conducive to modernization or against it, but no entity can start, stop, or entirely reshape the process due to its inevitable nature. Because modernization theory espouses a view of modernization as an evolutionary mandate without alternatives, the useful questions of why, when, and how modernization happens are not within its purview.

The above objections to modernization theory culminated in the rise of dependency theory and world systems theory. Dependency theory grew out of the work of Third World and First World economists and political scientists who analyzed the macro-economic basis for chronic poverty in the developing world. The hypothesis, developed by two economists, Raul Prebisch and Hans Singer, continues to have implications for all studies in development: since the terms of trade tend not to favor agricultural products, developing regions will continue to be at a disadvantage in a situation of "free" international trade. However, while this seed-theory had promise for generating much-needed study of development and wealth discrepancies on an international scale, its usefulness was hampered by political controversy and it was never allowed to grow into a sufficiently nuanced
theory. Just as scholars such as Andre Gunder Frank (1975, 1979) adapted the Singer-Prebisch hypothesis to fit Marxist theory, the Cold War was taking its toll in the scholarly community and Marxist work was effectively being “contained” in the Second and Third Worlds. So, while many useful pieces such as Valanzuela and Valanzuela (1978), Cardozo and Faleto (1979), and Przeworski and Limongi (1997) demonstrate the merits of dependency theory for understanding certain cases, the theory has not been subject to rigorous theoretical challenges and empirical testing. As a result, dependency theory remains too specifically formulated to Latin America to be useful for other cases, and lacks salience in the context of “globalized” economic relationships where companies “outsourced” production of manufactured goods to developing countries (Sarkar, 1986).

While the exact relationship between dependency and world systems theory is debatable, they derive their ideas from similar observations: that unequal economic interactions entrench persistent inequalities among international actors, and that, without counter-measures of significant scale, the trend will continue to the detriment of developing societies. Immanuel Wallerstein articulated the concept of the macro-structural “core,” those states with significant bargaining power in the international scene; vs. the “periphery,” or those states with less bargaining power, and therefore less chance to progress and develop according to their own economic priorities. The concept has spawned much study in international relations and comparative politics, and has proven its salience as a possible way of structuring an understanding of development discrepancies. However, world systems theory offers only a hypothetical macro-structure, and is of limited usefulness in understanding how and why development happens.

Both dependency and world systems theories improved our understanding of development by reframing development as a variable process, human-created, and fallible; and by demon-
strating that development policies take shape according to the agendas of internal and external political actors. However, while theorists draw our attention to the impact of foreign powers on developing states, they tend not to recognize the agency of developing states themselves in adopting and shaping their own policies. Poorer states are seen as perpetually “between a rock and a hard place,” forced to accept unfavorable terms in their relationship with rich states for fear of stronger coercion or sanctions. However, dependency theorists forget the element that distinguishes post-colonialism from colonialism: interdependence that is fluid and market-led. In a post-colonial world, developing states often do have a hand in determining their role with powerful neighbors even if their choices are restricted, and developing states’ bids for economic investment may make outright coercion unnecessary. Developing states do make choices in navigating their roles with former patron states, international entities, and the “developed” world as a whole. Debt and poverty weigh heavily on developing states, but they can and do find different ways of responding to their situation.

In the discussion of competing notions of development, dichotomies of “rival” worldviews often serve to eclipse important similarities among theories. It is relevant to note where dependency theory followed in the footsteps of modernization theory (or at least implicitly accepts some of its edicts), and where this study diverges from their trajectory. Modernization theory assumes that development is a single, universal, one-way process that all states will face, or will ideally face, at some time. Dependency theory assumes that actors are driven to take steps toward development in response to contextual factors. However, both are unclear about who must be the agents of change. Modernization posits a “natural” and universal process that should prevail in every society eventually; while dependency theorists emphasize the exploitative nature of the relations between weal-

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thy and poor countries, belittling the role of developing states themselves in initiating changes. These two approaches are wrong in conceptualizing development as a given or organic process. Theories of globalization come closer to a complex and problematized view of development as a set of possible changes that can be brought about by developing states and societies themselves, powerful external entities with which they must interact for their survival, and the international community as a whole. However, as globalization theories emphasize the revolutionary “interconnectedness” of the current era, they risk losing the broad concept of “modernization” as a cultural, economic, and political process rooted in a region’s specific history.

Globalization theory offers the most coherent critique of mainstream approaches to development: that they presume a “strict separation between internal and external affairs, the domestic and international arenas, and the local and the global.” (Held and McGrew, 2002) The current interaction of states, corporations, and international organizations attests to the permeability of these categories. The globalization school spawns new concepts that more accurately reflect the dynamics of global politics and help scholars analyze political power. The most significant contributions of globalization theory engage and energize the debates about the changing nature, scope, and significance of globalization, and must be understood in the context of these debates.

As questions about development and underdevelopment intensify, the battle lines in globalization theory are being drawn and redrawn. For some, the primary challenge posed by globalization is the need for new conceptions of governance, with new institutionalism and constructivism offering competing views (Hart 2000a). For others, an exclusive focus on state action no longer makes sense at all, as we are faced with unprecedented integration of social relations of all kinds (Giddens 2002). As is
common in times of accelerated change, there is a shift toward a more normative, "big-picture" debate about whether globalization is a force for good or evil. One fact is clear: though views of the globalizing world are many, assessments of globalization tend to fall into two broad categories, according to whether they highlight the beneficial or detrimental aspects of interconnectedness. On the one hand, economic neoliberals herald globalization as the path to prosperity and development, the tide that raises all boats. Ohmae (19990, 1995) and Perlmutter (1991) see globalization as bringing great benefits, including the East Asian miracle, the "information superhighway," and ever-increasing trade. Howard (1981), Mueller (1989) and Russett (1993) even extend the premise of interconnectedness to predict a permanent state of peace and cooperation between states.

But, there is also a growing movement of opponents of globalization who emphasize the connection between globalization and inequality, in both the cultural and economic realms (e.g. Castells 1997, Greider 1997, and UNDP 1999). The data, culled from communities from the neighborhood level to the international level, is unsurprisingly contradictory and ambiguous. Globalization is often associated with a loss of cultural identity, but there is also evidence that the "global village" provides new ways to activate cultural identities. Globalization challenges traditional forms of belonging, brings people together in new associations, and makes spaces and opportunities for new identities to be formed (Held, 237).

The concept of globalization offers particular promise, but also poses a particular problem for the theorist of development. As of now, economic globalization is the most accurate term for the set of changes in the international economic environment that are inordinately affecting developing societies: increased mobility of capital; a widening "digital gap" between regions with a thriving IT sector and those without; the international regulation
of agricultural production via patented seeds; and the privatization of natural resources by transnational companies. However, while proponents of the globalization approach do recognize the significance of wealth discrepancies among states, they do not adequately theorize the distinction between economically powerful “advanced industrial democratic” states and the developing world. Prominent theorists of cultural globalization, whether they recognize a loss of culture or a cultural gain, tend to assume that most communities are “up to date” in the globalized world, already competing in the “rat race,” for better or worse. On the contrary, many communities in the developing world face a lack of such advantages as infrastructure and information technology, i.e. they are not yet integrated or “globalized” to the same degree or in the same way as are their counterparts in the developed world. These communities provide counterevidence to the assertion that we are all increasingly interconnected.

Advocates of economic globalization often use the “business model” to understand the dilemma of all states, blurring differences in resources and opportunities. An instructive example of the limits of the business model is Simon Anholt’s Brand New Justice (2003). Anholt advocates name branding as a business strategy that would allow developing societies to alleviate their poverty. Unfortunately, name branding may not always be an available strategy to the poorest of developing societies, who are often stuck in unfavorable trade relationships that limit their export options to raw materials, piecemeal manufactured goods, and labor. Name branding is predicated on the perceived “comparative advantage” enjoyed by some regions and states in particular industries, and requires considerable startup capital to become viable in exports. Developing countries often have less stable availability of capital, and they are also less likely to be perceived as having “comparative advantage” given the fact that they are consistently portrayed as having little more than raw
materials and human populations in surplus quantities. So, while name branding may be an option in India or Brazil, for example, it may be less possible in very poor countries where comparative advantage is elusive. The business model manifests other theoretical flaws, as well: many entities in the globalized world, such as media conglomerates and monopolies, are “fundamentally non-competitive in any meaningful economic sense of the term.” (McChesney, 2002) Conversely, smaller entities and enterprises may not be able to meaningfully “compete” with the political forces that dominate them, as in the case of agricultural producers in Western Africa versus those in more heavily subsidized regions of the world. Globalized markets are not necessarily free markets. Therefore, thinking of states as businesses in a free market is not conducive to understanding the different kinds of constraints they face in the international arena.

What is globalized “development,” and what is the status of developing societies in an age of globalization? Developing societies typically experience less economic diversification and less access to free-flowing communication and information; they are more drastically affected by changes in modes of agricultural production and are more prone to the resource interests of transnational entities; and they typically have less state capacity coupled with a greater need for trade and other forms of economic interconnectedness, restricting their ability to use policies and laws to control the degree to which they are affected by globalization. The emphasis on increasing mobility and access is not conducive to analyzing cases where resources become more centralized within and among countries. Globalization theory cannot cope with contexts where mobility and access actually decrease.

My primary critique of the above theories is that they are each built around a restricted definition of what development is and where it comes from. Where theories seem to have incompatible perspectives, they can actually complement each other to
collectively produce a more valid understanding of the political processes affecting the developing world. However, there is little possibility for adapting the theories to new phenomena because their narrowed definitions of development are dogmatic. Dependency theory assumes a “comparative advantage” trade situation with a strict separation between agricultural and manufacturing producers. Economic globalization theory cannot effectively analyze the effects of urbanization on commerce in the countryside, because it is predicated on a definition of globalization as increasing access to information. Such theories risk a Procrustean analytical error when new data do not fit their rigidified evaluations of development.

The scholarly challenge to responsibly theorize the multifariously defined realm of development is compounded by the relative ease by which development institutions adapt to the rhetoric of contestation. United Nations programs have nearly completed the switch to more politically acceptable woman-centered and poor-centered language with remarkable ease, as Arturo Escobar forewarned years ago (Escobar, 1995). Feminists, in particular, have responded warily to this shift from openly urban and extractive initiatives to “rural development” and “poverty reduction” programs. The physicist and social movement leader Vandana Shiva repeatedly points to the countervailing interests of international financial organizations and rural communities, and calls for rural women to speak out against top-down policies, however “participatory” they claim to be (Shiva, 2005). Similarly, Shahra Razavi sees the new framing as nothing more than a new marketing sheen for development, ironically warning of its risks for women and feminist movements worldwide in a book published by the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development.

Many individual scholars in a variety of fields are recognizing the need for a more inclusive, data-led theory that would re-
flect the varied and changing nature of development. These theorists have had considerable success in promoting a wider purview with regard to development, and are able to analyze moments when development strategies seem to be distinct from other kinds of political action employed by developing states. I will consider a representative few of the approaches below, with particular attention to how they might illuminate area studies of Mongolia and other developing societies.

James C. Scott’s *Seeing Like a State* examines large scale development programs that have gone awry in their mission to fundamentally “improve” the social or cultural basis of certain societies. He finds a pattern to such programs, not in the mechanisms that produce negative consequences—some are accidental, some deliberate, and some despite assiduous efforts to “make it work” in the face of widespread popular resistance—but in the motivations and ideologies that legitimate the complete reordering of society. Scott’s decision to look at the most disastrous campaigns lends clarity to our way of assessing development. By focusing on the outcomes that we already agree should be avoided (such as famine in Ukraine under Stalin or the massive death tolls under Mao during the Great Leap Forward), Scott avoids the arbitrary labeling of development as “bad” or “good” and is able to examine the significant cultural change that makes development campaigns different from smaller scale political processes.

However, while *Seeing Like a State* illuminates modernization in many ways, it does not yield insight on the experiences of developing states in particular. By lumping early industrialization programs in Soviet Russia and China together with colonial and post-colonial events in the Third World, Scott obfuscates theoretically important differences. The factors that provoked industrialization of societies that became major world powers are
not identical to those that continue to influence societies in the developing world.

One important characteristic of development as experienced by “poor” societies is the constant assurance that it is an expected, natural, and necessary process. Consequences, side effects and sacrifices are normalized. In “The Myths of the Market and the Common History of Late Developers,” (1993) Kiren Aziz Chaudhry notes the “strong evolutionary undertones” of the discourse regarding market transitions, as evidenced by the persistent emphasis on “the pivotal role of the demonstration effect, economic stagnation, the emergence of a ‘competent bourgeoisie,’ and ‘learning.’” (248) Choudhry questions the assumption that markets are part of a natural evolutionary process.

Markets are conscious constructs— in the same vein that command economies are deliberate arrangements— in that they are based, by design or default, on political principles (who gets what, why, and how) and on choices of how individual resources, rights, aspirations, and possibilities are reconciled with collective ones. The assumption that markets are “neutral” and “natural” obscures the political choices that are embedded in the institutions that govern the market. (247).

Choudhry’s observations can be generalized to apply to many other aspects of development, as well. If we replace the word “market” with “development,” the passage holds true: many deliberate and highly specific political arrangements may be folded into the development process. These arrangements deserve special examination and possible reevaluation, as they bring weighty consequences for the populations of developing countries and the globalized world as a whole.

Moreover, it is misleading to speak of one market that all may adopt, or of one trajectory of development that all may achieve. Concepts of “the market,” “development,” and even “democracy” cannot be transferred in toto from the advanced
industrial West to the developing world, and interpretations of them may differ from region to region. Frederic C. Schaffer, in his book *Democracy in Translation* examines two separate notions of democracy: one denoted by the French word *democratie*, and one by the Wolof hybrid word *demokaraasi*. Both are used regularly in political discourse in Senegal, but have entirely different meanings. In his primarily linguistic study, Schaffer uncovers a split between perceptions of a political system that should rest on old sources of legitimacy such as religion, and one resting on new affiliations such as national citizenship.

Schaffer's study reveals important dynamics of development in that differently situated political actors may perceive different needs and manifest accordingly diverse policy preferences and theoretical understandings with regard to basic concepts. Nowhere is this truer than in the developing world, where democratic deliberation may be undermined by actors with strong economic interests and powerful bargaining positions. However, the awareness that different interpretations of basic political concepts exist is only the first step to understanding them. Unfortunately, Schaffer does not discuss the origin and significance of competing notions of democracy, which diminishes the political relevance of his study. Without a discussion of the political dynamics that produce diverging perceptions, he risks echoing the simplistic default explanation endemic to development discourse: that some peoples are inherently more capable of modern democracy than others. Daniel Lerner (1958) correlated willingness to modernize with the net effect of individual and group characteristics and social affiliation, while Almond and Verba (1963) have emphasized a society's history as the decisive factor; but, regardless of the specific variables considered, these explanations rely on a primordial understanding of national character. Attributing political change to non-political sources per-
petuates ethnocentric superiority claims and belittles the validity of developing societies' own political preferences and struggles.

It is possible to examine the interplay of cultural and political factors without propagating simplistic notions of causation. In *Nationalism and Hybridity in Mongolia*, Uradyn E. Bulag considers the social dimension of political change in Mongolia during and after socialism. He finds that moments of greatest political flux are also times of relentless social restructuring. In this sense, large scale political campaigns are times of great possibility for creating, disabling, and activating ethnic and gender identities, and for repositioning them in ways that further the goals of the state. The Soviet-influenced regime in Mongolia increased the politicization of ethnic labels and analogized ethnic conflict with class struggle, so that "once the redistributive system was removed, we see revealed an exclusive type of ethnicity, based on territory, economic specialization, and local power, which it in effect created" (Bulag 259). While it might be legitimately claimed that regimes do not "create" ethnicity, but only instrumentalize and magnify existing ethnic divisions, Bulag's overall point holds. Even after a successful political campaign is completed or replaced with a new one, a legacy may remain in the form of highly politicized social, ethnic, and gender hierarchies. The ideological worldview may not survive, but social messages and connotations are much more enduring. In newly democratic Mongolia, debates over the ethnic supremacy of the majority Khalkha is at issue in rival parties' competing depictions of "development" and "democracy."

Further, Bulag demonstrates how social restructuring aimed at achieving modern status is often justified with the necessity of complying with new standards of appropriateness and respectability as a society. Gender identities and sexual reproduction are often the prime locus of change in a developing society, and political discourse reflects the state's interest in fostering such
change. He cites Heng and Devan (1992), who documented the Singaporian government’s campaign to encourage well-to-do Chinese women to have more children “to counteract the ‘irresponsible’ high birth rate of the lower-class Malay and Indian women. The prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, openly attacked educated Chinese women for not producing the ‘genetically superior’ children necessary for the prosperity of the Singaporian nation” (Bulag 261). This passage shows that ethnic and gender identities, far from being outside the political realm, are highly relevant for the developing state. To be modern, a state must acquire the necessary social profile, and those in power become the “keepers” of a society’s modern status. (For more analysis of Mongolia as a developing society, see section 3.1)

There is a constant flow of empirical research on certain intractable patterns in regional development efforts, and similar insight is needed with regard to broader problems in development. An excellent example of empirical research on a regional development problem is Nicolas van de Walle’s *African Economies and the Politics of Permanent Crisis, 1979-1999*. Analyzing perceived “failures” in African aid projects, van de Walle finds that corruption and clientelism doom many aid projects, and that more attention should be paid “to the state and to the interests, economic ideas, and capacity to be found within the state apparatus” (280). While he is primarily interested in African cases, van de Walle’s approach of highlighting broad patterns that persist across time holds potential for research on broader questions in the development world.

Likewise, broader critiques often lack the empirical basis to usefully engage with the majority of work in the field of development. Arturo Escobar’s *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (1995) demonstrates how the historically constructed notion of cumulative and inevitable development is not simply a relic of modernization theory—on
the contrary, it is a cornerstone of contemporary development discourse. Accepting such a notion of development as anything but a historical construct marginalizes the experiences and needs those who must be “developed.” But, while mainstream theories of development are definitely problematic in a normative sense, empirical evidence is needed to show more specifically where they fail to describe the world.

How do you theorize agency in a development context, where there is no clear consensus on the means and ends of development? Firstly, a strong theory of development must emphasize that stakeholders have choices to make about how they will construct development. Secondly, their choices are constrained by domestic and international environments that already define development in various ways, and these may be associated with particular constraints and incentives for political actors. For example, political actors in a society may be compelled to support particular policies to increase trade, to attract investment, or for any number of other economic and political goals. More specific illustrations of incentives include broad-based international investment for countries who pledge to achieve the UN Millenium Development Goals, or a share of the $1 billion Millennium Challenge Account offered by the United States to reward free trade policies in low-income countries. In the midst of these norms and prescriptions, individual stakeholders respond by shaping the discourse in whatever way they can or privileging a given discourse in the turbulent environment of civil society. In this way, individuals make constrained choices about how to construct development in the domestic and international spheres.

Individual stakeholders have choices to make about how to bring about policies that they themselves favor, but also about how to foster the relationships that will help them shape development in a given sphere. Strategic positioning with other politi-
cal actors is the main path to development, however it is con­
strued. Development, as an outcome of collective political ac­
tion, is contingent on forming relationships, mobilizing people,
and altering society. This essential interconnectedness may be
sought in different forms—economic investment, social net­
works, access to information—but increased participation and
clout in discourse is usually the means, if not the end. States may
face many obstacles to integrating themselves in the world mar­
ket, and poor states may have particular difficulty in attracting
trade and investment. However, trade and investment, along with
other forms of interconnectedness, are crucial elements of devel­
opment that provide the economic basis for other policies a state
may wish to pursue. Strategically chosen economic ties make
development possible for poor states. Therefore, we can say that
poor states who embrace a development program will consistent­
ly try to attract trade, investment, and other forms of intercon­
nectedness with influential external actors.

Gaining favorable relationships is an enduring purpose for
poor states, and one that may occasionally take priority over oth­
er policy objectives that are also part of the development pro­
gram. To be associated with development, individual policies do
not necessarily have any clear and visible connection with a spe­
cific domestic or international goal such as increasing economic
activity, or engendering political freedom. Rather, many devel­
opment policies are undertaken specifically to increase compati­
bility with powerful external political actors in order to foster interconnectedness.

Even multilateral recognition of the need to re-think deve­
loPMENTALIST rhetoric has not yet culminated in robust scholarly
critique. Self-proclaimed labels are all over the map, with critics
worldwide positioning themselves in a bewildering variety of
ways as proponents of “sustainable development,” “alternative
development,” “anti-development,” “post-development.” Should
the term “development” only be used in an ironic sense to high­light the historical discrepancy between the development project and the real needs of those it targets; or is it better to bracket this discrepancy and get to work on a new vision of development based on human needs? Labels tend to introduce more confusion than they resolve, and no sort of prefix can substitute for critical investigation of the countervailing interests at play in defining the term “development.” One conclusion is sure: Scholars who invoke the term “development” uncritically lack relevance to its varied constituencies and their changing experiences, impov­er­ishing the field of “development.”

Empirical data is needed in order to construct more informed theories of development that do justice to the agency and inter­play of political actors. Understanding agency is essential to the ongoing scholarly project of theorizing development, and will ultimately have implications for globalization theory, rational choice, and the emerging theories of sustainable development. Visions of how societies might prosper in the globalizing world are more meaningful when there is real knowledge of how de­velopment is created and defined by those who influence and experience it directly.

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