Macalester International

Volume 13 *Prometheus's Bequest: Technology and Change*

Article 13

Summer 2003

Response to Choucri - 2

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Response

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Nazli Choucri presents an ambitious approach to understanding technology and development in the Middle East — so ambitious, in fact, that to do justice to the scope of her concerns, a book-length manuscript would be more appropriate than a conference paper. What we have, I believe, is a preliminary anticipation of a larger, more detailed and nuanced project, a quick overview in the form of a PowerPoint presentation. It is toward the larger project that my comments are addressed in the hope that they may contribute to a theoretically deep and historically rich effort. My critique is two-fold. First, I argue that fundamental terms such as technology, politics, and development require more robust theorizing to do justice to the stated problem, and that conventional, dictionary derived definitions are insufficiently sharp to cut deeply into the more profound relations between politics, technology, development, and sustainability that lay at the heart of Choucri's concerns. Second, I argue that the Middle East as a unit of analysis needs greater geographical, cultural, and historical articulation.

Choucri departs from a definition of technology derived from *Webster's New College Dictionary*, one that sees technology as "applied science" and as the "technical means of achieving a practical purpose." She rightly stresses that technology involves the pursuit of individual and social objectives yet she retreats from facing up to the teleological dimension that is central to all meaningful discussions of the phenomenon. We need some clearer ideas regarding what we take technology to be as well as where it ought to lead us. Choucri chooses to bracket this concern (see footnote 4 in her text), preferring a "transparent and behavioral approach." I beg to differ. Here we need more theory and history to do justice to the problem of technology and development in the Middle East, not less.

There are three dominant views regarding the normative dimension of technology, each with varying social consequences. The Enlightenment view sees science and technology as fundamentally good. In this triumphalist account, the progressive incorporation of science and technology into social practice automatically produces emancipatory consequences. Marx, as the last great Enlightenment intellectual, subscribed to this view, holding in his *Economic and Philosophical Manu-*

scripts that science has transformed life and lays the groundwork for the eventual emancipation of humanity, even though its immediate effect under capitalism may be to temporarily accentuate dehumanization. Reflecting this view, which Engels actually called "scientific socialism," Lenin saw "electrification" and even "Taylorism" as requisite means of "building socialism." A second view, which has become the conventional wisdom, sees science and technology as neutral instrumentalities that can be used for good or bad purposes. Good or bad purposes are subsequently applied from outside the domain of science and technology. Still a third view sees science and technology more directly implicated in politics and domination; they are neither necessarily good nor neutral. Though there are considerable differences between them, Thomas Kuhn, Everett Mendelsohn, and Herbert Marcuse assume what might be called a social constructivist stance, in which science and technology are seen as social activities that reflect, to some degree, the interests, values, and ideological conceptions of their participants. In other words, science and technology are historical-social projects, reflecting what a society and its dominant interests intend to do with things and people.

Had Choucri situated her concept of technology within this framework, adopting one of the three views, the relationship between technology and development in the Middle East might have had greater focus. As she is concerned with sustainable development and adapting technology to the particular needs of the Middle East, the social constructivist view of technology would have shed some light on why "sustainability" was never part of the European Enlightenment project, why the transfer of this technology to the Middle East might have generated additional problems, and why the development of an appropriate technology for the Middle East might necessitate significant theoretical revisions and not the tinkering at the margins of what is conventionally called technology transfer. In short, Choucri would do well to deconstruct the illusory "givenness," or what she calls the "transparency," of her atheoretical and ahistorical "behavioral" concept of technology. Perhaps the place to begin could be with the distinctive needs and exigencies of technology development in the Middle East as opposed to those of the West.

I turn my attention now to the way politics and development are theorized. Choucri appropriately underscores the impoverished state of conventional concepts of development, which are mechanistic and economistic, and fail to appreciate the fundamental problem of sus-

tainability (of nature, cultures, and societies). Given this concern, why did she choose to employ Harold Lasswell's celebrated "realist" definition of politics ("who gets what, when, and how"), rather than an Aristotelian or neo-Aristotelian definition, grounded in teleology and oriented toward "the good life?" We already saw the relation between technology and teleology, especially as sustainability is understood by Choucri as an important component of realizing Middle Eastern potentiality and constructing a "good" Middle Eastern life. Although useful in other contexts, Lasswell's realist concept of politics is of dubious value here, locked in, as it is, to "what is" rather than to the teleological-developmental question of "what might be." There is a world of difference between politics seen as "who gets what, when, and how" and politics as the realization of the good life. Lasswell's definition is normatively empty and will not do the work that Choucri needs to get done, given her manifest concern for a higher end than the free play of political interests. Such a neo-Aristotelian concept of development has already been proposed by the economist Amartya Sen and the normative philosopher Martha Nussbaum. Their "human capabilities" approach to development would be a more appropriate political starting point for Choucri as it links technology, sustainability, and human potentiality.

I turn now to the Middle East as the unit of analysis. Imprecision leaves one wondering whether this is a geographical, cultural, or religious category. At times, Israel, Turkey, and Iran are included in Choucri's account, yet it appears as if she is generally referring to the Arabo-Islamic world. She speaks of a deficit in cultural capital and a failure to invest in education, as well as political corruption and discrimination against women. Undoubtedly, her description is accurate, as amply demonstrated in the July 2002 United Nations Development Program report on *Human Development in the Arab Region*. Since Choucri is concerned with development, however, the "givenness" of the present must be historically and culturally deconstructed. After all, during the Middle Ages, this civilization built upon and advanced the Greek inheritance, with entire cities, such as Alexandria, created to promote science. This occurred at a time when the West sank into stagnation, ignorance, and poverty. How can one look at the Middle East developmentally and disregard the fact that for a considerable period of time this very same culture was the most scientifically literate on the face of the earth? Are there no residual aspects of this culture that could serve as the basis for future development, if not a renaissance?

My point is that the present can only be grasped as it relates to the past and future, and that a developmental view of the Middle East must take this illustrious past as a major point of reference, especially in an analysis that focuses on how a given culture historically relates to science and technology.

My criticism is that of a reader whose curiosity was piqued and who wants more, precisely because of the paramount importance of this fascinating project that, hopefully, will realize its full potential in a more richly articulated and analytically focused exploration.