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The Developer: Utilizing social types to interrogate the politics of ‘development localities’ and rearticulate individual agency

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Abstract

Sociologist Georg Simmel wrote short pieces on particular social types as a means of articulating the underlying logics bounded within certain social interactions. Here I have highlighted the creation, participation, and perpetuation of ‘The Developer’ as a Simmelian social type. Given the logics underlying development localities, a complex interaction ensues between the developer and developpee—in which a discourse of equality, human rights, and partnership manifests as continued socioeconomic stratification. Rather than reify development globalities as intractable entities by which localities are powerless, I argue that we can better identify and come to understand individual reflexivity and action as a mode for positive change by recognizing the influence of the globality on the logic of development localities through social types. I argue that the possibility for development-as-partnership begins only when one turns a sociological lens onto his/her own role within international development and, by extension, in shaping the experience of the local.

Keywords: Social types, epistemology, sociology, international development, hegemony

The daily interactions between developers and developpees form ‘development localities’ which, in total, create the foundation of the post-war development industry.ⁱ Here I extend Baxi’s (2007) use of ‘developer’ beyond political actors with strategic interests to include the persons employed to manage projects in the field as well as to produce empirical reports on project implementation. Likewise, Baxi’s use of ‘developpee’ connotes “the subjects and objects of development” (Baxi, 2007, p. x). As Crewe and Harrison (1998) caution, this binary is inadequate considering that these definitions are fluid and dependent on time, space, and position. Concurrently, they argue that the racial, national, and material dimensions of developers (simplistically portrayed as white, from the Global North, and middle-class) have not been appropriately highlighted. ‘Development globalities’ then signifies the complex interactions across physical and conceptual distance between developers in the field, those in headquarters, those drafting development grants and policies, and/or those acting in political roles for states giving and receiving assistance.

The politics of enacted development localities depends in part on the individuals immediately involved as well as the globalities within which these individuals create and structure the interaction. Given that development localities are situated *within* globalities that have been shaped by historical and political interaction, a critical look at development localities can serve as an avenue for understanding agency within development.

Although sociology as a discipline often reinforces the tradition/modernity binary, using a sociological lens underscores the complex relationship between personal agency and structural constraints. Georg Simmelⁱⁱ, a German interdisciplinary sociologist writing at the turn of the 20th century, argued that society and the individual exist in a mutual dialectic:

The large systems and the super-individual organizations that customarily come to mind when we think of society, are nothing but the immediate interactions that occur among men [sic] constantly, every minute, but have become crystallized as permanent fields, as autonomous phenomena. As they crystallize, they attain their own existence and their own laws, and may even confront or oppose spontaneous interaction itself. (cited in Lawrence, 1976, p. 63)

To explore this crystallization, Simmel wrote short pieces on particular ‘social types’ as a means of articulating the underlying logics bounded within certain social interactions. Simmel promoted purposeful abstraction, not meant to negate individual variation but to create a theoretical tool highlighting key features that fundamentally define or alter interpersonal relationships. Simmel presented social types by either characterizing (1) the pressures of holding a specific position in an interaction or (2) the general dispositions of humans that led them to certain experiences (Lawrence, 1976, p. *lxiv*). Examples of Simmelian social types include ‘The Stranger’, ‘The Poor’, and ‘The Prostitute’. Within these pieces, Simmel highlights the impact of underlying logics on social interactions, including social distance despite physical proximity, rights versus obligations to assist others, and the commodification of intimacy respectively (Simmel, 1971).

In this paper I highlight the creation, participation, and perpetuation of ‘The Developer’ⁱⁱⁱ as a social type that exists within development localities in ‘the field’.^{iv} I focus on the archetypal developer, whom Crewe and Harrison (1998) have identified as underexplored, not to encourage tidy definitions but rather to create an abstract and theoretical tool that can aid in individual reflexivity. Applied to the development industry, Simmel’s two analytic dimensions prompt the following questions: (1) what occupational pressures structure the Developer’s interaction within development localities? and (2) which type of person is attracted to the Developer role? Considering the continued material inequalities around the globe despite the

stated goals of the development industry it becomes crucial to expose the ways in which “local” people are constrained by the appropriation of “globalities” by individuals situated in particular development contexts. Viewing development as an industry allows international development to be conceptualized within the complex interplay between state sovereignty, neoliberal capitalism, and trade laws—all of which shift and change temporally and with spatial implications. It also appropriately highlights the training and subsequent employment of developers. In comparison, viewing development solely as a project towards an idealized equality is to ahistoricize and to decontextualize the ensuing interactions. As Crewe and Harrison (1998) appropriately articulate, “the language of ‘partnership’, which currently pervades much development policy, is oddly blind to the unequal basis on which such aid partnerships are formed” (p. 22).^v The resulting asymmetrical relationship between developers and developees becomes crystallized within development localities without concerted recognition by developers. ‘The Developer’ as a social type must be viewed within this context. Given these asymmetries, a complex interaction ensues between the developer and developee in which a discourse of equality, human rights, and partnership manifests as socioeconomic stratification. Rather than reify development globalities as intractable entities by which localities are powerless, I argue that by recognizing the influence of the globality on the logic of development localities through social types, developers can better identify and come to understand individual reflexivity and action as modes for positive change.

The Developer: A Simmelian social type

The Developer, driven by varying degrees of sympathy and empathy, is challenged with coming today and leaving tomorrow. The nature of his job is to implement activities that will improve the lives of developees by increasing their income, made possible through increased knowledge, positive attitudes, and changes in behavior. These activities derive from goals determined a few years earlier by entities a continent away. The Developer is a highly sociable and emotional being. The terms of employment are inherently short-term and project-based, planned using log frames and Gantt charts and tracked using indicators and statistics. The Developer is eager to be outside of an office setting, enjoying the challenge in front of him. During his last contract, the Developer had been excited by the possibility of a well-building program, but it was determined by headquarters that it was outside the boundaries of the project. Still, he sees poverty and injustice here too and knows that with the right adaptation of technology to the local context, developees will have potable water and their lives will improve.

The Developer is acutely aware that the project by which he is employed will not be enough to fix the problems here, but he knows that progress is slow and incremental. He knows his livelihood is made possible by the relative deprivation of the developee, but he is here to remedy that issue. Upon stating to a developee that he wants all people to have what he had growing up, the developee responded by mentioning the export processing zone in the neighboring country. The Developer did not understand the comment but wanted to share his intentions with his developees as a sincere effort to build partnership.

Over drinks at expat watering holes in capital cities, the Developer recounts the recent success of a workshop—this time, using Coca-Colas as an incentive, he had thirty beneficiaries attend! Another Developer voices his frustration at the quick shift in funding priorities from early childhood education to higher education. Another Developer says she is losing hope for her developees—yesterday she completed an analysis that demonstrated her knowledge campaign had no impact on the use of latrines. The last Developer comments on how quickly the community library near her post was abandoned after the VSO^{vi} volunteer left. The Developer

watches some of his colleagues struggle with the efficacy of their projects and they decide to leave the profession. This self-selection further purifies the remaining pool of Developers. The Developer sees but does not acknowledge the implication of the daily practice of managing and being managed, which is organized by race and nationality.

The Developer experiences the everyday routines of life with immunity to the lived experiences of those around him. He gets to simultaneously observe and ignore the geographic dimensions of development, traveling from Dulles to Frankfurt to Nairobi in the time span of only twenty-two hours. The shift from cool to hot, grass to dust, shade to sun is obvious in surrounding yet this spatial change does not carry the socioeconomic implications for the Developer. He has a nice house with bars on the windows, a new corrugated iron roof, and a patio with potted flowering plants. His house is furnished and it holds numerous appliances that decrease the amount of time needed to complete the household chores of laundry, dishwashing, and food preparation. Since he works long hours, the Developer hires a local woman, similar in demographics to the beneficiaries of his project, to assist him. The Developer rationalizes this by knowing that he is helping to remedy her situation, which requires the local woman to leave her own household chores so that she can complete his as her livelihood. He does not ask if she owns land or a house but assumes she enjoys the air-conditioning while she works.

In his free time, the Developer consumes goods and services offered by local cafes and restaurants. Sitting in the shade and enjoying a Coca-Cola, the Developer is joined by other developers—expatriates and nationals alike. This group of diverse developers shares a middle-class livelihood, formal training at university, and a sense of responsibility for the developpee. The group of national developers are all old friends, having worked together for the ministry before joining the NGO for better pay. The national developers add complexity to the expatriate Developer's understanding, and so the Developer knows he has something to learn from them. Still, he does not question the currency of their respective paychecks nor its relative purchasing power.

The transitory possibilities available to the Developer generate social interaction never before imaginable. The Developer, owner of appropriation, works in faraway places with the developpee, local owner of dispossession. The Developer wears SPF-enhanced, antimicrobial quick-dry clothing, a watch displaying three time zones, and holds a passport fastened inside a security belt. The developpee wears stitched plastic sandals and clothing purchased from shipping containers of donations, and holds a local identification card, fastened inside a knotted pocket. The Developer struggles to understand the actions of the developpees, is saddened by sacrifices made for their families, and sees victimization everywhere. He sees his own developpees as possible success stories if only they can utilize the expertise he has brought them. This will allow them to continue down a path similar to that of the national developers thus completing the ultimate development project.

The Developer is educated to the graduate level, an expert in development topics: education in emergencies, public health in complex emergencies and war, post-atrocity community development, security and logistics coordination, and therapeutic use of music and art. The Developer was trained far away by professors of similar demographics to himself. He learned to analyze and critique sector assessments and search UN Statistics. This training has prepared him for a world of acronyms and buzzwords. The names of prominent Third World scholars like Samir Amin, Mahmood Mamdani, Ngũgĩ Wa Thiongo, Franz Fanon, and Paulo Freire remain unfamiliar. The Developer was forced to make a difficult decision to choose between a Monitoring and Evaluation or a language course as an elective. The former seemed to

increase employability more so than the latter. As such, the Developer is dependent on translators—he may work on a different continent for his next contract and, as such, even a foreign colonial language will not be effective across these geographies. As a topical expert, the Developer is needed around the world so there is no need for geographic specialization.

After thousands of dollars have been spent on tuition, the Developer works alongside those who live on less than a dollar a day. These are his partners in development. Knowledge validated through a legitimation process far removed from the concerns of the people he now serves, the Developer is positioned as an expert in how to best help the developpee. Realizing the inferiority of his knowledge in the presence of dynamic local knowledge, the Developer may feel a sense of inadequacy for the first time, but is simultaneously emboldened by the power granted to his technical expertise relative to the knowledge of the developpee. The NGO and project reflect the knowledge of the Developer and marginalize that of the developpee. While the developpee may gather data on indicators, the Developer synthesizes and analyzes. The Developer is the one who holds meetings with the Chief of Party and external evaluators. They ask the Developer to share his reports on the recently completed barrier analysis and participatory rural appraisal workshop. This power unleashes emotions in the Developer he had not felt before—years of study and training premised on the idea of equality are now infiltrated with sentiments of superiority.

The perpetuation of the Developer is encouraged by the world in which it was created. The Developer takes rest and relaxation as is stipulated in his contract and takes leave from the project and its developpees. He is questioning and conflicted by the sentiments he has been feeling lately. He returns home to rationalized cities, rationalized people, and rationalized interaction. He shops in grocery stores, orders Starbucks, and posts Facebook photos which feature him amongst brown skinned, smiling children from his temporary neighborhoods abroad. People here do not know his field of expertise, but they have a desire to be worldly and so they listen intently to their friend just returned from the exotic boundaries of the globe. They filter the conversation through images of the developpee as seen on TV—skinny legs that form a mob, kids with flies in their eyes, and pickup trucks filled with armed men—and place their friend gloriously amongst it all. Oh, their selfless friend! How much he sacrifices to help others! How he is working to help others gain the quality of life we have! Unable to imagine the depth of their imperfect information, they shower the Developer with praise. Before returning to the field, the Developer attends meetings at headquarters and sees visual displays of the outputs and outcomes of the initiative, of which his project is a part. He also reads a handful of success stories and best practices, which provide him with good ideas to incorporate into the project once he returns. Shortly thereafter, the Developer steps back onto the plane, reaffirmed of his meaning and self-worth. For it is only from within the regime of the rationalized world, the world which created the Developer and the developpee, that the Developer can gain validation.

Utilizing the Social Type for Reflexivity

Given the underlying logics that constrain the actions of developers, a path of least resistance is subtly established for everyday interaction between developers and developpees that does not reflect the current development rhetoric of equality and partnership. This disjuncture opens development localities as a space in need of critical examination. While Simmel argues that crystallized societal forces can then confront or oppose individual action, sociologist Allan Johnson (2008) emphasizes that it is people's participation which allows social systems to live and persist and, in doing so, reclaims individual agency. Johnson (2008) utilizes the metaphor of

playing the game of *Monopoly* to discuss the relationship between individuals and societal forces. If we are to view development within a sociological lens, Johnson would argue a critical evaluation of ‘the development game’ is needed:

When I play the game, I feel obliged to go by its rules and pursue the values it promotes... If *we* were the game, then we’d feel free to play by any rules we like. But we tend not to see games—or systems—in that way. We tend to see them as external to us and therefore not ours to shape as we please. (p. 17)

But, as people, we *are* the game and if we conceptualize our everyday interactions as part of a continuous crystallization of development localities and globalities, we have the power to change the rules. How, then, do our actions have an impact on the game? The social type as a theoretical tool promotes a reflexive eye towards individuals’ actions while acknowledging the influence of development globalities. If current and would-be developers in the field do not interrogate their own relationship to ‘The Developer’ social type, their assumed good intentions and/or belief in equality, human rights, and partnership are too easily structured by the forces created by historical dispossession and subsequent development globalities. By interrogating the logics flowing underneath development localities, it becomes possible to first recognize and then acknowledge the ways in which many developers fall into the path of least resistance.^{vii} This reflexive process allows for the identification of individual agency, which can then be rearticulated within development localities as concerted action. It is through this process that developers can, in part, impact the implementation of the development industry and contribute to a progressive crystallization of social interaction which equalizes power imbalances and works toward social justice.

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ⁱ This is not to say that the actions of developpees working together do not construe the foundation of development as an ideal, but rather to highlight the creation of developers as crucial to the development *industry* and its continuation. This binary does not appropriately represent the variety of people involved in development but is created here to apply Simmelian social types to the development industry.

ⁱⁱ A brief introduction to Georg Simmel and his work can be found at the following website:

<http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/socsi/undergraduate/introsoc/simmel.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ When referring to the social type, 'Developer' is capitalized. However, when referring generally to the living, breathing people who engage in development activities lower cases are used as the developer/developpee binary is inadequate to describe development actors. The developpee is never capitalized to signal that the developpee is a character the archetypical Developer interacts with in development localities and is not presented here as an archetype.

^{iv} Numerous social types could be developed to interrogate the various social forces at play across the variety of positions and roles with the development industry. Here I have highlighted only the role of the Developer.

^v For an example of this language of partnership, see the USAID's Global Partnerships website which can be accessed here: http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/global_partnerships/

^{vi} I purposefully have not spelled out VSO since its use is within the social type part. Development is a world full of acronyms. Often, when used in the field, acronyms are not understood by developpees.

^{vii} This is not to imply that larger, systemic changes to development globalities are unimportant. If these changes are to be made, it requires recognition of the disjunctures present in development localities which can then inform shifts in development globalities.