Evolutionary Theory of Social Development

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WORKING PAPER

The evolutionary theory of social development is grounded on the understanding that progress is the outcome of a three stage process: 1) identifying the community’s values; 2) creating goals to enhance these values in the community; and 3) forming strategies to implement these goals. Values in an evolutionary framework are neither “set in stones” (absolute) nor determined by the whim of an individual (relativistic). Instead, true values must meet the test of instrumentalism—meaning their existence must promote a going society. A going society is one that can support the continuation of the human life process. Once members agree on the set of shared values, they next create goals to advance these values. The community then finds strategies to achieve the proposed goals. Strategies must be evaluated for their practicality, however. Unpractical strategies render proposed goals to be unfeasible. Strategies are evaluated on three criteria of institutional adjustment: 1) the community has the technological capability of realizing the goals (principle of instrumental primacy or technological determination); 2) community members recognizes how the proposed change may affect them and other members and, hence, group interaction is necessary (principle of recognized interdependence); and 3) the community must be able to integrate the implemented change back into the existing social fabric (principle of minimal dislocation). In addition, the community must deliberates on where it is “at” and where it would like “to be” (ends); how it plans to “get there” (means); and the consequences of choosing certain means over others. Means-ends-consequences and deliberation are thus the two corollaries of the theory of institutional adjustment.
The purpose of this essay is to give an introduction to the evolutionary perspective of social development. My goal is to familiarize the readers to the major concepts of this theory, and I leave it to the readers to seek out a more nuanced understanding of evolutionary social development.

I. Values

In our everyday interaction, we use the word values to refer to ideas and beliefs we hold dear. We speak of values with reverence because we believe they are the truth. The evolutionary theorist agrees that values are indeed the truth, but she asks further what makes something true. Ayres (1996 [1944]) answered, “The very word, ‘truth,’ is in effect a synonym for continuity, and the continuity it postulates is that of instruments and tools that is to say, technology” (Ayres 1996, http://cas.umkc.edu/econ/_resources/OIE/readings/Ayres/tep/tepfore.html). True values are true because they promote ways of thinking and doing that move the community forward, putting it on a more secured footing against the forces of nature. The evolutionary theorist refers to true values as “instrumental values.” Instrumental values must be distinguished from “ceremonial values,” or false values, because the latter do not contribute to the community’s quest for survivability. Ceremonial values are outdated ways of thinking and doing. We are attached to ceremonial values because we have been taught since youth to believe “this is how things always have been.” Ceremonial values provide a shared experience for members of the community, allowing us to resolve conflicts in an orderly manner and without resorting to violence (Atkinson 1987). Too strong of an attachment to ceremonial values can be quite detrimental to our survivability, however; we will resist attempts to change our ideas and ways, even when social or physical conditions require it.
The evolutionary theorist is not concerned with identifying and labeling instrumental versus ceremonial values because she knows values change with social and physical conditions. Instrumental values today will be incompatible with the circumstances of tomorrow, rendering themselves to the label of false values. Having said that, the evolutionary theorist believes the rapid advances of technological skills since the Industrial Revolution makes it possible for the community to pursue six ‘broad’ instrumental values: security, abundance, excellence, freedom, equality, and democracy.

We have reached a point in technological development where we can provide every member of the community subsistence like food, shelter, transportation, healthcare, and education; this is security from basic material needs. As long as we do not impede technological progress, we stand a real chance of satisfying more of the community’s material desires. The advent of mass production has made it possible for us to produce greater quantity of outputs without sacrificing their quality. The more material abundance and production excellence we achieve, the greater is the possibility for us to realize the values of freedom and equality. Increasing material wealth gives us a wider range of choices. We have more freedom to choose what we want to eat, where we want to live, and how we want to move around than our predecessors did a century ago. Moreover, we now have the technological capability to reduce economic inequality in the community. We can provide more goods to more people than ever before. Ayres (1961) also noted individuals who have greater experience with instrumental ways of doing and thinking are less likely to discriminate others based on ceremonial grounds. Invidious distinctions are set aside when the community is more concerned with providing material welfare for everyone.
A question that arises is if we have the technological know-how to pursue security, abundance, excellence, freedom, and equality, why have we not done it? After all, economic textbooks are filled with warnings that we do not have enough resources to give everyone, and we must make tough decisions to provide for some and leave out others. This assertion is a myth, however, and it is a dangerous one. If we buy into this myth, we are consenting to let a few members of the community, the economic advisers, politicians, and all other so-called ‘experts,’ deprive ‘non-expert’ persons access to material outputs. Consequently, if we want to provide material well being for the whole community, we must begin by asking everyone what s/he wants to have and do with his/her life. We cannot achieve security, abundance, excellence, freedom, and equality if we do not engage in democratic participation. The only people who know best how to have a going society are the people who have to live it; thus, the community members should get to decide what they want to produce and consume. This is the true meaning of democracy.

II. Goals

Whereas values are truths we hold dear, goals are possible outcomes of our attempt to augment these truths in the community. In other words, goals are the practical enhancements of values. The evolutionary perspective believes goal setting is a situation-specific activity. The community faces different problems at different times. Problems are crises of values, when past instrumental ways of thinking and doing are no longer compatible with the current social climate. Solutions require us to ask where we are “at” and where we would like “to be.” Where we want to be is the end, so end is a synonym for goal. Social life always brings forth new ways of thinking and doing, and the community must constantly adjust its values to maintain a going society. Changes in values lead to changes in goals. Previous goals are set and achieved, just so
we can redefine our goals and set out to achieve new ones. This is the nature of goal setting: there are no final goals.

Evolutionary social theorists have proposed many goals they thought must be carried out to have a going society in the capitalist mode of production. The goals can be categorized into two strands of thought. The first strand focuses on the goal of increasing material welfare in the community, and the second strand emphasizes the need to alter the existing structure of social relationships. We can say that the first strand has a more immediate concern with enhancing security, abundance, excellence, and freedom while the second strand wants to foster equality and democracy; however, both strands would argue achieving their proposed goals would lead to the augmentation of all six values.

The strand focusing on increasing material welfare traces its roots back to Veblen (1978 [1904]). Veblen said the community cannot survive without goods, and he thought their production should be given to the captains of industry, whose technological expertise would ensure the realization of this goal. In a similar vein, Ayres (1996) said human progress consists of “finding out how to do things, finding out how to do more things, and finding out how to do things better” (Ayres 1996, http://cas.umkc.edu/econ/Institutional/Readings/Ayres/tep/tepfore.html). De Gregori (1987; 1998) put himself squarely in this Veblenian-Ayresian tradition of technological progressivism. De Gregori equated economic development with resource creation, or using scientific know-how to turn the neutral ‘stuff’ in the physical world into useful resources for human consumption. Dugger (1996) merged these works to redefine the purpose of economics. He said the goal of economics is to study, analyze, and improve upon the process of social provisioning for the community. He dismissed Lionel
Robbins’s definition that economics is the allocation of scarce resources, arguing this belief is grounded on non-instrumental values.

The second strand which emphasizes the need to change existing patterns of social relationships also traces itself back to Veblen. Veblen (1978 [1904]; 1998) analyzed the antagonistic relationship between captains of industry, whose goal is material production, and captains of finance, whose goal is profit making. The captains of finance control access to machines and factories in the capitalist system, and they may deny the captains of industry access if a sufficient rate of profit cannot be realized. Veblen (1978 [1921]) advocated for a “technicians’ revolution” whereby engineers would replace the captains of finance in making production and distribution decisions. The directorate of engineers would have no interest in making profits, and its only goal is to provide material welfare to the community.

Polanyi (2001 [1944]) also thought the community is on precarious footing in the current state of capitalism. Polanyi showed capitalism displaced two traditional methods of social provisioning for the community, redistribution and reciprocity, with market exchanges. Redistriuction is the obligation to make payments to a central authority who, in turn, may give them to individuals in need. Reciprocity is obligatory gift giving between kinsmen and close social groups. Redistribution and reciprocity are regulated by customs and common laws; hence, their existence ensures some level of subsistence for everyone in the community. Market exchanges, on the other hand, are regulated by the price mechanism. Market exchanges put everything up for sale, including the three basic elements of social reproduction: land, labor, and money. The fate of everything in the marketplace is at the whim of buyers and sellers, who determine at what price something or someone is worth buying (low price) or selling (high profit). Polanyi examined historical attempts to commodify land, labor, and money and the
enormous social upheavals and, ultimately, backlashes. Polanyi called upon the community to replace market exchanges with more redistribution and reciprocity and, thus, putting social reproduction above profit making.

Commons (1961 [1932]), writing from the perspective of a legal scholar, thought the problem with capitalist social relationships is unequal legal power. Commons took ‘transaction’ as his unit of analysis, and he defined it as “the alienation and acquisition between individuals of the rights of future ownership of physical things as determined by the collective working rules of society” (Commons 1961, p. 58). Commons identified three types of transaction: bargaining, managerial, and rationing. A bargaining transaction involves the transfer of property rights between at least five participants; there are two sellers and two buyers, indicating there is an opportunity for market competition, and an arbiter who settle disputes. The sellers and buyers are legal, but not necessary economic, equals. Consequently, coercion may still occur between legal equals, but they have the right to appeal undesirable outcomes to the arbiter. The arbiter decides by examining whether there was the presence of fair competition, alternative opportunities, and equal bargaining power. A managerial transaction occurs when a legal superior dictates tasks to a legal inferior, and the purpose of this transaction is to produce material goods. Atkinson (1987) said a managerial transaction is different from a bargaining transaction in the sense that the former is concerned with efficient production of outputs while the latter seeks the necessary pecuniary incentive to produce (Atkinson 1987, p. 199). A rationing transaction is different still from bargaining and managerial because it involves legal superiors allocating burdens and benefits of a joint enterprise to legal inferiors who have no bargaining power over the matter. Commons argued rationing transactions dominate life under capitalism and thus exasperating unequal bargaining power among individuals. He thought it
was necessary to curb rationing transactions, replacing them with bargaining and managerial transactions to promote legal and economic equality in the community.

In the two strands of thought discussed above, we note that while evolutionary theorists saw serious problems with capitalism and want to make changes to the existing structure, most did not advocate for the replacement of capitalism with an alternative mode of production.¹ There is a simple reason behind this lack of interest in alternatives to capitalism. Evolutionary theorists prefer to focus on solving immediate problems of the community. They find asking community members to put aside the problems of their lives to focus on the greater goal of a worker’s revolution to be unrealistic. The community may cease to maintain itself as a going society before a revolution is realized. Evolutionary social theory is not a defender of capitalism. Rather, it takes an agnostic view about alternative modes of socioeconomic organization. Opportunities for real change exist in the realm of known possibilities, not in the unknowables.

### III. Strategies

Since evolutionary social theory takes the view that not all goals are feasible, we need a criterion to evaluate their practicality. This is where strategies enter in the social development process. Strategies are the means that must be implemented in order to achieve desired ends. Strategy formation is not the residual outcome of the two previous stages. Evolutionary theorists have long understood the close connection between goals and strategies, and they have developed a theory called institutional adjustment to explain this linkage. At its core, the theory of institutional adjustment is a test to evaluate the practicality of proposed strategies, and, hence, the feasibility of goals. If there are no practical strategies, we must change our goals. The theory of institutional adjustment consists of three principles, instrumental primacy/technological

¹ The sole exception may be Veblen. Dugger (2006) argued Veblen had sympathies toward socialism and anarchism.
determination, recognized interdependence, and minimal dislocation, and two corollaries, means-ends-consequences and deliberation.

**Principle of Instrumental Primacy (or Technological Determination)**

The first step of strategy evaluation involves answering the question “do we know how to do that?” That is, we must figure out whether we have the technological capability to realize the proposed mean. Bush (1987) said technology sets the boundaries of social development:

> The breadth and depth of the accumulated fund of knowledge [the technology] available to the community clearly sets the limits to the feasibility of institutional change. The greater the fund of knowledge, the greater the potential for institutional change.... [The] time rate of change is constrained by the paucity of the technological base from which the innovations must spring (Bush 1987, p. 1105).

We should not interpret the evolutionary position above as suggesting technological progress will solve all problems. On the contrary, technological progress is both the solution to existing problems and cause of future problem. Technological change brings forth new ways of thinking and doing things, causing our existing values to become invalid. We have to form new goals and entertain new strategies to adjust our community to the new technological conditions, and this too requires the use of technology.

**Principle of Recognized Interdependence**

The second question which must be asked in strategy evaluation is “does everyone understand how s/he will be affected if the proposed strategy is implemented?” This is the principle of recognized interdependence. Foster (1981d) said the success of an attempt at social change requires community participation. A top-down, authoritarian approach to social change will not work:

> …persons whose behavior is correlated through the new structure must understand their respective patterns of participation. Persons simply cannot perform in any correlated manner unless they know at least the immediate points
of correlation between their own behavior and that of others with whom they are brought into direct contact (Foster 1981d, p. 941).

Cognizance of the effects of the proposed change does not require community members’ consent. “However unwilling the persons involved accept the new pattern and however little discretion they may have in specifying the adjustment,” said Foster, “they must recognize their actual relationships as specified in the new pattern” (Foster 1981c, 933). The most willing supporters who do not understand their roles in the proposed strategy will muddle through the attempt at social change. On the other hand, the harshest critics with an awareness of their participation can realize the proposed change if they are required to do it.

*Principle of Minimal Dislocation*

The last question the community must ask upon evaluating a strategy is “can the proposed change be integrated back into the existing society?” Foster (1981d) said,

…adjustments must be capable of being integrated with all of the existing institutions which have not entered the comprehension of the members of the community as problematic actors. Typically, among alternative choices, the one chosen is the one that least dislocates the institutional structures which are not considered a part of the problem (Foster 1981d, p. 941).

We noted earlier that evolutionary social theorists (with the exception of Veblen) are not enamored with the proposal of social revolutions, and the principle of minimal dislocation is at the heart of their dissent. An attempt to carry out a worker’s revolution, whether it succeeds or fails, would dramatically alter the existing social fabric. The likely result would be us trying to recreate a going society, and we may not be able to accomplish this goal before our community ceases to exist altogether.

While the principles of institutional adjustment serve as an adequate test for determining the practicality of a proposed strategy, they do not address two questions:
1. How does the community come to a conclusion about which proposed strategies to implement?

2. What happens when we implement our chosen course of action?

Bowsles et al (1999) and Sturgeon (2006) put forward two corollaries, deliberation and means-ends-consequences, to answer these questions.

Corollary of Deliberation

The community decides which proposed strategies to implement by way of deliberation. Hodge (____) defined deliberation as “a particular form of reasoning and talking together in which we weigh carefully the costs and consequences of our various options for action, in the context of the views of others” (Hodge ____, p. 7). Deliberation is different from dialogue, which is a discussion to increase understanding among individuals, and debate, which is a verbal battle to win support for one’s position by proving one’s adversaries wrong (Hodge 2010, p. 8). Deliberation goes beyond discussion, but it is not interested in converting supporters for an established position. Deliberation works best in a forum setting, which consists of individual participants and a moderator. The moderator ensures all individuals are given the opportunity to voice their opinions but keeps any one person from overtaking the conversation.

There are three advantages for a community that engages in deliberation. First, deliberation creates a public voice, or a shared sense of concern that a problem exists and we must resolve it. Second, deliberation forms a pool of public knowledge, or a collection of what we know about the problem (why the problem exists in the first place) and the proposals to fix it. Third, deliberation leads to a public choice, or when the community decides to go forward with a chosen course of action. Everyone in the community does not have to consent to the public choice; nevertheless, everyone is cognizant of his/her relationship to the public choice.
Corollary of Means-Ends-Consequences

Bowles et al (1999) said when the community decides it wants to go from ‘here’ to ‘there,’ it initially does not know how to get ‘there.’ The community entertains possible means of achieving the desired end. It evaluates the intended consequences of choosing certain means over others. The community decides which intended consequences it can live with and chooses the means accordingly. Means, once implemented, move the community to its desired end; however, it is also entirely possible that the means take the community to ‘somewhere else’ entirely. More often than not, attempts at social change bring about unintended consequences. Unintended consequences can be both positive and negative in nature. The community then decides what additional changes it must make to continue reaping the benefits of positive unintended consequences and curb the harms of negative unintended consequences (unless it is willing to let the problem exacerbates for some time). Consequently, social change begets more social change. This is the gist of the means-ends-consequences hypothesis.

The evolutionary theory of social development is unique in its understanding that change is a process. This process requires us to ask what values we want to project onto our community to keep it a going society. We set goals so we would have outlets to advance our values. We form strategies to implement our goals. We carry out all these tasks with an awareness that we will have to revisit them another day because social development is an interminable process. While some may find the lack of concern for a final solution to social problems to be frustrating, the evolutionary theorists believe this is the best feature of their theory. The evolutionary framework is optimistic about our ability to make positive changes in our community right now, and this is a message that resonates with people in today’s challenging socioeconomic environment.
Bibliography


