

## Chapter IV

# A Critical Theory Approach to Information Technology Transfer to the Developing World and a Critique of Maintained Assumptions in the Literature

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter reviews some of the existing Information Technology Transfer (ITT) literature and suggests that it has fallen victim to the well-known limitations of an economic rationalist and positivist worldview. In particular we challenge the extensive use of the term “success” in the ITT literature, arguing that it is problematic for several reasons. Mainstream ITT research portrays ITT as primarily linear, incremental, and progressive in line with the economic rationalist belief that a “rising tide lifts all boats.” We suggest Marx’s theory of dialectical materialism as an alternative to the dominant hegemony and encourage researchers in ITT to accept the fact that internal contradictions are part of a dialectic system. We encourage ITT researchers to view local resistance more sympathetically. Concerted efforts should be made to understand and dialog with the Other. Overall we recommend more interview based case study research in preference to mass-mail out surveys which may prove ineffective in reaching a broad segment of the population in non-Western locations. The existing literature’s preoccupation with educated urban elites and Transnational Corporations may also prove to be a hindrance to both our increased understanding and radical social change.*

## INTRODUCTION

This chapter is written in the form of a polemic which aims to highlight limitations and problems associated with accepting uncritically an economic rationalist and positivist worldview when researching Information Technology (IT) Transfer in the developing world. A polemic is a style of writing which is deliberately unbalanced and provocative; the aim is to highlight weaknesses and limitations in established thought so as to create radical social change. The Free Dictionary at Farlex (available online at [www.freedictionary.com](http://www.freedictionary.com)) defines “polemic” as “a controversial argument, especially one refuting or attacking a specific opinion or doctrine.” Our aim is for our readers to reflexively challenge their own maintained assumptions consistent with Michel Foucault’s (1986, 1987) late-period writings on ethics where he presents an “ethics of the self” according to which one creates and forms oneself reflexively as an ethical subject. Because this chapter is written as a polemic, we are not bound to follow conventional rules associated with other forms of writing such as a need for completeness and balance. Famous polemics of the past include Karl Marx’s many newspaper articles written in the 1850s for the *New York Tribune* and his later “Critique of the Gotha Program” (Marx, 1994), Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil* (1973) and *Twilight of the Idols* (1990), Herbert Marcuse’s *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), and the recent philosophical work by Australian author Tamas Pataki entitled *Against Religion* (Pataki, 2007).

This chapter investigates and explores, from a neo-Marxist/Critical Theory perspective, some of the key issues that arise when we consider IT Transfer to countries in the developing world. We also critique two generally well-regarded articles in the recent mainstream (i.e., noncritical) IT Transfer literature, Straub, Loch, and Hill (2001) and Nahar, Lyytinen, Huda, and Muravyov (2006), with a view to highlighting

how these articles, whilst commendable in many ways, reflect the dominant hegemony of Western technological rationality (Adorno, 1994a; Bapat, 2005, p. 171; Marcuse, 1964; Weber, 1968). It is important to remember that we are *not* reviewing these papers from within the confines of a mainstream worldview. To do so would mean that we would be forced to focus on points of methodology. Instead we critique these papers from a radical sociopolitical perspective. Our critique is holistic and integrated and may bring to readers’ consciousness issues that they may have not previously considered. It is hoped that this chapter will prove to be especially useful for early-career and higher-degree researchers who see merit in an integrated and sociopolitical approach to researching IT Transfer issues.

We conclude that research in this emerging and important field should take cues from Marx and the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School, so as to best extract oneself from a positivist worldview that detracts from the ability to meaningfully engage with members of a cultural Other. We discourage the continued use of value-laden Western technological-rational concepts borrowed in many cases from the natural sciences such as “ranking of success factors” (Nahar et al., 2006, p. 669), “rival hypotheses” (Straub et al., 2001, p. 17), “scientific hypotheses” (Straub et al., 2001, p. 20), “success or failure of the adoption process” (Straub et al., 2001, p. 9), and so forth. This terminology reflects and perpetuates the limited and limiting cultural worldview of its originators (see Tinker, Merino, & Neimark, 1982 in the critical accounting literature). Many cultures in the developing world, such as most South, East, and South-East Asian (both Confucian-influenced and ethnic Indo-Malay), Pacific Island, and Australian Aboriginal cultures value cooperation more highly than competition (Heitmeyer, 2004; Hofstede, 2001; James & Otsuka, 2007; Otsuka & Smith, 2005; Singh, 2004). They also tend to value *achievement through (shared, cooperative) effort* more highly than *achievement*

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