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Going Beyond Heroic-Leaders in Development

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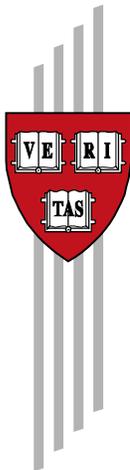
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Abstract

Leadership is an under-studied topic in the international development literature. When the topic is broached it is usually in support of what might be called a ‘hero orthodoxy’: One or other individual is identified as *the hero* of a specific achievement. The current article offers a three part argument why this orthodoxy is problematic and wrong for many developing countries, however. It suggests first that heroes have not emerged in many countries for a long period and individuals who may have been considered heroes in the past often turned out less than heroic. It posits second that heroes are actually at least as much the product of their contexts as they turned out to be the shapers of such. It proposes third that the stories about hero-leaders doing special things mask the way such special things emerge from the complex interactions of many actors—some important and some mundane. Leadership, it appears, is about multi-agent groups and not single-agent autocrats. The conclusion posits that romantic notions of heroic-leadership in development become less convincing when one appreciates these three arguments. It calls development theorists and practitioners to go beyond the heroic-leader perspective.

Estragon: Let's go.

Vladimir: We can't.

Estragon: Why not?

Vladimir: We're waiting for Godot.

Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*

Andrea: Unhappy is the land that breeds no hero.

Galileo: No, Andrea: Unhappy is the land that needs a hero.

Bertolt Brecht, *Life of Galileo*

Introduction

Leadership is an under-studied topic in the international development literature. When the topic is broached it is usually in support of what might be called a 'hero orthodoxy': One or other individual is identified as *the hero* of a specific achievement. A 2010 report by Michael Spence's Growth Commission heralds Lee Kuan Yew as the hero of Singapore's growth story, for instance, and presents Park Chung Hee as the hero of South Korea's miracle.¹ The implication of such work is that countries need heroes to develop—individuals who see the need for change, care about promoting the long-term good of their people, and have the power and charisma required to turn vision into reality. This story line emerges from similar narratives about civil rights reform in the United States and the way America conquered the moon. Those considered heroes in such cases include Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, and President John F. Kennedy. Their courage, vision and charisma is recounted and lauded in classrooms, lecture venues and motivational seminars around the world, entrenching the notion that special individuals are required to make special things happen.

The current article argues that this story-line is problematic and wrong for many developing countries, however. To start this argument, a first section locates the hero orthodoxy in the development field. It notes that most studies focus on *what* is needed in development,

¹ Brady and Spence, 2010.

which creates a long list of solutions and requires one to ask, ‘*who makes it all happen?*’ The section suggests that the common answer in development is simply, ‘a hero (or champion), of course’. The second section makes a three-pronged argument why the development community needs to go beyond this kind of answer and the fascination with heroic leaders.

- First, it suggests that heroes have not emerged in many countries for a long period and individuals who may have been considered heroes in the past often turned out less than heroic. A continued embrace of the hero orthodoxy will thus leave many developing countries waiting—for Godot or any other future (and frustratingly fictional) hero who will more than likely end up harming the country and not helping it.
- Second, heroes that one might point to (including Lee Kuan Yew and Park Chung Hee) are actually at least as much the product of their contexts as they turned out to be the shapers of such. The facilitative context thus becomes an interesting and important variable to think about when examining leadership, not the hero who conquers the context.
- Third, the stories about hero-leaders doing special things mask the way such special things emerge from the complex interactions of many actors—some important and some mundane. Leadership, it appears, is about multi-agent groups and not single-agent autocrats.

The conclusion posits that romantic notions of heroic leadership in development become less convincing when one appreciates these three arguments. It suggests that romantic versions of heroism in developed countries are also incomplete, using evidence from the stories of the American civil rights movement and space program to show that leadership went beyond Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King and John F. Kennedy. The final note is simply that development theorists and practitioners must also go beyond concepts of heroic-leaders and embrace ideas of multi-agent leadership in facilitative contexts. This approach would stop the search for heroes and champions and bring hope to countries where such fantastic individuals seem hard to find. It would necessitate a different approach to thinking about and cultivating leadership. This approach would involve working with groups in their context, and foster agreement with Bertholt Brecht’s Galileo that heroes are not the be-all-and-end-all of development. Countries that build

contexts that facilitate multi-agent leadership are likely to be more blessed than countries with a perpetual dependence on heroes.

The hero orthodoxy in development

Development has existed as a quasi-discipline since the 1950s. A host of countries across Africa, Asia and beyond became independent at this time, all faced with the challenge of establishing stand-alone governments and markets. A range of multilateral and bilateral agencies quickly assumed responsibility for assisting in addressing this challenge. The World Bank created its International Development Association to help the world's poorer nations in 1960, for example. A year later, the United Kingdom started its Department of Technical Cooperation with similar intent. President Kennedy established the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in 1961 as well. The United Nations Development Programme emerged four years later, in 1965, when the Expanded Programme of Technical Assistance was merged with the United Nations Special Fund.

Various authors identify phases or periods of development intervention since the 1960s. Each phase offers a different perspective on *what* countries needed to do to develop: The 1960s saw a major emphasis on building infrastructure considered necessary for industrialization. The 1970s involved a shift towards activities focused on tackling poverty, facilitating agriculture, and providing basic social services. The 1980s are commonly seen as the structural adjustment years, where developing countries were assisted in reigning governments in and adopting free-market policies. The 1990s started with a continuation of the adjustment years, and shifted into an emphasis on 'governance' as the answer to development's questions. Institutional reforms, mostly in the public sector, were now the order of the day, targeting corruption, waste and inefficiency. The 2000s have seen a variety of new ideas about what countries need to do to facilitate development. Participatory planning and global goal setting were introduced to address poverty, spawning the prominent Millennium Development Goals. As developing countries wrote plans, wealthy nations committed to ramp up their international aid contributions and forgive poor countries' debt. Strategies to generate shared growth emerged as popular, trade gained attention as an alternative to aid, and efforts to stabilize places like Afghanistan raised the challenge of dealing with conflict and helping 'the bottom billion'.

This list of ideas about *what* should be done in development is only a partial caricature. It forces ideas into phases, when in fact most countries have pursued many of the mentioned activities together, in different combinations. It also excludes items that are either additional or fit into one or other larger category. These include solutions like capacity building, decentralization, democratic governance, micro-credit, liberalization and privatization, deregulation, and modernization.

Beyond these considerations, one should note two important characteristics of all the ideas. First, they were all embraced as the ‘right’ solutions at one time or another, dominating academic and practical perspectives on what should be done to drive development and focusing the activities of international development organizations. Second, they all imply the importance of demanding and complex change in developing countries. Consider what it would have taken to adopt free markets in socialist Benin in the late 1980s, for instance: laws allowing private ownership; norms and cultural-cognitive understandings of what private ownership means; a market-based banking system; banks; arms-length regulatory agencies; price mechanisms that move with supply and demand; and the list goes on. Think similarly about the demands of establishing a high quality bureaucracy in post 2002 Afghanistan: Beyond things like new buildings needed to house public managers, computers, computer training, electricity for computers, and guarantees of safety in the workplace, one would need new processes of hiring, promoting, training, rewarding, and penalizing employees, as well as a pool of employees likely to be responsive to the new processes; and a citizenry and body politic likely to engage with these employees in a manner that fosters merit and results based accountability.

This kind of detail is left out of the recommendations of what development demands in most studies on the topic.² An example is 2008’s report by the Commission on Growth and Development, headed by Nobel Laureate Michael Spence. This identified three factors contributing “the right mix of economics, institutions, and politics supporting growth and development”:³ 1. An open-economy strategy, with competition and high public and private investment and savings; 2. Rule of law, predictability, competent bureaucracy, and incentive

² This is even the case when one looks at particular areas of concern in development, like public financial management and local government development, which are both much more complex in practice than they are often portrayed as being in the literature or even in project documents from organizations like the World Bank (Andrews, 2003, 2005).

³ Brady and Spence, 2010, p.3.

structures focusing politicians on public value; 3. Political interactions and structures that foster stability and facilitate, over time, the emergence and participation of important interest groups (like the middle class). It is not difficult to appreciate that each of the three factors imposes complex and demanding content requirements on countries trying to establish this ‘right mix’. Essentially, *what development demands* is not captured in the list of three factors, but rather in an expanded inventory that could go on for many volumes.

Who does this all? The hero, of course!

Whether one assumes that the list of *what development demands* makes sense and is in fact ‘right’ or not,⁴ a question remains: Who gets it all done? In a broad sense this question is about all of the agents required to facilitate far-reaching social change. More narrowly, it asks who the leaders are and what they do to facilitate the adoption and implementation of these changes. Such question is hardly ever asked explicitly in the development community. In demonstrating this, a recent review found that the subject of leadership was addressed in only seven of 1,059 articles published between 2002 and 2007 in the prominent journals *World Development* and *Journal of Development Studies*.⁵ Analyses of World Bank project documents show a similar bias.⁶ These documents focus predominantly on what interventions will do, and typically provide only limited information about who will do the work or how they will do it.

This is not to say that development agencies like the World Bank ignore the issue altogether. These organizations name agents in government who are legal counterparts in loans and projects, and they sometimes list agents formally responsible for one or other component as well. They also often identify key government officials as the ‘champions’ of reform. This is typically the President, Minister of Finance or other high level official ostensibly mentioned to foster a confidence among overseers on the World Bank board or in senior management that leadership issues have been considered in project design. Documents seldom explain why these agents are expected to successfully lead change, however, or what they are meant to do. The assumption is simply that reform happens when agents in high positions of authority sign loan documents that commit their governments to adopt ideas deemed ‘right’ by external

⁴ Which a plethora of recent studies claims it is not. See Pritchett, Woolcock and Andrews, 2012.

⁵ Lynne De Ver, 2008, p.24.

⁶ Andrews, 2013.

organizations. These agents are assumed to understand, accept, and buy-into such ideas, and to enjoy the authority, influence and ability to get them implemented; often by edict or through their personal charisma. They are also presumed to be motivated by the goal of producing public rather than private value, and to have a long-run perspective instead of a short-term political focus.

The accomplished management scholar Henry Mintzberg describes this kind of approach as a dependence on “heroic leadership.”⁷ In reflecting on a visit to Ghana, he opines that international organizations encourage this approach, fostering faith in “important people, [who are] quite apart from the others who develop product and deliver services.”⁸ Mintzberg notes the tie between importance and position, citing that, “The more higher “up” [these people] go, the more important they become.” This belief has a long legacy in the leadership literature, galvanized in Max Weber’s work on authorized leaders, and Thomas Carlyle’s idea of ‘The Leader as Hero’.⁹ It is central to the thinking behind a small sub-set of recent academic and policy studies emerging from the development economics literature. Such work underscores the view that top-down leaders driven by the long term interests of citizens hold the key to development.

The 2008 Growth Commission headed by Michael Spence is a good reference point in this respect. It produced a 2010 report, titled *Leadership and Growth*, which breaks ground by bringing the discussion of leadership into the mainstream of development economics. The introductory chapter of this report argues that high level individual leaders have had a major influence in facilitating prominent high-growth episodes of the twentieth century. With David Brady, Spence himself speaks routinely about the role individual national ‘leaders’ played in these experiences, noting that they were particularly responsible for “making the right choices” in early stages of development, and then adjusting strategies and choices in response to changing circumstances.¹⁰

⁷ Mintzberg, 2010, 3.

⁸ Mintzberg, 2010, 3.

⁹ Carlyle, 1902.

¹⁰ Brady and Spence, 2010, 4-5.

Brady and Spence reference the work of Benjamin Jones and Benjamin Olken prominently,¹¹ citing it as a rare and ‘careful’ study of leadership. The latter authors’ research examines whether countries’ growth records decreased after the accidental death of a high profile ‘leader’, finding this to be the case with a select set of autocrats. They argue, as a result, that leaders matter, ‘at the top’. The authors also argue that high-level individuals have facilitated prolonged periods of high growth at the positive extreme. Without detailing how these activities occurred or who really did them, the authors ascribe growth-enhancing or growth-reducing policy decisions, coalition building activities, and even implementation successes to people like Deng Xiaoping in China and Lee Kuan Yew in Singapore. This yields the recommendation that “strong leadership” fosters growth,¹² which Bill Easterly characterizes as an implicit endorsement of the ‘benevolent autocrat’ concept in development.¹³

Such concept has a growing support base in the literature on international development, with authors linking positive stories of growth and development (mostly in the east) to periods of apparently strong, unchallenged, top-down leadership. Brady and Spence seem uncomfortable endorsing such perspective explicitly, especially given that there are often negative sides to even the positive growth stories of places like South Korea under Park Chung Hee. The perspective is central to their message about who makes development happen, however: A strong, apparently civic minded individual, operating from the top-down, adopting and forcing implementation of the ‘right’ ideas. It is similar to the message World Bank evaluations posit about leadership needed to make projects work. Most simply, one could call this the *hero orthodoxy*, especially given the way it reminds one of Carlyle’s advice in writing about leaders as heroes: “Find in any country the Ablest Man that exists there; raise him to the supreme place, and loyally reverence him; you have a perfect government for that country.”¹⁴

Problems with the hero orthodoxy

¹¹ Jones and Olken, 2005, 2009.

¹² Brady and Spence, 2010, 4-5.

¹³ Easterly, 2010.

¹⁴ Carlyle, 1902, 226.

A variety of authors have mounted critiques of the Brady and Spence work and the studies that support it.¹⁵ Such critiques suggest that the hero orthodoxy should not be relied upon as a theory of who leads development. This section offers three arguments emerging from such critique: (i) the hero often turns out less than heroic; (ii) the hero is a product of context; and (iii) leadership happens in groups, even if heroes are part of such, and not through individuals acting alone.

The hero mostly turns out less heroic than hoped

Critics point out, most importantly, that the record of high level heroic leaders is mixed. These critics do not call such leaders heroes, however, but prefer the term ‘autocrat’ and find that some countries with top-down autocratic leaders have enjoyed high growth but many more have hobbled along with average records. A large number have simply fallen apart, seeing low growth, human rights abuse, conflict, and social upheaval. Harvard University’s Joe Nye names various countries that currently suffer at the hands of such leaders; Zimbabwe, Burma and Belarus.¹⁶ The prominent development economist Bill Easterly provides more systematic evidence that heroes often fail, noting that only 10 percent of the 89 countries one could commonly call autocratic experienced high growth since 1960.¹⁷

One might, of course, argue that positive experiences happened under the leadership of the benevolent autocrats—true heroes—and not the malevolent autocrats—false heroes, perhaps. This is a challenging perspective, given that a fair selection of poorer performing countries had leaders who were once considered benevolent, at least by the international community; often because they appeared to support the ‘right’ policies suggested by western development experts. Recent examples include Egypt’s Mubarak and Tunisia’s Ben Ali.¹⁸ The World Bank acknowledged Mubarak for making Egypt one of the world’s top reformers in 2007 and a Doing Business reform leader in 2010. Cairo’s journalists called Mubarak an “IMF poster child” given such plaudits. Ben Ali’s neoliberal restructuring also won praise from the World Bank and Western governments. His leadership resulted in a 2008 congratulatory visit by the IMF’s head, Dominique Strauss-Kahn, and a World Bank award for making Tunisia a top regional reformer.

¹⁵ Easterly, 2011.

¹⁶ Nye, 2008, 12.

¹⁷ Easterly, 2011, 25-26.

¹⁸ This paragraph is based on Andy Wynne’s blog titled, Africans Revolt Against New Public Management as well as for Democracy. http://publicfinanceafrica.blogspot.com/2011_03_01_archive.html

Ben Ali—and his country, Tunisia—were heralded as examples of market reform only days before a vendor burned himself to death in a local market, due apparently to frustration about the lack of basic economic freedoms and difficulty in doing business, sparking the 2011 Arab Spring.

This kind of evidence challenges the simplicity of saying that benevolent autocrats facilitate development. At the very least, research should ask what differentiates the autocratic experience in high growth contexts from those in moderate to low growth contexts. Is it really as simple as saying that some autocrats are benevolent and others are not? What does this mean anyway, and who determines whether an autocrat is benevolent or not? Is the tag of ‘benevolent autocrat’ something that one can only assess ex post, or is it cheaply earned by sending the right messages to international organizations?

The hero tends to be a product—not shaper—of context

These questions immediately remind one that leadership happens in a context, local and global, and the roles played by autocrats like Mubarak, Ben Ali, Lee Kuan Yew and Deng Xiaoping are only part of the social, political, and economic theater in which development plays out. Could contextual factors in these theaters have some influence on the kind of behavior one sees from different autocrats? Does the context shape the opportunities for heroism? Should we speak about leadership-conducive settings rather than leaders?

Easterly implies such questions in his commentary on Jones and Olken’s perspective that Mozambican growth patterns improved after (and apparently because of) Samora Machel’s untimely death in 1986. Easterly notes that many factors changed around the time of Machel’s death that had a lot to do with Mozambique’s changing fortunes and little (or nothing) to do with the leader himself (or his successor). He cites, for instance, a range of contextual factors including the end of white majority regimes in neighboring Rhodesia (newly Zimbabwe) and South Africa, decreased support of such to the RENAMO rebels in Mozambique, the end of Soviet aid, and the growing Mozambican engagement with World Bank, IMF and other western donors. He posits that internal players beyond the presidency were in a state of flux a well, with the role of Portuguese settlers changing and emerging political and business interests shifting the balance of power, creating new and different opportunities for the country—and its national

leaders. In referencing such factors, Easterly notes, “The autocrat is one player in a game of many players reacting to each others’ moves” and “there are many claimants to Mozambique’s growth success.”¹⁹

This kind of detail is missing in much of the work about benevolent autocrats or even of heroic democratic leaders. Authors of the recent economic growth studies (like the Jones and Olken study) seem content with statistical regressions where an outcome variable like growth is related to a dummy reflecting the transition of formal power from one high-level individual to another. The formally authorized hero represented in the dummy either makes the difference or does not. Such simplicity is also reflected in the explanations many observers (academic and otherwise) typically give for specific development successes and failures. Consider Malawi, for example, where 1994 democratic reforms led to the ouster of ‘President for Life’ Hastings Banda and created the expectation of vibrant, clean government. Unfortunately, corruption seems to have worsened since this time, at least according to data provided by groups like Transparency International.²⁰ Commentators initially criticized Banda’s successor Bakili Muluzi for this decline, claiming that he exhibited tendencies of his predecessor—trying to stay in power and use resources for his own ends. The president after Muluzi, Bingu wa Mutharika, was then singled out as the reason corruption continued. Commentators note that, after a promising first term, wa Mutharika’s will for change waned—leading to stalled reforms. Observers criticized the president for using public money to fund a lavish wedding to a much-younger woman and buy an expensive presidential jet, bullying critics, and resorting to “tribal politics to shore up his support.”²¹ This thinking leads to the lament, “If only Malawians were luckier with their leaders, the country could capitalize on its many natural assets.” It is almost like one is listening to the line cited at the start of this article, by Andrea in Bertholt Brecht’s play, *The Life of Galileo*: “Unhappy is the land that breeds no hero.”

This kind of commentary ignores the fact that Malawi’s three presidents seem to have behaved similarly over time, regardless of heroic promises to do differently. What details could help explain why presidents, CEOs and other authorized leaders expected to lead change

¹⁹ Easterly, 2011, 25-26.

²⁰ Transparency International scores for anti-corruption fell from a high of 4.1 (out of 10) in 1998 to 3.2 in 2001, 2.9 in 2002, 2.8 in 2003, and 2.7 in 2006. Lower scores are worse than higher scores.

²¹ Taken from a 2011 article in the *Malawi Democrat* by Greg Mills of South Africa’s Brenthurst Foundation, <http://www.malawidemocrat.com/politics/long-fingers-in-the-warm-heart-of-africa/>.

frequently do not, and often repeat the mistakes of their predecessors? Is there something about the context, followers, and even other leaders, that could help foster a better understanding of such experience? Would such detail add to or alter the stories about benevolent autocrats who have fostered growth as well?

The hero is always a part of a group, which seems to be vital

This is certainly the opinion one draws from reading Lee Kuan Yew's personal account of Singapore's move from third world to first.²² Singapore's founding leader reflects in detail on contextual constraints and opportunities the country faced in decades following its expulsion from Malaysia. He also goes to great lengths acknowledging those who were around him; advising, negotiating, facilitating relationships, and implementing thousands of small and unforeseen steps required to build the new nation. Lee uses the metaphor of an orchestra when discussing leadership, noting that there are multiple functions played by multiple agents in producing orchestral sounds.²³

He calls himself a conductor in the orchestra but names many others who, metaphorically, led the tuba, oboe, and clarinet players. These are not just 'bit players' in his estimation. They are leaders of their sections in the orchestras, armed with knowledge, skill and connections to do something that the conductor cannot do. In the Singapore experience these players included local people in the President's core team and working a few arms-lengths away from this team, as well as external advisors, supporters, and influencers. According to Lee, the deep social, economic and institutional change that helped Singapore move from third world to first was a product of broad-based, multiagent leadership—not his benevolent autocracy alone.

The idea of multiagent leadership is at the heart of much complexity theory, which argues that, "[L]eadership occurs when interacting agents generate adaptive outcomes."²⁴ As such, theorists in this domain posit that, "Individuals act as leaders in this dynamic when they mobilize people to seize new opportunities and tackle tough problems. As the situation changes, different people may act as leaders by leveraging their differing skills and experiences."²⁵ The idea that

²² Lee, 2000.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Lichtenstein, et al. 2006, 4.

²⁵ Lichtenstein, et al. 2006, 4.

these agents are distributed emanates from new theory about institutional change. This suggests that change agents come necessarily from different points in social networks, from where they provide different functional contributions, skills and experience.²⁶ Agents in positions of formal power can authorize a new change process, for instance, but agents located in more peripheral social positions are required to provide the creative ideas that inform change experiments and the knowledge about what implementation challenges lie ahead.

Observers of Singapore's story typically tell of multiple, distributed agents who led the country's transformation. While Lee Kuan Yew played a key role, for instance, a number of other agents made contributions that were crucial to fostering the country's adaptive qualities.²⁷ These include Goh Keng Swee (considered the mastermind behind Singapore's economic policies), Lim Siong Guan (who drove civil service reform), Philip Yeo (who had the idea and drive to create Singapore's Chemical Island), and a string of other individuals and organizations that played vital leadership roles needed to make Singapore a success. Non-Singaporeans are also on this list of agents providing important contributions to the leadership solutions. Albert Winsemius, for instance, was a Dutch economist who worked for the UNDP and became a long-time advisor to the government—working closely with the President and with the President's various policy teams and providing many ideas for the government to experiment with.

The observation that leadership comes through many agents does not imply that people like Lee Kuan Yew are unimportant, or that David Brady and Michael Spence are incorrect in saying that visionary, (apparently) civic minded national leaders can make a difference. Conductors matter a great deal in orchestras, but so do the first and second violinists, and so does the structure and size of the orchestra and the level of trust between the conductor and the section leaders, and much more. The quality of an orchestra's performance also depends on the material they are playing, the instruments they are playing with, and the acoustical arrangements of the performance venue itself. This complexity pours water on the idea that one can explain—or predict—an orchestral performance simply by identifying who the conductor is. Similarly, it is spurious to think one can summarize the experience of leadership in development through a measure of the presence or death of one or other leader. Even where one observes that a

²⁶ Andrews, 2008a, 2008b, 2013; Andrews, McConnell and Wescott, 2008; Andrews, Pritchett and Woolcock, 2012.

²⁷ Neo and Chen, 2007.

champion seemed to make a difference, there is guaranteed to be a group of agents behind that champion, and the questions we should ask are: How do these groups emerge? What do all the different role players do? What does the champion do? Is the champion's role dependent on having other role players?

Conclusion

The essence of this article's argument is simply that there is a lot more to leadership in development than a focal hero: Heroes often end up being less than heroic; contextual factors shape opportunities for leadership and development; and multiagent groups typically lead, not solitary heroes. The multiplicity of role players should be obvious when one considers the many ideas about *what development demands*. There is no way that one man (yes, heroes and benevolent autocrats are usually male) can think up, motivate, implement and institutionalize the many steps required to set up anything like the 2008 Growth Commission's "right mix of economics, institutions, and politics supporting growth and development."²⁸ Leadership of such change, to the broad economic, governmental and political rules of a society, must span different locations, fields and time periods in the life of an emerging country. This leadership must be facilitated by the context and will only emerge when involving multiple actors who are mobilized to engage in a strategic, synergistic manner. The hero orthodoxy fails to account for this complexity, when it is perhaps the fundamental challenge of leading development.

Such challenge manifests at a more granular level as well, through specific reforms and project experiences in developing countries. The hero orthodoxy suggests simply that individual champions are responsible for making these interventions successful. Project evaluations by organizations like the World Bank show this view is limited, however, and reforms frequently require much more leadership than any individual agent can provide. Many reforms are shown to have failed even though individual champions were identified, for instance, while many successes speak of leadership solutions that go beyond the individual champion. Nepal's budget reforms were halted in 2005, for example, because so-called champions were dismissed by more powerful agents.²⁹ The champions had ideas, and even motivation, but lacked ultimate authority to effect real change. This authority resided with other agents who did not support the change but

²⁸ Brady and Spence, 2010, 3.

²⁹ See discussion at <http://www.worldbank.org/projects/P125770/strengthening-pfm-systems-nepal?lang=en>

were part of the leadership complex in government. In contrast, a story the World Bank uses to train task team leaders about project successes references leadership by a group of technocrats in Mexico. Supported by law, this group engaged with ‘major industrial players’ to get regulatory reform done.³⁰ Reform in this example, and others like it, emerged through the interplay of various agents inside and outside government, and contextual facilitators like the law; not individual champions working alone to defy contextual constraints.

The idea that leadership solutions are more about contextual opportunities and multi-agent groups challenges the romantic notion of heroic leadership that dominates development. It is important to note that the romantic notions of heroic leadership are also open to challenge in stories from developed countries. Consider, for instance, how added details alter common narratives about the United States civil rights movement and America’s historic moon mission (both of which were referenced in the introduction):

- Rosa Parks is heralded for playing a heroic key role triggering civil rights reform by sitting in a whites-only section of a bus in 1955 Montgomery, Alabama. The common story tells of a spontaneous and courageous act that sparked the change movement subsequently led by Martin Luther King. Such narrative excludes important details, however.³¹ It does not credit the 1954 Supreme Court decision that emboldened civil rights activists. It also fails to mention that the idea of challenging Montgomery’s discriminatory seating practices had been developed by a lawyer called Edgar Nixon and Jo Ann Robinson, head of the local Women’s Political Council. Nixon sought an appropriate candidate to symbolize the issue, rejecting three women who pre-dated Parks in refusing to leave a whites-only seat.³² He ultimately supported Parks when she was arrested, was the one who bailed her out, arranged for her representation by the prominent white lawyer Clifford Durr (whose wife employed Rosa Parks and who was a personal friend of Lyndon Johnson), and personally mobilized local ministers to organize a boycott of her arrest. According to historical references, his third call was to

³⁰ <https://www.wbginvestmentclimate.org/toolkits/business-licensing-toolkit/identifying-reform-champions.cfm>

³¹ Robinson, 1987; Willie,2008; Schwartz, 2009; Alderman, Kingsbury and Dwyer, forthcoming.

³² Nixon decided not to build a case around 15-year old Claudette Colvin, for instance, because she became an unwed mother a year after the arrest. Mary Louise Smith was similarly rejected because her father was rumored to be an alcoholic. Rosa Parks was selected for the role, being an upstanding member of the community, someone more fitting of the ‘hero’ title. She was the elected secretary of the Montgomery National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) before Nixon approached her.

a young minister called Martin Luther King who had just arrived in town and was yet to begin his activism. King's work was supported and accommodated by a host of actors and the link between lawyers like Nixon, Durr and then-president Lyndon Johnson were critical in fostering changes within government that led to the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

- On May 25, 2001, the CNN web site ran a story recalling with deference the leadership President John F. Kennedy displayed 40 years earlier, announcing that Americans would reach the moon within a decade.³³ It did not mention the many others who contributed to the story and arguably exercised key leadership in the process, or the contextual factors that influenced Kennedy's decision. Prior President Eisenhower was left out, even though he had the vision to create a space program three years earlier, without which no moon mission would have been possible. There was no consideration of the memo Vice President Johnson wrote to President Kennedy three weeks before the announcement, noting that the moon was in reach and that a moon mission was key to establishing political leadership.³⁴ There was no discussion of the role NASA Administrator Jim Webb played or how President Kennedy had rejected Webb's prior requests for additional resources to pursue space travel. The expertise of scientists like Wernher von Braun was also ignored, even though it was crucial in convincing decision-makers to adopt the mission. There was no mention of the way a Soviet space flight piloted by Yuri Gagarin pressured Kennedy to consider the moon expedition.

The additional information takes one backstage in two of the United States' great twentieth century stories, at least in the public and political sectors. This information shows that there are severe limits to common versions of heroism in these stories. Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King were not solely (or even primarily) responsible for instigating civil rights reform, and John F. Kennedy did not independently develop, promote or lead the dream of American moon travel. The three protagonists played important roles in these initiatives, not the least as symbols of the potential change. Many other actors were involved as leaders, however, collaborating to initiate and then implement change. The many players involved suggest that individual heroes are insufficient in narratives like these. The fact that all three heroes were

³³ http://articles.cnn.com/2001-05-25/tech/kennedy.moon_1_single-space-project-apollo-space-race?_s=PM:TECH

³⁴ See the letter from Vice President Johnson to President Kennedy, Evaluation of the Space Program, April 28, 1961. Available at <http://www.hq.nasa.gov/office/pao/History/Apollomon/apollo2.pdf> (accessed June 2012).

absent at the end of both events shows that such actors may not even be necessary to parts of these narratives (at least to parts of the narratives).

While it may seem sad to give up the romance of a heroic version of leadership in these kinds of stories, it is also empowering—especially for developing countries. It is disempowering to see leadership as something that demands waiting for special individuals to do special things. It is empowering to see leadership more empirically; as something that emerges in certain contexts and manifests in multiagent groups. This approach raises practical questions that can help the development field move beyond heroic leaders in development: What contextual factors facilitate the emergence of leadership? Who makes up the multiagent group? Can policy interventions help create facilitative contexts and mobilize potential multiagent groups? These questions are not only pertinent to policymakers but could also be useful for academics thinking about and researching leadership in the development and change process.

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