

# Smith, Murray E.G.

## modernization theory

'Modernization theory' is a form of economic and social theory that seeks to conceptualize the processes of change occurring in traditional or undeveloped societies as they move in the direction of a more complex DIVISION OF LABOUR and more elaborate patterns of social and political organization. It is usually associated with an 'evolutionary' view of the social, economic and cultural transition between two IDEAL TYPES of society/economy: the traditional and the modern. The task of such a theory is to conceptualize the key factors underlying the process of social differentiation and the reorientation to economic and social action that facilitate this transition. Most modernization theorists assume that the modernization process is one that follows a definite set of specifiable historical laws, and that (in principle) all pre-modern societies can follow in the footsteps of those societies that have already traversed the road to MODERNITY. The theme of modernization is also to be found in the Marxist theoretical tradition, but here it occupies a decidedly secondary status in relation to the concept of social revolution, while at the same time constituting a source of both theoretical and political controversy among Marxists.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the problematic of modernization was at the very centre of the development of early modern social theory. From the ENLIGHTENMENT of the 1700s up to the early years of the twentieth century, the nature of the 'great transformation' that was fundamentally reshaping European society was a major preoccupation of all of the emerging social sciences. ADAM SMITH wrote of the transition from an 'agricultural' to a 'commercial' market-based society; Herbert

Spencer wrote of the transition from 'militant' to 'industrial society'; Emile Durkheim wrote of the movement from mechanical to organic solidarity, and Ferdinand Tönnies wrote of the shift from *gemeinschaft* (community) to *gesellschaft* (societal association). In one of the more enduringly influential (and pessimistic) formulations of this era, MAX WEBER described the triumph of a world-historical process of rationalization that had catapulted European society from traditional forms of economy and 'domination' to the modern capitalist ones that were rapidly enclosing civilization in a soulless 'iron-cage' of rational-legal bureaucracy and instrumental rationality. While similarly recognizing the increase in human ALIENATION brought about by the transition from FEUDALISM to the capitalist MODE OF PRODUCTION, KARL MARX saw the triumph of capitalist modernity as laying the material basis for a new society that would be free of class antagonism. For Marx, the future communist society would not simply be a different version of modernity, but the beginning of a truly human civilization.

## Twentieth-century modernization theory

In the twentieth century, modernization theory was most closely associated with the academic discipline of sociology and in particular with sociological functionalism. Building on Weber's ideal-type distinction between traditional and modern orientations to social and economic action, Talcott Parsons delineated a series of 'pattern variables' to distinguish between traditional and modern social forms. For example, in traditional societies, behaviour tends to be 'affective' (emotionally charged), whereas in modern ones, 'affective neutrality' is the norm. The process of modernization is

th promoted and characterized by a shift from the traditional set of forms to the modern one: affectivity gives place to affective neutrality; ascribed statuses to achieved ones; diffusion to specificity; particularism to universalism, and an orientation towards collective interests gives way to an orientation towards private interests. In defining his pattern variables in this way, Parsons took his view of mid-twentieth-century US society as the exemplar of modern society. Indeed, for functionalist modernization theory in general, the US model of society – democratic, industrial, individualistic and capitalist – is viewed as the final goal towards which the process of modernization, conceived as a unitary direction of change, must unfold.

The key theme of functionalist modernization theories has been 'structural differentiation' – the 'horizontal' process of increasing functional specialization and separation of social roles and collectivities that are becoming both more formally autonomous and materially interdependent. Structural differentiation allows for the emergence of a more productive and wealthy society, but one which must also confront the Durkheimian problem of 'anomie' – the deficit of moral and normative regulation that undermines social harmony and solidarity. A traditional 'collective consciousness' gives way to a 'cult of the individual' nurtured by an ever more complex division of labour. Modernization, to be successful, must steer a successful course between the goal of increased economic efficiency and the requirements of socio-cultural 'reintegration'.

The most influential economic theory of modernization is that of W.W. ROSTOW, who specifies a set of 'stages of economic growth' (THE STAGES OF GROWTH). Like the sociological-functional theories of modernization, Rostow's account assumes that all societies have a potential to become advanced industrial, capitalist societies, and that to realize this potential contemporary 'developing societies' must follow the evolutionary path blazed in the past by countries like the United Kingdom and the United States. All societies may be identified in their 'economic dimensions' as situated

within one of five categories or stages: 'the traditional society, the preconditions for economic take-off, the take-off, the drive to maturity, and the age of high mass-consumption' (Rostow, 1960: 2). The traditional society is an essentially agricultural one in which a 'ceiling' exists on the level of attainable output per head – a ceiling determined by 'pre-Newtonian science and technology'. Societies evincing the preconditions of economic take-off are marked by the appearance of new production functions in both agriculture and industry in a dynamic context of expanding world markets and increasing international competition. A decisive feature of this transitional stage is the appearance of an effective centralized national state, which is 'almost universally' a necessary condition for take-off. The third stage, that of 'take-off', witnesses the unleashing of 'the forces making for economic progress' and their rise to societal dominance. The drive to maturity, a stage lasting some sixty years after take-off, culminates in an economy that evinces the technological and entrepreneurial skills to produce anything that it chooses to produce. Finally, the age of high consumption is characterized by a shift in the leading sectors of the economy towards durable consumer goods and services; as society moves beyond a mere 'technical maturity', it attains the political maturity to allocate increasing resources to social welfare and security, permitting a 'welfare state' to emerge.

The most serious criticisms of modernization theories have concerned their abstract, ahistorical and one-sided character. A one-sided concern with the 'endogenous' factors impeding or promoting modernization and DEVELOPMENT in particular 'undeveloped' societies betrays an unwillingness to explore those 'exogenous' forces operating within the global capitalist system that serve to promote UNEQUAL DEVELOPMENT and thwart dynamic growth in much of the Third World. In assuming that contemporary underdeveloped societies should emulate the 'prescriptions' implicit in the Western 'model' of development and growth, modernization theories characteristically overlook the role of colonial pillage,

territorial conquest and the slave trade in effecting the PRIMITIVE ACCUMULATION OF CAPITAL that was so important a condition of industrial capitalist 'take-off' in Europe and the United States. In suggesting that the salvation of poor countries lies in opening themselves up to Western technology, culture and capital, the theorists of modernization 'forget' that a policy of 'free trade' and 'open markets' was hardly an essential ingredient for the development of any of the first-born nations of capitalist civilization. Neo-Marxist dependency and world-systems theorists (see DEPENDENCY THEORY; WORLD-SYSTEMS THEORY) are particularly vehement in their rejection of the modernization paradigm. Far from promoting genuine progress in the 'periphery' of world capitalism, they argue, the nostrums of modernization theory are mere recipes for perpetuating the cycle of dependency and exploitation that sustains a persistent structure of global inequality.

### The theme of modernization in Marxist theory

Within the Marxist tradition, the theme of modernization has been an understated and controversial one. Marx's 'stages in the economic formation of society' are conceived in terms of a sequence of class-antagonistic modes of production: Asiatic, ancient, feudal and capitalist. The communist mode of production of the future would represent a qualitative rupture with this human 'pre-history', combining the egalitarian social relations of 'primitive communism' with the advanced productive capacities brought into being by capitalism.

In the *Grundrisse*, Marx writes of an historic transition from 'personal ties' to 'objective bonds' and comes close to counterposing a pre-capitalist traditionalism to a capitalist modernism. But while other social theorists focused on the transition from a rural, agricultural, traditional society to an urban, industrial and modern one, Marx chose to concentrate his analysis on the transformed social relations of production involved in the transition from

feudalism to capitalism. Capitalist society is characterized by a contradictory ensemble of exploitative, competitive and formally egalitarian social relations, the effect of which is to reconcile the appropriative rationality central to class exploitation with the technical-instrumental rationality central to the growth of productivity. The resulting capitalist mode of production was the most dynamic and productive in human history, creating more wealth in just a few generations than had been produced by all previous modes of production. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels predict that this mode of production will soon batter down 'all Chinese walls', uproot and vanquish all pre-capitalist forms, and create a world after its own image.

This early prognostication of capitalism's universal modernizing mission is at least partially abandoned by Marx in his later economic writings, in particular in the third volume of *Capital*. Anticipating later Marxist theories of IMPERIALISM, Marx writes of how 'the internal contradiction [of the capitalist mode of production] seeks resolution through an extension of the external field of production', and of how the tendency of the average rate of profit to fall in developed capitalist countries must be countered by 'foreign trade' and investment (see FALLING RATE OF PROFIT). The contradictions and crisis tendencies of a mature capitalism increasingly interfere with its mission to revolutionize the relations of production on a world scale. The advanced capitalist countries look to the cheap raw materials and labour of the colonial and semi-colonial world as a means of shoring up their profits; at the same time, competition for world markets becomes so intense that every established capitalist power has an interest in blocking the emergence of new rivals and keeping the undeveloped countries in a state of DEPENDENCE. These themes are further elaborated, albeit in diverse ways, in the theories of imperialism developed by ROSA LUXEMBURG and V.I. LENIN.

The international communist movement under the leadership of Joseph Stalin and his successors revived the notion that the immedi-

e historical task confronting peripheral capitalist nations was a national-democratic revolution that would extricate pre-capitalist forms and lay the basis for a dynamic capitalist development. Only after a protracted period of capitalist development would the conditions be ripe for a socialist revolution. However, such a strategic conception was difficult to reconcile with a continuing formal allegiance to Lenin's theory of imperialism, which insisted that capitalism was no longer capable of playing a progressive 'modernizing' role on a world scale. More recently, BILL WARREN has sought to solve the implicit contradiction by redefining imperialism as the 'pioneer' of capitalism rather than as its 'final stage' and by arguing that capitalist modernization remains a real option for the countries of the Third World. At the opposite end of the Marxist spectrum, LEON TROTSKY and his followers have argued that the laws of combined and uneven development in the epoch of imperialism dictate the need for a strategic perspective of PERMANENT REVOLUTION in the more backward countries of world capitalism. According to Trotsky, the only way that pre-capitalist forms can be definitively extricated and that such modernizing tasks of the democratic revolution as land reform can be carried out in the countries dominated by imperialism is through a revolution that places the WORKING CLASS in power and creates a planned, socialist economy. The immediate task of such a workers' state would be to use 'socialist methods' to address the 'pre-socialist problems' of industrialization, democratization and general modernization.

**see also:**

free-trade imperialism; historical materialism; interdependence, asymmetrical

**References and further reading**

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