

The Cultural Schema of a Developmental Hierarchy

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Do people use and have knowledge of a cultural schema that depicts a *developmental hierarchy of societies* around the world? Evidence from Arland Thornton's research on "developmental idealism" suggests that they do. When asked to rank different countries by their level of development, people from various countries and backgrounds are asked to rank different countries around the world by their level of development, their rankings closely match that of the *United Nations' Human Development Index (HDI)*. Once individuals' responses are aggregated by country of origin, the correlation between people's developmental rankings and the *UN's HDI* can be calculated. The resulting correlation ranges from $r = .75$ to $r = .97$ (Thornton et al. 2012). This strong correlation suggests that people have knowledge of a particular mental model – or cultural schema¹ – of a developmental hierarchy of societies. This cultural schema has "gotten under the skin," shaping the minds of people around the world. Ethnographies from around the world—including Nepal (Pigg 1992), Lesotho (Ferguson 1990), Zambia (Ferguson 1999), and Malawi (Hannan forthcoming; Swidler and Watkins 2009)—confirm that people mentally understand and pragmatically make use of this cultural schema.

The cultural schema of a developmental hierarchy that Thornton and his colleagues document, however, is precisely that: a cultural schema. As such, it is what Berger and Luckmann (1966) call a "social construct," a human-made interpretation of the world that actors learn through socialization and take for granted as "reality." People's perceptions of "reality" may vary over space and time. How has the cultural schema of a development hierarchy of societies varied over time? What is the genealogy of this cultural schema?

Drawing on the work of cognitive science, I argue that one way to estimate whether people are aware of, make use of, and generally understand a specific cultural schema, such as the developmental hierarchy of societies, is to analyze the words they use. Actors' use of certain keywords represents if not knowledge of the cultural schema upon which the meaning of the words are based then at least the ignorant reproduction of the schema in question. Thus, I argue that the frequency at which actors use keywords that refer to societies' positions in the developmental hierarchy indicates how ingrained and how salient this cultural schema is within a given population. My claim is not deterministic or causal, but rather historically contingent and descriptive. In addition, my analysis requires a number of methods to verify that the words and specified cultural schema are linked.

The question at hand is whether – and if so then to what degree – the cultural schema of a developmental hierarchy of societies has shaped the minds of and been used by people throughout the course of history. Many scholars have written about the history of the ideas

¹ I draw my definition of *cultural schema* from Quinn (2005), who says that schemas are "a generic version of (some part of) the world built up from experience and stored in memory," and that "to the degree that people share experiences, they will end up sharing the same schemas" (p. 38). I call schemas that are available for use by actors *cultural schemas*.

of developmentalism, progress, and civilization, but they generally focus on the history of *scholars'* ideas. Nisbet (1969), for example, summarizes the role of developmentalism in Greek, Roman, Augustinean-Christian, European, and American scholars' writings. Others have written about the influence of these ideas on the processes of colonialism, imperialism, humanitarianism, industrialization, and globalization. Thornton and his colleagues focus on the contemporary diffusion of the developmental hierarchy cultural schema across different nations. Finally, scholars writing from the world culture perspective theorize that ideas about "development" and "modernity" are becoming increasingly institutionalized across the world.

Weaving these distinction bodies of scholarship together, I focus on the terms used by authors of books in the English language during the past three centuries regarding a developmental hierarchy of societies. Using the aforementioned literatures, I outline a series of historical events that shaped the developmental hierarchy cultural schema among people (broadly speaking) in Britain and the United States. In addition, I construct an index of terms that people have used to refer to societies' positions on a development hierarchy. I then analyze the frequency by year at which these terms can be found in books written in the English language from 1700-2008. For my quantitative analysis, I rely on the *Google Books N-gram database*, which is estimated to contain 6% of all books ever published around the world (Michel et al. 2011; Lin et al. 2012). Combining the narrative of historical events with the quantitative word frequency data, I make the following proposals:

- (1) the use of words and phrases referring to societies' position on the developmental hierarchy were prominent throughout the past three centuries;*
- (2) the frequency in usage of these words and phrases rose during the latter half of the eighteenth century, as Europeans expanded their colonial projects and theories of social evolutionism gained popularity;*
- (3) the language of social evolutionism began to decrease toward the end of the nineteenth century and then was obsolete by World War II;*
- (4) the language of modernization theory became popular in the second half of the twentieth century;*
- (5) the object of developmentalism, as reflected in the words and phrases analyzed, shifted from ethnicities, races, and societies to the nation-state during the twentieth century.*

*****Figures 1-4 at the end of this document support these propositions.*****

The history of the words associated with the developmental hierarchy cultural schema is important for at least three reasons. First, words are both representations of and tools for power (Bourdieu 1991). Understanding their history and usage over time unveils power structures in society. Second, analyzing vocabulary change over time helps to assess the connections between dominant cultural schemas, as well as their ideational genealogy. Third, grasping the history of the cultural schema of a developmental hierarchy is helpful for appreciating the extent to which social scientists themselves have been and are immersed in the historical *doxa*, or "knowledge culture" (Somers), of their time and social space (Waquant and Bourdieu 2001; Harding 1984). Historicizing the cultural schema of a developmental hierarchy in this way grants scholars a breath of fresh air, allowing them to

re-theorize old concepts. This is especially important in demography, where a European core of foundational authors concerned with (1) comparing their own societies to others around the world and (2) the changes their societies were experiencing as a result of “modernity” provide the primary concepts and methodologies for the discipline (Thornton 2005).

Figure 1. Frequency counts of all 81 terms individually graphed.

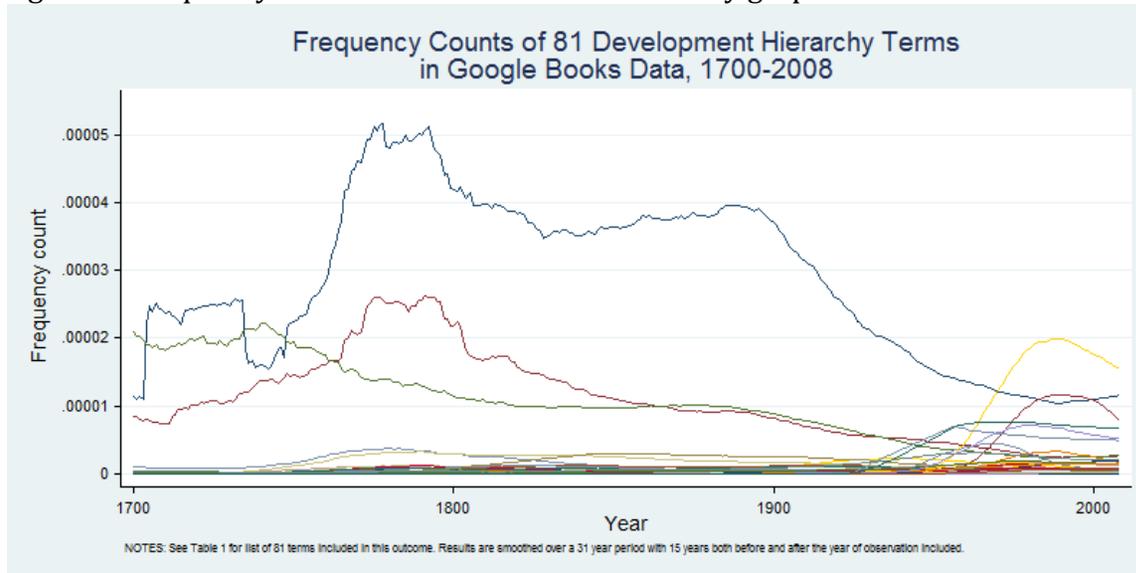


Figure 2. Frequency count of all terms combined together into a single index.

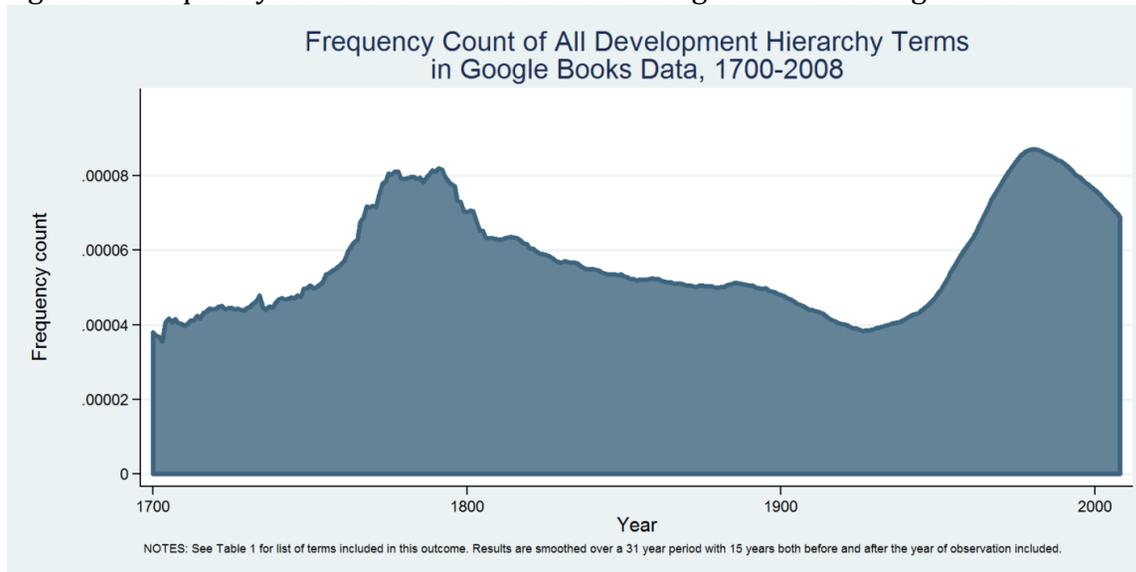


Figure 3. Frequency count of two indices: First Wave (social evolutionism) & Second Wave words (modernization theory).

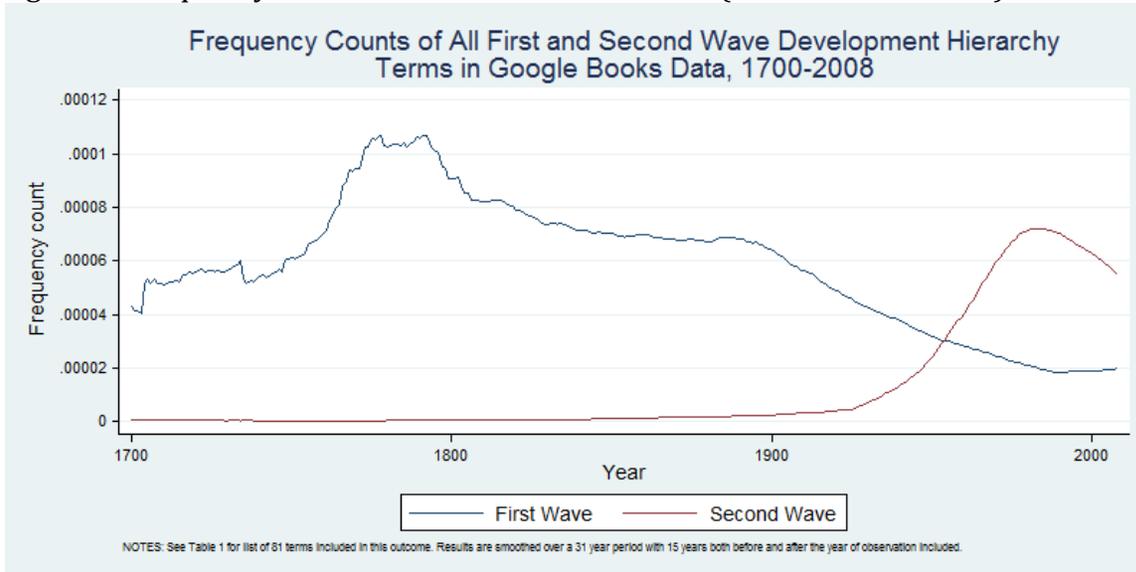


Figure 4. Frequency count of two indices: Terms that reference nation-state as object of development and terms that do not.

