

## Modernization Theory

In political science, we have a lot of isms and ations . Almost every day we hear about some new viewpoint; most recently Phillip Smith of Lark College legitimized Smithism stating that the mass development of theoretical labels would factionate the discipline rendering it uselessly over-descriptive. Still, we do not have all that many major theories. Perhaps this speaks to the inability to create viable fixed rules in the social sciences, but either way, most undergraduates do not learn very many great theories. However, there is likely not a student in the country at any reputable political science school that has not heard of Modernization Theory.

Modernization Theory developed in the mid 20 th century largely with the works of Walter W. Rostow. The theory examined the modernization of states and noted that economic development encouraged political development, and that the two were necessarily compatible. The idea, in essence, was that economic openness fostered urbanization, the creation of a middle class, and the downfall of traditional systems. From here, it is argued that economic development encouraged political development in order to meet to newfound needs of an advancing economy. Political modernization has long been thought of as the liberalization of the governmental system, or democratization.

Modernization Theory is state-centric; it focuses primarily on individual states or countries for analysis. It is also universalistic and linear, meaning that it implies a degree of inevitability in development; all countries will someday become economically liberal democracies, but that some will come to this conclusion faster than others. In addition, approaches to Modernization Theory are considered scientific. This is because it is researched with economic and political development as operationalized variables such as per capita GDP and political liberty ratings. Proponents argue that it is not simply a philosophical theory, but that it is supported in study.

There are a number of critiques of Modernization Theory. Actually, following its inception, little has been written in direct support of it; in many ways, more critiques and modifications exist than affirmations. Primarily, Modernization Theory is thought to have a tremendous cultural bias; when it was written, the only really "advanced" states were found in the United States and Europe. Because of this, many have questioned the theory's applicability in other areas of the world. Many Latin American countries found the model inapplicable in their situation and this helped to lead to the development of Dependency Theory. Dependency stresses that the lack of development some countries face is not a result of their actions, but that instead the global system discourages advances. These theorists claim that their poorer periphery countries are made dependent on core states and that the advanced economies have an interest in the poor staying poor.

Others have found a post-modern critique of Modernization Theory. They claim that the universalism it expresses is careless and ignorant; that perhaps development is not for everyone, or that it may be that different states will come to a developed stage in different ways. Samuel Huntington put forth a conservative critique of Modernization Theory by stressing the idea that progress is not a law; that instead, stability was in many ways more important than careless and rapid development.

Ultimately, development is an exceptionally complicated issue; it is likely that no specific model or theory will always be applicable everywhere. Still, most do agree that economics and politics are intricately related. However, it is important to remember that "one-size-fits-all" approaches to development will almost certainly face difficulty. Modernization Theory has proven relatively good in S.E. Asia, but has been largely unsuccessful in Latin America. In conclusion, it will likely always be that economics are a primary concern in development, but it is important to give great consideration to the social, historical, religious and cultural contexts in which development is attempted.  
-Mike Ryckman

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Dr. Joel Toppen  
Hope College - Assistant Professor of Political Science  
Office: Lubbers 220B  
(616) 395-7458  
[toppen@hope.edu](mailto:toppen@hope.edu)

Site Designed and Maintained by Randy Owen  
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Email questions or comments to [randall.owen@hope.edu](mailto:randall.owen@hope.edu)  
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**MODERNIZATION THEORY AND THE LAWS OF SOCIAL CHANGE (notes by Róbinson Rojas) (1996)**

MODERNIZATION THEORY AND THE PACIFIC (OR VIOLENT) TRANSITION TO INDUSTRIAL CAPITALISM

Modernization theory is the historical product of three main events in the post-World War Two era:

- 1) the rise of the United States as a superpower to contain the growth of the international communist movement. For this, the United States financed the industrialization of Western Europe ( Marshall plan), the industrialization of South Korea and Taiwan, and the reconstruction of Japan.
- 2) the growth of a united worldwide communist movement led from Moscow and later on also from Beijing (with Soviet Union, People's Republic of China, Vietnam and Cuba as hot points).
- 3) the process of de-colonisation in Africa and Asia as an outcome of the disintegration of the former European colonial empires.

By and large, including Latin American states which decolonised themselves between 1804 and 1844, the new nation-states were in a search for a model of development.

Thus, the United States political and economic elites encouraged their social scientist to study the new nation-states, to devise ways of promoting capitalist economic development and political stability, defined as "social order", SO AS TO AVOID LOSING THE OLD AND NEW STATES TO THE SOVIET COMMUNIST BLOC.

United States political scientists, economists, sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists, and demographers teamed up and started publishing since the early 1950s.

They adopted

- a) an EVOLUTIONARY THEORY, and
- b) a FUNCTIONALIST THEORY

a) the classical evolutionary theory ( see Comte et al) stated the following:

- 1) social change is unidirectional, from a primitive to an advanced state, thus the fate of human evolution is predetermined.
- 2) it imposed a value judgement on the evolutionary process: the movement toward the final phase is GOOD because it represents PROGRESS, HUMANITY, and CIVILIZATION, the latter three concepts defined in accordance with Western European cultural parameters.
- 3) it assumed that the rate of SOCIAL CHANGE is slow, gradual, and piecemeal. Most importantly, social change, in accordance with Charles Darwin approach to biological development, was EVOLUTIONARY, not REVOLUTIONARY.
- 4) from above, the process (from primitive to complex. modern societies) will take centuries to complete.

b) Functionalist theory, as presented by Talcott Parsons, 1951, had the following tenets:

- 1) human society is like a biological organism, with different parts corresponding to the different institutions that make up a society;
- 2) each institution performs a specific function for the good of the whole, thus there are FOUR CRUCIAL FUNCTIONS that every institution must perform to maintain the social fabric:
  - a) adaptation to the environment -performed by the economy, but not any economic system, only capitalism can adapt to the environment
  - b) goal attainment -performed by the government, pursuing liberal aims as defined by English and French thinkers.
  - c) integration ( linking the institutions together) -performed

by the legal institutions and religion. But not any religion. Branches of the judeo-christian religions were the right ones.

d) latency ( pattern maintenance of values from generation to generation ) -performed by the family as an ahistorical basic human organization, and education.

From the above, functionalist theory stated that societies tend to harmony, stability, equilibrium and the status quo. Any behaviour jeopardizing these conditions will be considered anti-social and therefore punishable, etc.

Modernization theory characterised societies as follows:

TRADITIONAL SOCIETIES: social relationships tend to have an affective component -personal, emotional, and face-to-face, which is a constraint in the process of developing efficient relations of production via a market.

MODERN SOCIETIES: social relationships are NEUTRAL -impersonal, detached and indirect, which make possible efficient market relationships, etc.

Functionalism, or its related theories of structural-functionalism and systems theory, has been one of the most influential of all social science theories, not only in political science and sociology, but in anthropolgy. Like we saw, much of its origins depends on analogies with biological systems, and in just the way that a biologist might study the role of some physiological aspect, some set of cells, in the maintenance of life, functionalists have tried to understand what are the necessary "functions" that must be carried out in any political system if it is to cope with its environment and achieve its goals, and to locate the "structures" (political parties, socializing agencies like churches, family, etc) which facilitate the functioning.

One very important structure for modernization theory, the family institution, have been conceptualized as follows:

THE TRADITIONAL FAMILY is multifunctional  
was responsible for:  
reproduction

emotional support  
production (the family farm)  
education ( informal parental socialization)  
welfare ( care of the elderly )  
religion ( ancestral worship )

THE MODERN FAMILY is small and nuclear, the state take over the education, welfare and religion functions and the individual takes over production. Reproduction becomes ambiguous, etc

SOCIAL DISTURBANCES appear when one or more sectors in the "balancing chain" family-civil society-the state fails to fulfil its functions. The social disturbances are the result of lack of integration among what were thought by modernization theory followers as "differentiated structures".

The disturbances take the form of:

peaceful agitation  
political violence  
nationalism  
revolution, or  
guerrilla warfare

It follows that crushing human beings involved in these social disturbances takes the form of "humanitarian actions" to preserve social order and social peace to maintain the balance family-civil society-state.

(It is interesting to notice that in the bureaucratic socialist state ( equivalent to the crude notion of "stalinist state" ) first in the former Soviet Union, and then in People's Republic of China), the same notional framework was at work, except that the state enjoyed the multi-status of civil society and family. (See my books "La Guardia Roja Conquista China", 1968, and "China: Una Revolucion en Agonia", 1978, for a more scientific approach to this phenomenon)

#### THE GENERAL SOCIOLOGICAL AND ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVE

N. Smelser (see his "Mechanisms of and adjustments to change", in T. Burns (ed.), INDUSTRIAL MAN, Penguin 1969), and W. Rostow (see his "The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifest", Cambridge University Press, 1960) attempted to provide more general

perspectives. Smelser was concerned with the effects of economic development ( for Smelser, economic development had the restricted meaning of economic growth ) on social structures.

Smelser distinguished four processes:

- 1) there was a move from simple to complex technology
- 2) there was a change from subsistence farming to cash crops
- 3) there was a move from animal and human power to machine power
- 3) there was a move from rural settlements to urban settlements

For Smelser those processes would not occur simultaneously, and, more, importantly, changes would differ from one society to another. He added that "there was a variety of pre-modern starting points and the impetus to change would also vary, being crucially affected by tradition, thus leading to different paths towards modernization". National differences are always important, even in the most advanced stages of modernization, he stated, and added that "wars and natural disasters, can crucially affect the pattern of development".

For Rostow, the processes of change were simpler ( actually Rostow theory is one of the most simplistic, mediocre and unscientific body of thought ever produced by the third rate political economy of development coming from Western Europe and the United States in the last 50 years. R.R.). He suggested that "all societies can be placed in one of five categories, or stages of economic growth":

The first stage: traditional society. Output is limited because of the inaccessibility of science and technology. Values are generally "fatalistic", and political power is non-centralized.

The second stage: The preconditions for take-off. There are clusters of new ideas favouring economic progress arising, and therefore new levels of education, entrepreneurship, and institutions capable of mobilizing capital. Investment increases, especially in transport, communications and raw materials, with a general direction towards commercial expansion. But, in accordance with Rostow, traditional social structures and production techniques remain. There is the presence of a "dual society". ( A fractured society in accordance

with my notional framework. R.R.)

The third stage: the take-off. Agriculture is commercialized, there is a growth in productivity, because that is necessary if the demand emanating from expanding urban centres is to be met. New political groups representing new economic groups push the industrial economy to new heights.

The fourth stage: the drive to maturity. Rostow said that between 10 and 20 per cent of gross domestic product is invested and the economy "takes its place in the international order. Technology becomes more complex and there is a move away from heavy industry". Now production is not the outcome of social necessity but of the need of maximizing profits to survive in a competitive capitalist market.

The fifth stage: mass consumption. The leading economic sectors specialize in durable consumer goods and services. At this stage, economic growth makes sure that basic needs are satisfied, and the social focus changes to social welfare and security.

Rostow thought of his theory as a dynamic one "that deals not only with economic factors but also with social decisions and policies of governments".

It seems to me (R.R.) that a review of Rostow's assumptions is necessary at this stage:

- 1) modernization is a phased process, and the stages in this process are common to all societies (thus, this assumption put the theory outside historical development. R.R.)
- 2) modernization is a homogenizing process. There exist tendencies toward convergence among societies ( which, of course, justifies cultural imperialism by the central powers, R.R.)
- 3) modernization is an Europeanization or Northamericanization process. The nations of Western Europe and the United States are the models tha latecomers would like to emulate.

- 4) modernization is an irreversible process. In other words, once "third world societies" come into contact with the Western European and Northamerican societies, they will not be able to resist the "impetus toward modernization". Towards adopting capitalist relations of production, that is.
- 5) modernization is a progressive process. Modernization creates agonies and suffering for many, but that is "the right price" to pay.
- 6) modernization is a lengthy process. It is an evolutionary change, not a revolutionary change.
- 7) modernization is a transformative process, societies must drop traditional ways of thinking, traditional ways of human relations. In a word, societies must drop traditional structures, cultures and values, and adopt those of Western Europe and Northamerican societies today.

It is not difficult to work out that some "simple implications" can be derived from this theory which created to fight socialist thought in the 1950s until today. I (R.R.) propose the following:

- a) since the United States is MODERN AND ADVANCED and the Third World is TRADITIONAL AND BACKWARD, the latter should take the former as its model, and, of course, ask for guidance and advice from the people leading the model.
- b) because of the above, Third World societies should consider their common enemies communist ideology and socialist economic theory.
- c) modernization theory helps to legitimate as progressive and necessary the United States' ruling class "foreign aid policy", "trade policy", and "international relations policy", and the U.S. expansionism (imperialism) since the XIX century, especially in Latin America and the Pacific, as a "modernizing" drive helpful to the whole human species.

(This is what a I mean by "the view from the top". R.R.)

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 THE VIEW FROM THE TOP. MODERNIZATION THEORY AND THE DYNAMICS OF SOCIAL CHANGE  
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MODERNIZATION THEORY AND THE LAWS OF ECONOMIC GROWTH, SOCIAL CHANGE, DISTRIBUTION OF INCOME AND POLITICAL POWER.

MODERNIZATION THEORY AND THE TRANSITION TO INDUSTRIAL CAPITALISM  
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### As we have seen.....

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3) the process of de-colonisation in Africa and Asia as an outcome of the disintegration of the former European colonial empires.

By and large, including Latin American states which decolonised themselves between 1804 and 1844, the new nation-states were in a search for a model of development.

Thus, (in the main) the United States establishment encouraged their influential economists, historians and social scientist to study the new nation-states, to devise ways of promoting capitalist economic development and political stability, defined as "SOCIAL ORDER", SO AS TO AVOID LOSING THE OLD AND NEW STATES TO THE SOVIET COMMUNIST BLOC.

Thus North American political scientists, economists, sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists, and demographers joined forces and started publishing from the early 1950s.

#### THE CORE OF MODERNIZATION THEORY WAS BASED UPON:

- a) an EVOLUTIONARY THEORY ( see Appendix at end), and
  - b) a FUNCTIONALIST THEORY
- a) THE CLASSICAL EVOLUTIONARY THEORY ( see Comte et al) stated the following:

1) social change is **unidirectional**, from a primitive to an advanced state, thus the fate of human evolution is predetermined.

2) it imposed a **value judgement** on the evolutionary process: the movement toward the final phase is **GOOD** because it represents **PROGRESS, HUMANITY, and CIVILIZATION**, the latter three concepts defined in accordance with Western European cultural parameters.

3) it assumed that the rate of **SOCIAL CHANGE** is slow, gradual, and piecemeal. Most importantly, social change, in accordance with Charles Darwin approach to biological development, was **EVOLUTIONARY, not REVOLUTIONARY**.

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2) each institution performs a specific function for the good of the whole, thus there are **FOUR CRUCIAL FUNCTIONS** that every institution must perform to maintain the social fabric:

**2.1) adaptation to the environment -**

performed by the economy, but not any economic system, only capitalism can adapt to the environment.

**2.2) goal attainment -**

performed by the government, pursuing liberal aims as defined by English and French thinkers.

**2.3) integration -**

(linking the institutions together) -performed by the legal institutions and religion. But not any religion. Branches of the Judeo-Christian religions were the right ones.

**2.4) latency -**

the maintenance and transmission of values from generation to generation - performed by the family as an **ahistorical** basic human organization, and education.

From the above, functionalist theory stated that societies tend towards harmony, stability, equilibrium and the status quo. Any behaviour jeopardizing these conditions will be considered anti-social and therefore

punishable, etc.

## Modernization theory characterised societies as follows:

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social relationships tend to be based on personal, familial, emotional, and face-to-face, which is a constraint in the process of developing efficient relations of production via a market.

### MODERN SOCIETIES:

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One very important structure for modernization theory, the family institution, has been conceptualized as follows:

**THE TRADITIONAL FAMILY** is multifunctional and extended: is responsible for:

	*-reproduction	
	*-emotional support	
	*-production (the family farm)	
socialization)	*-education (informal	parental
	*-welfare (care of the elderly)	
patterns)	*-religion(traditional	worship

**THE MODERN FAMILY** is small and nuclear, the state takes over the education, welfare and religion functions and the individual takes over production. Reproduction becomes ambiguous, etc.

**SOCIAL DISTURBANCES** appear when one or more sectors in the "**balancing chain**", i.e. **family-civil society-the state** etc. fails to fulfil its

functions. The social disturbances are the result of lack of integration among what were thought by modernization theory followers as "differentiated structures".

**The disturbances take the form of:**

- \*- peaceful agitation
- \*- political violence
- \*- nationalism
- \*- revolution, or
- \*- guerrilla warfare

In general, the pacification and containment of human beings involved in these social disturbances takes the form of **"humanitarian actions"** to preserve **social order and social harmony** to maintain the balance between **family-civil society-state**.

(It is interesting to notice that in the bureaucratic socialist state ( equivalent to the crude notion of **"Stalinist state"** ) first in the former Soviet Union, and then in People's Republic of China), the same notional framework was at work, except that the state enjoyed the multi-status of civil society and family.

## **THE GENERAL SOCIOLOGICAL AND ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVE**

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**The fifth stage:** **mass consumption**. The leading economic sectors specialize in durable consumer goods and services. At this stage, economic growth makes sure that basic needs are satisfied, and the social focus changes to social welfare and security.

Rostow thought of his theory as a dynamic one i.e...."**that deals not only with economic factors but also with social decisions and policies of governments**".

**Rostow's assumptions may be reviewed as follows:**

1) modernization is characterised by "**PHASES**", and the stages in this process are common to all societies (thus, this assumption put the theory outside historical development.

2) modernization is a **HOMOGENIZING** process. As such, societies tend toward convergence: which can justify cultural imperialism by the central powers.

3) modernization **replicates European/North American values/world-view**. The nations of Western Europe and the United States are the models that latecomers would like to emulate.

4) **modernization is an irreversible process**. In other words, once "TWCs" come into contact with the Western European and North American societies, they will not be able to resist the "**impetus toward modernization**". Towards adopting capitalist relations of production, that is.

5) modernization is a progressive process. Modernization creates agonies and suffering for many, but that is "**the right price**" to pay.

6) modernization is a **lengthy process**. It is an **evolutionary change, not a revolutionary change**.

7) modernization is a **transformative process**, societies must abandon traditional ways of thinking, traditional ways of human relations. In a word, societies must drop traditional structures, cultures and values, and adopt those of Western Europe and North American societies today.

## **SOME OBSERVATIONS.....**

It is not difficult to work out the "**implications**" of this theory in the context of the Cold-War; i.e. in the 1950s and 1960s and later...as follows:

a) since the United States is **MODERN AND ADVANCED** and the Third World is **TRADITIONAL AND BACKWARD**, the latter should take the former as its model, and, seek guidance and advice.

b) modernization theory helps to legitimate as progressive and necessary the United States' "foreign aid policy", "trade policy", and "international relations policy", and the U.S. expansionism since the XIX century, especially in Latin America and the Pacific, as a "modernizing" drive helpful to the whole human species.

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## **Appendix**

**Comte, (Isidore) Auguste (Marie Francois Xavier) (1798-1857)**

French philosopher regarded as the founder of sociology, a term he coined 1830. He sought to establish sociology as an intellectual discipline, using a scientific approach (positivism) as the basis of a new science of social order and social development. In his six-volume Cours de

philosophie positive 1830-42, Comte argued that human thought and social development evolve through three stages: **the theological, the metaphysical, and the positive or scientific.** Although he originally sought to proclaim society's evolution to a new golden age of science, industry, and rational morality, his radical ideas were increasingly tempered by the political and social upheavals of his time. His influence continued in Europe and the USA until the early 20th century.

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F. Naamani Oct.1997