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Preface

ISSUE 09

LITTLE DEVELOPMENT DEVICES & HUMANITARIAN GOODS

SMALL TECHNOLOGIES OF GOVERNMENT NOW permeate the field of international aid. From micro-insurance, sin taxes, and cash transfers to solar lanterns, water filtration systems, and sanitation devices, examples proliferate across the early 21st-century landscapes of humanitarianism and development. Some of these devices focus on fostering forms of social improvement. Others claim to alleviate suffering. Many seek to accomplish both, blurring the lines between public and private interests; between obligations, gifts and commodities; and between long-term improvement and short-term relief. *Limn* 9, “Little Development Devices/Humanitarian Goods,” examines the tremendous intellectual and moral energy, as well as the financial and organizational resources, being devoted to inventing and disseminating such micro-endavors today. It asks: What does the proliferation of such small devices tell us about the contemporary state of “development” and “humanitarianism” as governmental projects, particularly when viewed in contrast to the massive modernist projects of previous decades? What forms of life, and what kinds of subjects, do they work on and constitute? What relationships do they establish between expertise, government, and the purported beneficiaries of these devices? What politics do they make possible—or preclude? And what might a critical social science have to say about them?

One can, of course, find antecedents for today’s little governmental devices, for example, in the decentralized technologies of

liberal government and the prepackaged instruments of emergency medicine of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, such as utility metering and first aid manuals, or in the do-it-yourself counterculture technology movement of the 1960s and ’70s (Immerwahr 2015; Otter, 2007; Redfield, this issue; Turner 2006). As our title suggests, we perceive two trajectories into this phenomenon that distinguish its contemporary form and significance. The first derives from the legacy of the large, capital-intensive and spatially fixed infrastructural projects of post-World War II development, such as dams, power plants, and road networks. These were the instruments of societal transformation engineered by technocratic experts and government officials. Within this classic modernization paradigm, a collective actor (often the state) sought to achieve broad structural and infrastructural transformation that benefited the nation or “the public” as a whole. The devices we highlight arose against the backdrop of sustained and polymorphous critiques of this approach, along with successive waves of economic restructuring and fiscal crisis. In reacting to and against the perceived failures of the past, little development devices are designed to produce immediate, measurable and testable outcomes, and to rely on individuals or communities as both agents of development and arbiters of value.

The second frame for today’s microtechnologies is the parallel emergence of humanitarianism as a mode and set of techniques for crisis response, including the establishment of intergovernmental agencies and

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nongovernmental organizations devoted to the care of distant others, as well as the standardization of associated mobile technologies like refugee camps. The devices we examine respond to perceived incapacities and failures of this aid regime, even while seeking to further its general goals of alleviating urgent needs and saving lives. Here, a key development is the recent turn to market logics—the treatment of these items as commodities more than gifts—ostensibly enlisting profit motives to achieve humanitarian ends. They thus strive to be “goods” in two senses, reflecting both ethical and economic ambitions, and combining care with self-interest.

Many of the devices examined in the articles that follow straddle these worlds, disturbing the constitutive distinctions between humanitarianism and development, and provoking a series of challenging questions about the identity of each. What has the project of development become when its interventions are focused on individual outcomes—or the outcomes of small communities—rather than a vision of longer-term societal transformation? What is a humanitarianism whose lifesaving interventions have to be sustained by market forces rather than charity, and that is alert to the often-perverse long-term effects of charitable interventions?

Those designing and promoting little development devices and humanitarian goods primarily target populations understood to be “infrastructurally marginal”—lacking connection to networked forms of modern

provisioning, such as water, sewerage, communication, and electricity, or to services such as health care and finance. Sites in sub-Saharan Africa and South and Southeast Asia are notably prominent in the geography of these devices and provide the setting for a number of articles in this issue. Leaving aside the question of whether these devices can, in fact, operate successfully without more traditional infrastructures somewhere in the background (the articles in this issue suggest that in many cases, and in important ways, they cannot), we wanted to devote equal attention to the places where these devices are invented and built, and to the moral, political, and financial aspirations of those who design, fund, distribute, test, and evaluate them. The articles here thus cast light on new formations of international assistance that have taken shape in recent decades, linking traditional actors—such as development agencies and humanitarian organizations—with design schools and firms, global philanthropies, and startup companies. Here, the prominent geographies include Silicon Valley, Boston, New York, London, Geneva, Scandinavia, and Washington, D.C. We find curious mixtures of positivistic science, entrepreneurial culture, design, and moral virtue, along with rational choice economics and its behavioral variants. The (purported) rigors of experimentalism are combined with an aesthetics of parsimony and small scale: elegantly designed, functional objects replace the monument and spectacle of dams, power plants, or railroads.

At first glance, small scale may seem to

correspond to modest ambition. Little development devices and humanitarian goods are not instruments of revolution or “big push” modernization. Rather, they are tools to produce more attenuated improvement, hemmed in by limited means, and working under the shadow of past failures. But if these devices do not index revolutionary transformation, there is no lack of lofty ambition or salvational talk hovering around them. These devices are designed to save lives, restore communities, improve health, even save the world, all through a dream of scaling up micro-technologies to have macro effects.

At the same time, the design schools, philanthropies, and development agencies supporting these devices—not to mention university initiatives to foster “social entrepreneurship” and “maker spaces”—produce their own visions of the good. The articles that follow draw our attention to the ethics, technics, and worldview of the inhabitants of these milieus: an ethos of novelty, innovation, and care—the best and the brightest designing clever devices to circumvent the messy complications and entanglements of collective action. Here, the influence of earlier oppositional and alternative technology movements comes into focus: Joseph Schumacher’s challenge to gigantism in *Small Is Beautiful*; the Whole Earth Catalog, with its ambition to bypass the great institutions of government, business, education and religion, and its celebration of tools that would enable the “individual to conduct his own education, find his own inspiration, shape his own environment, and share his adventure with whoever is interested.” This more aptly describes the ethos of those who design little development devices than of all their intended users.

The articles that follow suggest that the project of creating little devices for developmental improvement or humanitarian care is fraught with tension. Born of a dream of being “off the grid,” many turn out to rely on material, administrative, and political infrastructures. Some, indeed, may be best conceived of as hacks that deal with gaps, elisions, or breakdowns of such infrastructures, on which they remain dependent.

Another tension concerns the relationship between conceptions of local and universal qualities of life. Many of these devices aim to avoid a top-down variant of development or humanitarianism, limiting expenditure and putting more agency in the hands of those affected by the interventions. For this reason, they embrace minimalist designs that emphasize self-sufficiency of device and user rather than attempting to engineer a complex system. Yet minimalism is also an aspiration to baseline universality—deployability without regard to context—that often breaks down in practice.

Of course, many designers and implementers of these devices are acutely aware of these tensions and have sought to adjust their practices and their thinking in response. The age of the little development device and the humanitarian good stretches back at least to the 1970s or 1980s, and the articles here document the multiple waves of innovation, experimentation, success, failure, reflection, criticism, and adjustment within the field itself. In some cases, at least, the lofty ambition that initially accompanied these devices has been tempered. But the articles do not suggest that the project of creating and deploying little development devices is running out of steam or that it is time to return to the big, structural interventions of post-World War II development. Indeed, in documenting the original impulses and problems that animated these devices, the articles also serve to forestall, or at least to qualify, one of the more obvious and, perhaps, easy lines of criticism. Namely, that little development devices abandon the project of “real” change and forsake reassuringly forceful action by the state in the public interest. In place of such unified critique, the authors here offer a map of conceptual fault lines and suggest patterns of pressure and friction running through both planning mechanisms and material forms. Taken together, they point to an ongoing and open-ended exploration of examples, effects, and implications. In this spirit, the issue includes a catalog, in the tradition of the Whole Earth Catalog, inviting others to participate in assembling a collective cabinet of little curiosities.

LITTLE DEVELOPMENT DEVICES/HUMANITARIAN GOODS

LITTLE: These devices are little in a number of senses. First, they are light, inexpensive, scalable, and portable; they may be deployed experimentally and flexibly for small units of population. Second, they are little in the sense that they operate at the level of the “micro” in economics—their target is not the “national economy” or macroeconomic aggregations but individual preferences, aspirations, and calculations. Third, they are “minimal”; they are, for better or worse, deployed with relatively limited assumptions about the form of life into which they are to be inserted. None of this is to say that they need remain small in scale. Some have, indeed, been deployed by national governments and have large aspirations (e.g. affecting national poverty or mortality rates).

DEVELOPMENT: Although these devices may not define development in terms of national populations, they do aspire to improving conditions of existence and the quality of lives. They thus require and entail the assembly of new kinds of expertise, new visions of a better future (whether for individuals, communities, or nations), new articulations of populations, and new instruments.

DEVICES: Because they are deployed with “minimal” assumptions about context, a very great deal is packed into these devices themselves. Many depend on material technologies such as GPS, mobile communications, and cheap solar panels. But they may also be calculative devices, drawing on forms of accounting, and various kinds of expertise in modeling and forecasting.

HUMANITARIAN: These technical devices embody norms, models of how people make decisions, assumptions about what people want, and what constitutes a good life. These are, in short, devices that are designed to do good. They reflect an explicit desire to alleviate suffering and save lives. They focus on moments of present crisis and a future in which states may no longer have the capacity to build, manage or sustain universal infrastructures in territorial grids.

GOODS: These are things that also seek to do well (financially) while doing good. Humanitarian goods that are premised on conditions of state fragility often hold out the promise that they can transform that fragility in productive or profitable ways. Designs for things like solar lanterns or nutritionally fortified foods, for example, seek to generate economic value for a diverse array of investors, via sales to institutional consumers like humanitarian or aid organizations as well as directly to the poor. Thus, they present themselves as caring commodities rather than disinterested gifts. As they move through design and use, and through spaces of poverty and humanitarian emergency, they remind us of just how difficult it has become to imagine ways of expressing care and concern without fostering markets.

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