Considering “Traditional Society” in the Middle East: Learning Lerner All Over Again

Karin Wilkins, Ph.D.
Professor
University of Texas at Austin
Department of Radio-TV-Film
1 University Station, A0800
Austin TX 78712
kwilkins@mail.utexas.edu

Abstract
More than fifty years ago Daniel Lerner published his classic text on *the Passing of Traditional Society* (1958). While this text has served as an illustration of a dominant paradigm in the field of development communication broadly, this specific work also delves into a particular approach to the modernization of the Middle Eastern region specifically. Despite prominent critiques in the academic community regarding the patriarchal, xenophobic, and simplistic character of this model of social change, the dominant themes articulated in Lerner’s model live on in current public discourse in the U.S. This study explores this discourse in USAID publications and U.S. news. Overall, U.S. discourse on development in the Middle East follows an Orientalist perspective, projecting the U.S. as the best model of development, seen as engaging in benevolent giving to poor, traditional societies hampered by problematic religious beliefs.

“What America is... the modernizing Middle East seeks to become.”
(Lerner, 1958, p. 79)

More than fifty years ago Daniel Lerner published his classic text on *the Passing of Traditional Society* (1958). Although many have worked within and from a modernization paradigm, Lerner’s work is singled out in this text as being emblematic of an Orientalist approach (Said, 1978) to development work in the Middle East. His juxtaposition of a modern entrepreneur in relation to a traditional chief underscores a linear path of inevitable transition, as individuals develop empathic potential once exposed to media. While this text has served as an illustration of a dominant paradigm in the field of development communication broadly, this specific work also delves into a particular approach to the modernization of the Middle Eastern region specifically. In particular, Lerner’s articulation of “tradition” in the Middle East, as an obstacle to economic prosperity and democratic political engagement, becomes juxtaposed with an idealized “modern man,” worth supporting by the development industry. Despite prominent critiques in the academic community regarding the patriarchal, xenophobic, and simplistic character of this model of social change, the dominant themes articulated in Lerner’s model live on in current public discourse in the U.S.

This study questions to what extent Lerner’s vision of modernity still presides in U.S. development discourse (Escobar 1995; Foucault, 1982). Following an explication of Lerner’s approach, along with Said’s critique of Orientalism as it applies to the development industry, this study surveys current practice of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) directed toward development of the Middle East, concentrating in Iraq, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, West Bank/ Gaza, and Yemen (these countries are those that receive more attention than others in the Arab Middle Eastern region from USAID). Through this analysis, I consider how USAID discourse represents continuity and change in relation to Lerner's half-century-old approach. In addition, I explore current US news discourse on USAID development work in the Middle East. These media and development sources combine to offer a more integrated portrait of U.S. public discourse on development in the Middle East.

Lerner's Modernization

Lerner's model of transition offered a set of idealized types, as well as a projected trajectory from "traditional" to "modern" society. This model also posited a particular approach to social change, as well as a context that circumscribed the parameters of social change processes.

Lerner's parable (1958) of the Turkish village grocer and chief exemplified his central articulation of tradition, in dichotomous union with modernity. While the chief relied on ancestral heritage as his legitimation for authority, the grocer gained value as a broker in trade, privileging cash over a trade economy that offered "modern" items, such as neckties and other forms of dress. The grocer longed to be somewhere else, probably urban, perhaps foreign, while the chief channeled his focus to the local community. The traditional leader relied on obedience to elders, while his more modern counterpart found faith in distant mediated voices, calling for national allegiance.

In Lerner's world, modern men rely more on media than on family for information, more on scientific explanations than religious interpretations (Colle, 1989), with more interest in national than local issues. In contrast, the traditional man, most clearly described through his presentation of the poor, local peasant with no shoes on his feet, can not imagine himself anywhere but where he currently stands, resigned to his fate as somehow divinely orchestrated.

The transition through which individuals might move from their traditional stance toward more modern perspectives was propelled through media use. Lerner believed that exposure to media, in his time radio, newspapers, and film, would inspire “empathy,” or an ability to project one’s self outside of current circumstances. News of the nation and of the world, along with narratives of people outside of the local community, encourage listeners, viewers, and readers to consider lives outside of their own experiences. Through their empathic projections, people may learn to identify with their national instead of their local community, become engaged in civic participation in this national sphere, and be encouraged to work within a industrialized, cash economy, as was evidenced in the four years between field work visits in the 1950s by Lerner and his staff.

The model of transition from “traditional” to “modern” society projected in development communication literature during the period of Lerner’s key publications in the field described the former as being more narrowly focused on local issues, with socialization occurring through more authoritarian channels that end up perpetuating roles and rituals rooted in historical divisions of labor. The context of this society privileges the national over the local, and even the global, as well as the importance of place over space, marketing territorial bounds as more integral to identity than spatial connections, which might have considerable weight in diasporic communities without a nation-state grounded in territory.

Although there are many paths and processes of social change, encompassing structural as well as normative transitions, Lerner’s preoccupation with individual behavior change as a central mode of transition resonates in development literature outlining social marketing approaches (Kotler et al., 2002). Lerner’s attention to the role of empathy in moving individuals from a projected traditional focus on local to a modern concentration on national events brings in the role of media, as provoking a sense of national identity that inspires action; social marketing also considers media as a force to provoke behavior change through learning new information and consequently adapting attitudes.

Inspiring individuals to become more democratic and entrepreneurial was a central feature in Lerner’s work, but resonated clearly with many other scholars of development during this time period. Schramm (1963), Pye (1963), and others enthusiastically called for development support to move nations from traditional to more modern societies, along a linear, hierarchical trajectory. This approach has been critiqued subsequently, strongly and soundly, for the ethnocentric assumptions grounding this vision of tradition versus modernity (Escobar, 1995; Rogers, 1976). While the idealized dichotomy between traditional and modern has been critiqued substantially for missing complexity as well as for being overly focused on the national at the expense of the global (Esteva, 1992), these characterizations, typified in Lerner’s parable of the modern grocer juxtaposed with the traditional chief, may still be relevant in current discourse.

An Orientalist Critique of Development

Said’s articulation of Orientalism (1978) offers a useful framework for this critique. Orientalism refers to a process through which nations and agencies with power have historically dominated a constructed “Middle Eastern” region through language that serves to subjugate the “other” while raising the “west” as superior (though this construction also works in terms of other geographical dimensions structured through differences in power; Park & Wilkins, 2005; Wilkins, 2003). Orientalism as a discourse works to justify American and European military as well as economic and cultural domination of Middle Eastern cultures as somehow necessary for the greater good. As a manifestation of a hegemonic process, Orientalism can be understood as an ideological perspective that transcends news and popular culture, and even media, instead acting as a central configuration in communications within dominating cultures.

A key characteristic of Lerner’s model is the supposition that the Middle East, as described in this central text (1958), needs to emulate the U.S. This assumption guides the overall model, in which what becomes projected as a modern individual ends up resonating considerably with what White, Middle

Class, Male Americans might have valued and practiced at the time of his work. These assumptions fit what Said (1978) introduced many years ago as an Orientalist framework, in which people in the west assume that an essentialized and conflated Arab, Muslim community rooted in the Middle East should exonerate and imitate. The work presented here questions the degree to which an Orientalist framework, illustrated through Lerner’s work, lives on in current discourse on US development strategies in the Middle East.

As a framework for critique, Orientalism suggests that the development discourse articulated through Lerner and others’ work serves to justify US intervention and domination in the region (Wilkins, 2004). Referring back to the quote at the beginning of this paper, Lerner’s vision of the Middle East is of a needy child, desiring only to be more like the US/(us). The implication of this vision is to denigrate Arab and Muslim communities, as not knowing enough to author their own development processes. This critique will be used as one way to consider the broader implications of a Lernerian approach to Middle Eastern development.

USAID’s Approach to the Middle East

The work of USAID represents a central set of strategies used by the United States in its approach to allocating resources toward development in the Middle East. What is meant by “development,” particularly in terms of attempting to promote modernization against the weight of “traditional” culture, is explored in this analysis. Although this research focuses on USAID, other national agencies also engage in development work, through military intervention and covert operations, as well as through economic privatization. Noting the limitation of relying exclusively on USAID projects, which are more publicly presented than others, sources here include public documents published in 2009 explaining USAID programs and policies in the Middle East.

The overview of USAID policy in the region specifies that the central value of the region is its "enormous potential for economic growth and development" (USAID, 2009). While the economy is foregrounded in the overview as a reason why to invest in development, social and political concerns are highlighted next in a section entitled "challenges." The goal of USAID programs in the Middle East is to support "a prosperous, stable, and democratic Middle East . . . that actively participates in the free exchange of ideas" (USAID, 2009). Central problems of development within the region are attributed to demographics (half of the population being under 24), as well as limited education, employment, and health, leading to "unrest." In addition to these obstacles, lack of democratic participation is suggested to be hindering development potential in Iraq, West Bank, and Gaza. In response to these obstacles, USAID describes its "response" as working to stimulate economic growth, particularly through trade and business development, and to raise education, health, and governance standards.

Within this broad rubric, the most critical development issue emphasized is that of economic development. Political development is described as both a goal, similar to that of economic development, but also as a challenge. Social development attracts many project dollars, but in emphasis becomes identified more as a source of a problem of "tradition" to be resolved than as a goal, necessary in order to bolster economic growth and democratic potential. Each of these broad themes, economic, political, and social, will be described next in terms of the projects implemented, and then considered in terms of their relation to Lerner's approach as well as an Orientalist critique.

According to USAID documents, "(e)conomic growth is a key U.S. foreign policy goal for the region" (USAID, 2009). Most of the projects focus on trade, technology, and agriculture, particularly in support of creating policies and laws to facilitate private business. In Morocco and Jordan, USAID works toward attracting support for free trade agreements with the U.S. and compliance with the WTO, while in Egypt the agency works toward "establishing legal and regulatory framework for efficient ICT" (USAID, 2009).

This emphasis on modernization of the economic sphere, particularly in terms of fostering the work of private business within the nation-state, resonates with the work of Lerner, who privileges the entrepreneurial spirit of the grocer as emblematic of modernity. What is missing from this vision of development, however, is the global context in which nations are encouraged to trade "freely" with the US, but may go into debt doing so. Within the global sphere, a hierarchical positioning of countries enhances the abilities of some to the detriment of others. This global context loses visibility within USAID's programming for economic, as well as political development.

USAID's approach to democratic governance positions nations clearly along a traditional to modern trajectory, aligned with Lerner's and other modernization theorists' vision of development:

> Countries in the Middle East and North Africa range from those in the early stages of nation building to formal democracies. Challenges include corruption, weak democratic institutions and poor governance. In some cases, extremism threatens regional stability. USAID programming in democracy and governance bolsters democratic institutions, mitigates the appeal of extremism, helps combat corruption and contributes to long-term development (USAID, 2009).

Many programs, such as those in Iraq, West Bank/ Gaza, focus on national elections, linking democratic participation with economic potential. The Orientalist concern is clear, in that what is promoted as political participation is meant to emulate western forms of democracy, rather than ground civic engagement in more indigenous or more comprehensive approaches (Huesca, 2002).

Programs addressing education, health, and population issues become marked as a form of social development needed to underscore political and economic development. Education programs attempt to increase equitable access to schools and resources. In Egypt, for example, USAID attempts to improve student access to computers. Keeping with this focus on technology, USAID programs in Morocco train teachers and students to use information technology in the framework of entrepreneurship. Throughout the region, scholarships are provided to students for study in U.S.-based universities, which “highlights the importance of U.S. trained scholars and their roles as development leaders upon returning home” (USAID, 2009). Projects in education, just as in democratic governance, assume, again in Lerner’s terms, that what the U.S. is, the Middle East seeks to become.

A central theme across projects is the projection of technology as central to modernity, using computers to facilitate quality education, business acumen, and even transparent governance. This theme also becomes part of population projects, such as one in Jordan encouraging the use of “modern methods” for family planning. Technological control, through medical training and application, marks the distinction referred to in separating “traditional” health care from “modern” approaches in infant mortality, maternal health, and other programs in this sector.

Social development programs also allude to programs specifically designed to address gender inequity, though these projects actually are more about targeting women exclusively than addressing power imbalances across gender. Projects targeting women in the Middle East, when not channeling resources to women through their roles as mothers in population projects, focus on encouraging women to run small private businesses, through expanding their access to credit. As with population projects, women’s value is in their assumed ability to contribute to society: “Small and medium size businesses can have a transformative impact on communities. When women own and operate these businesses, the benefits often spread throughout the society" (USAID, 2009).

Valuing women in terms of their potential as fertile reproducers and as small business managers, USAID's approach does not differ dramatically from most other large bilateral donors in the development industry (Wilkins, 1997). In Lerner's world, women had been largely absent from his articulation of tradition and modernity, so this visibility marks a difference worth noting. However, focus on individual mobility through these fairly limited roles does not go far enough along to give voice to women as would be advocated by scholars of global feminism.

Lerner Lives

In sum, it appears that Lerner still lives on through USAID development work in the Middle East. The focus on "tradition" as an obstacle, central in Lerner's work, maintains this import in its juxtaposition with "modern" technological solutions to health concerns, "modern" forms of democracy, and "modern" private business growth. Lerner's preoccupation with individual acts, moving people from being more traditional to modern, also grounds USAID work in these sectors as well, being more likely to engage social change through individual mobility than through structural change.

An Orientalist approach, highlighting a concern that the vision of development projected on to the Middle East attempts to re-create societies in the image of the U.S., still bears relevance. Economic development focuses on the growth of private business rather than public enterprise connected to the state; political development emphasizes formal participation in elections rather than collective mobilization and protest; and social development favors individual mobility rather than collective affirmative action or policy change. The missionary zeal with which these projects are carried out underscores an attitude that the U.S. represents the ideal development image, such that development projects work to attempt to bring poor, traditional societies into this benevolent radiance.

Not all of USAID work fits squarely into the early Lernerian model though. While Lerner focused on individual change within the context of the nation-state, current development programs are more likely to take a global context into account. USAID attention to security and conflict, justifying much of its work through attempting to vanquish potential terrorists, marks a critical difference from earlier development models that projected national growth as if in a vacuum separate from global politics.

Another central difference is USAID's emerging attention to environmental issues, particularly a focus on limited water resources in the Middle East. Early development models rarely touched upon environmental issues or sustainable development concerns, which began to gain attention about twenty years after Lerner's central publications. Understanding the connection between human activity and environmental context, particularly over the long-term, does represent a notable departure from early development models.

US News Discourse on USAID Development Practice in the Middle East

In addition to exploring how USAID represents its own work through publications, U.S. news on development work in the Middle East contributes toward broader public discourse on the topic. News as an industry represents its own particular set of parameters structuring perspectives distinct from that of the development industry. While a development agency uses its public record to explain and justify the importance of its work, mediated news can serve to perpetuate dominant ideological discourses, such as the one projected through Orientalism, or to offer critiques of development practice.

In order to consider news discourse in temporal proximity to recent USAID publications, this analysis builds from a Lexis-Nexus search of U.S. news published from January 1 through August 31, 2009, using the terms "USAID," "development," and the "Middle East." Using additional terms, pertaining to names of countries for example, would elicit a larger sample, but the focus here is on a constructed sense of what the "Middle East" might mean in mediated discourse on development. Seven articles were found using this procedure, published in the *Boston Globe, The Washington Post, Africa News, Christian Science Monitor* (2), *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Washington Times.*

One prominent theme in these articles extends the Orientalist bent toward the Middle East to encompass an anti-Islam mentality. USAID is seen as attempting to "fight… radical Islam" in three of the seven articles, published in the *Boston Globe, Washington Post,* and the *Los Angeles Times*. These expositions focus on the difficulty that U.S. foreign aid has in addressing Islam given the projected "separation of Church and State" (Lynch, 2009); however, these articles also intimate a hypocrisy in the U.S. claiming to work outside of religious institutions yet funding several "faith-based" non-profit groups in support of development projects. Seeing religion as an obstacle to development fits the lens of Lerner's vision for development. Moreover, focusing on the extreme elements of Islam accentuates an Orientalist framework that essentializes Islam rather than recognizes diversity within the faith.

Further amplifying an Orientalist concern with the "Middle East" as a dangerous "other" in relation to a projected more "modern" west, some news attention works to justify development work as attempting to quell potential terrorist activity. Corresponding with the USAID's own projection of its development work as an informed response to conflict and terrorism, the *Christian Science Monitor* details U.S. support for economic development in Afghanistan. *The Washington Times* projects USAID in a more critical light, not seeing development aid as a tool toward preventing dissension but instead as a support for what they term “an increasingly radical Palestinian society that despises Israel and embraces terrorism” (Mowbray, 2009, p. A21). Another *Christian Science Monitor* news item echoes this concern with the USAID funding the Palestinian “Fatah campaign, down to the choice of backdrop color for the podium where Mr. Abbas was to proclaim victory,” (Olsen & Olsen, 2009) to the detriment, it claims, of the broader Palestinian community.

While the justifications and implications for development work become debated within the press, the actual work of USAID does not make an appearance often. One exception is an article in *Africa News*, describing a USAID project funding a private agri-business program to make Mozambican agriculture more competitive in a global market. While Mozambique is the focus on the article, the Middle East is mentioned as being a potential market for this agricultural project. Much like the development industry’s own public relations literature, the notion of participation becomes focused on a global marketplace.

This news discourse resonates with a Lernerian framework by describing religion as indicative of traditional culture and by privileging participation in a capitalist system over other forms of civic and political engagement. An Orientalist framework is accentuated when the religious community, particularly Islam, is seen as at fault, while many Christian organizations attract funding for their faith-based projects. Moreover, connecting development work to the support or prevention of terrorist activity builds on an Orientalist narrative of the Middle East as dangerous and unsteady, in contrast to a projected calmer and safer U.S.

Implications

Although there are some clear and critical differences in the way the U.S. approaches development work in the Middle East, the underlying assumption that “tradition” serves as an obstacle lives on, in both the publications of the development industry and in public discourse debating the merits and reasons for development. Lerner proposed tradition as a dichotomous condition in connection with modernity, and offered a linear trajectory through which individuals must pass in order to achieve their potential. USAID projects resonate with this model still, describing their work as transformative and beneficial to individuals subscribing to their vision of development. As an industry, development sponsored by the U.S. in the Middle East can be seen then as contributing to a hegemonic process of domination, attempting to win over hearts and minds; and given a penchant for military intervention, closely connected with reconstruction and development, the cost of NOT giving over hearts and minds may well lie in the losing of bodies.

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