

The Modernization Theory Paradigm and Its Discontents: Reviewing the Contribution and Fallings of the Modernization Theory to Social and Political Research

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This article is an attempt to critically consider the modernization paradigm of the study of social and socio-political processes in a manner that would allow one to clarify the respective paradigm's contribution to understanding and analysing the processes of global social, economic and political development. The article argues that an insufficient objectivity and deterministic nature of the modernization theory should lead one to consider the need for a major revision of the assumptions as to linear and deterministic development of the state and society as adopted from the classical statement of the modernization theory. The author provides both an overview of the unfolding of the modernization theory in its classical version, by paying due attention to interconnections between the socio-economic and the socio-political dimensions of the latter; and a review of major critiques issued against the modernization theory as well as the challenges faced by more contemporary attempts to revive it (e.g., the "end of history" thesis or the post-modernization theory). Overall, the author comes to a conclusion that the modernization theory paradigm should be at the very least majorly revised if the viability of its claims in the contemporary social environment may be upheld in a convincing manner.

Keywords: modernization theory, development theory, post-modernization, "end of history," critique

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Introduction

The idea of ranking development levels of human societies according to certain criteria has existed at least since the times of classical antiquity, but it ultimately began to acquire its scientific dimension only in the 19th century. It was then that the first scientific schools appeared, which began to consider the problems of socio-economic and political development of various human societies and to put forward certain general concepts of their socio-political evolution. Finally, the paradigms of research in this area emerged only in the 20th century, which was due to both scientific and purely political factors. One of the most influential approaches in this area was the consideration of socio-economic and socio-political development based on the ‘modernity’ / ‘traditionalism’ dichotomy, which became the basis of the concept of modernization.

The basis of modernization theories, for which Talcott Parsons (1902-1979) and Edward Shils (1911-1995) are usually considered to have been the founding figures, despite some differences between each of the individual theories of this circle, is the idea that human societies develop in accordance with a certain evolutionary perspective. The main differences between a ‘modern society’ and a ‘traditional’ one, according to Parsons, are the dominance of the industrial sphere over agriculture, individualism over collectivism, secular science and philosophy over mythology and religion, the presence of a developed division of labour and the predominance of individual social status over hereditary ones, as well as of universalism over particularism (Parsons, 1985: 324). The views of Shils, Parsons’s close associate, on modernization as a phenomenon and a social process was most clearly expressed in his famous lecture on the problems of newly independent states in Dobbs-Ferry, in June 1959 (Gilman, 2003: 1). In this lecture, Shils purported to identify such basic features of a ‘modern’ society as a high degree of industrialization of the economy, the democratic nature of the political system, the egalitarian nature of social values, the orientation of public policy to overcome class antagonisms and the formation of “welfare state”, which would result in rational nature of social institutions overall. Hence the modernization theory attempted to flesh out a conceptual interpretation of the processes of socio-economic and socio-political development as undergone by contemporary societies in accordance with both the general and the specific features of the former.

Even though the modernization theory has experienced a substantial flourishing in the mid- to late 20th century, the rise of postmodernist thinking and a growing skepticism as to the efficacy of the respective policy prescriptions in the field of politics of development would lead to a substantial re-evaluation of the tenets of the modernization concept regarding the process of national economic and political development. Consequently, this article seeks to provide for an overview of the major statements of the modernization theory as a paradigm for development politics, the factors behind the latter’s decline as a theoretical framework guiding the policy making process, and the key claims of some of the theories that have been introduced to either complement or replace the modernization theory as the explanatory foundation for understanding, and comparing, societal development. In so doing, the comparison between the modernization theory and the other theoretical frameworks that have come to take its place will have provided for a more thorough understanding of the evolution of theoretical approaches underlying cross-country comparison as far as politics of development, in general, will be concerned.

Literature Review

In the aftermath of the fall of the Soviet Union, the concept of modernization enjoyed a high level of popularity among Ukrainian researchers, since the discrediting of the previously dominant Marxist-Leninist / historical materialist paradigm of social development had by default made the modernization theory, as an expression of the ‘Western’ understanding of politics and economics of development an inherently attractive alternative option. Thus, Volodymyr Gorbatenko’s 1999 monograph may be representative of this approach as the author emphasized the strategic role of the concept of modernization in regard of bringing the Ukrainian state-society complex closer to the Western prototypes of supposedly modernized political and economics forms (Gorbatenko, 1999). Likewise, Oleksandr Fisun’s monograph on democracy and neopatrimonialism in the context of Ukraine’s and the world’s fundamental political and economic transformations in the early 21st century makes ample use of the discourse of modernization as far as the work’s underlying conceptual premises are concerned (Fisun, 2006). Other scholars would attempt to combine certain aspects of the modernization theory as connected to specific phenomena of post-socialist state and society transformations while either refurbishing some of the previously held theoretical models and concepts they used to apply in the context of the historical materialist paradigm of social science or incorporating the relevant aspects of the modernization theory into the other methodological frameworks of ‘Western provenance.’ Thus, in respect of the former approach, Valentin Yakushik (1991) made references to the criteria of political transformation from one stage of political development similar to those developed in the context of the modernization theory while combining them with Marxian premises concerning the ‘state of the transitional period’ and its movement towards the stateless society. In his later work on the problems of political regime transition in the post-Communist Ukraine (Yakushik, 1993), the author placed focus on the key criteria and indicators of the ‘transitional’ nature of the Ukrainian political system, such as the ones of the prevailing models of conflict resolution, welfare provision, legal system, etc., which may once again be seen as revealing the evidence of an influence on the part of the discourse of the modernization theory, even as the author seeks to develop his own approach toward categorizing the related features of Ukraine’s socio-political system as such. In regard of the latter approach, the Ukrainian school of transitology studies would strive to draw upon the insights of the modernization theory while critiquing the latter’s perceived ‘structural determinism’ as far as transitions from one stage of socio-political and socio-economic development might be concerned (Romaniuk, 2007). The Ukrainian scholars’ interest in the modernization theory was thus motivated primarily by their need to either find or develop a new explanatory framework that would be capable of addressing their practical needs in respect of political analysis and/or forecasting. In that sense, elements of either the discourse of modernization or of the theory as such would be used in the respective scientists’ works mostly in a pragmatic manner, which may invite the need for further reflection on the continuing relevance of the notion of modernization and the latter’s internal discursive contradictions.

On the other hand, the contemporary Western discipline of development studies would largely view the modernization theory as an already obsolete stage of its own evolution, with the focus placed on interrogating the latter’s main assumptions and premises in a critical way (see, e.g., the respective contributions of the dependency theory and an assorted range of neo-Marxist theories; Roxborough, 1988). On the other hand, a relative decline in the prominence

of the modernization theory implied the attendant decrease in the interest on the subject in the recent decades, even though one may be able to refer to such fundamental works on the problems of modernization theories as the ones authored by Richard Peet and Elaine Hartwick (2009), Nils Gilman (2003), and Alberto Martinelli (2004). However, these works appear to focus on a general overview of the theoretical constructs in question so that the degree to which providing for a thorough investigation of the problems of the modernization theory may be adequately addressed in this context. Accordingly, the present article builds upon the insights already offered by the previously published literature on the subject, while seeking to expand on them in a manner of bringing together the key arguments of the modernization theory proper and those of the theoretical frameworks that have been developed on the basis of the modernization yet would purport to replace it.

The Unfolding of the Modernization Theory: A Critical Account

In the 1950s and 1960s, the modernization theory was experiencing its golden age, a manifestation of which in the purely scientific sphere was the emergence of such particular conceptualizations of modernization as the economic modernization theory by Bert F. Hoselitz (1913-1995), who first applied Parsons's conceptual framework to the field of development economics (Hoselitz, 1960), and psychological and cultural theories of modernization of Everett Hagen (1907-1993) and Daniel Lerner (1917-1980), which reflected an attempt to bring together the notion of modernization and the behaviouralist concepts of the contemporary U.S. academic science of their time (Hagen, 1962; Lerner, 1958; Peet & Hartwick, 2009). The discourse of modernization, from in the 1950s on, began to be seen as an ideological basis for counteracting the further success of radical left-wing movements in 'third world' countries by proposing alternatives to socialist projects of post-colonial reconstruction (Gilman, 2003: 156). Contrary to the designs for the 'people's democratic revolution,' which was the ideological basis for the spread of Soviet influence in the 'third world', the American authors of the modernization theory as an explanatory framework for understanding the comparative processes of societal development, put forward the idea of the leading role of the technocratic welfare state, with the mid-20th-century USA being viewed as an effective embodiment of that ideal (Gilman, 2003; Peet & Hartwick, 2009). This observation may enable one to assess an inherently political aspect of the modernization theory as far as the connection between the latter's development and the ideological and geopolitical considerations of the Cold War era are implicated (Gilman, 2003).

Of all the theories of modernization which originate from Parsons' original model, the most influential and well-known was the stages of growth theory as developed by Walt Rostow (1916 – 2003). In his 1960 *magnum opus*, *The stages of economic growth: a non-Communist manifesto*, Rostow presented his own classification of the stages of development of human society, which, in his opinion, were universal in nature, as based on the principle of determination of socio-political processes by technological and economic factors. The following 'stages of economic growth' were identified by the author: 1. "traditional society" (as based on agricultural subsistence economy with significantly low levels of scientific knowledge and commercial transactions); 2. "preconditions to take-off" (development of manufacturing and commencement of national and integration economic integration); 3. "take-off" (a period of short-term but intense industrialization-driven economic growth); 4. "drive to maturity" (involving gradual economic growth and diversification of production and consumption in

accordance with the industrial model of development); and 5. “age of high mass consumption” (mass production and consumerism as the basis for the economy and the society at large). As a result, all these stages would be considered to be an integral part and economic basis of the process of social modernization (Rostow, 1960).

Personally, Rostow did not believe that the pathways of ‘third world’ modernization should necessarily be identical to the Western experience of industrialization, urbanization and democratization (Peet & Hartwick, 2009). However, from the logical perspective, within the framework of Rostow’s theory, all societies that successfully complete the process of modernization must ultimately reach the stage of “age of high mass consumption,” with the post-New Deal model of social development of the USA in the 1930s to 1950s clearly being a tangible prototype thereof. Although, Rostow put forward his model of modernization as based on the principles of technological and economic determinism, it is impossible not to pay attention to the clear political characteristics and imperatives of his concept. According to the author, the main driving force of modernization of ‘non-Western’ societies was not the endogenous factor of understanding the advantages of economic rationality over traditionalism, but the exogenous factor of so-called ‘reactive nationalism’ as a reaction to the military and economic dominance of ‘foreigners’ (Rostow, 1960; Gilman, 2003). Rostow considered the legacy of Western European colonialism to be a modern example of such ‘humiliation,’ so, in his opinion, the goal of U.S. foreign policy should be to promote new relations of cooperation between sovereign nations that would replace the old ties of colonialism (Gilman, 2003). Thus, he saw post-colonial nationalism as the main impetus for the modernization of the ‘third world.’

However, Rostow, in accordance with his own political views, called for a distinction between “democratic nationalism,” the support for which, in his opinion, should be the basis of U.S. foreign policy and “communist nationalism”, which he considered to be a “deviation” with respect to modernization. Rostow argued that the Soviet Union supported “xenophobic nationalism” in ‘third world’ countries, reviving anti-Western sentiment. At the same time, the theorist of modernization ignored the role of neocolonialism and, in particular, the U.S. alliances with former colonial powers in the growth of anti-Western sentiment (Gilman, 2003). Rostow’s views played a leading role in the final formation of the modernization theory as the dominant paradigm of research on global development in the United States in the 1960s. Due to his role in developing policy guidelines for U.S. national security, Rostow served as deputy National Security Advisor in the J.F. Kennedy administration and played a significant role in determining the nature of further U.S. “Vietnam policy” in the 1960s (Mulcahy, 1995). Political conclusions from the stages of growth theory are thus abundantly clear in that context: ‘traditional societies’ seeking to successfully modernize must follow the example of the West, increasing their level of integration into the world economy and adapting their political system along the line of the U.S.-prescribed guidelines (Peet & Hartwick, 2009).

Subsequently, Rostow’s theory became a kind of orthodoxy of the modernization theory, and subsequent researchers (for example, David E. Apter), who worked within this paradigm in the 1960s, mostly followed the directions outlined by this theorist. Apter’s conceptual framework of the three stages of transition to modernization (i.e., ‘declining traditionalism,’ ‘transitioning to industrialization’ and ‘rising modernity’; Apter, 1965), or a similar conceptualization provided by A. F. K. Organski (1965) were marked by the influence of the concept of stages of growth and were actually complementary to it – this in time, in the fields of politics and culture. Indeed, to conclude the overview of classical theories of modernization, it would be

appropriate to consider the views of their authors on the problems of political development that accompany the processes of modernization. While Rostow's stages of growth theory focused on issues of economic development, the works of Gabriel Almond and Lucian Pye provided for the analysis of the process of political modernization as their main research focus. It is hardly surprising that the consideration of the relationship between modernization and political development was put forward by scientists who participated in the Committee on Comparative Political Science (Committee on Comparative Politics) of the American Scientific Council for Social Sciences (of which first Almond and then Pye were presidents consequently). According to the definition of political development/modernization provided by Pye and his colleague Sidney Verba, the latter would be defined as a process of (1) spreading socio-political views aimed at recognizing the importance of the principle of social equality (increasing demands for greater civil rights, increased social activity); (2) increasing the capacity of the political systems to regulate the economic sphere of society, to respond to public demands, to regulate social conflicts; 3) differentiating, specializing and integrating disparate social roles and political organizations (Pye & Verba, 1965). In that sense, the process of political development would be viewed as parallel to the unfolding of economic modernization, since both of them would entail a progression from isolated and self-sufficient forms of social activity to more diverse and mutually integrated ones.

Arguably, the most systematic definition of crises and challenges to political development in the modernization theory paradigm was formulated by the Norwegian political scientist and sociologist Stein Rokkan (1921-1979). The latter identified the following political challenges of modernization as associated with the relevant institutional decisions: (1) state-building onset, associated with political, economic and cultural unification at the elite level and accompanied by the creation of permanent political institutions; (2) national identity development through creating permanent armed forces, introducing compulsory secondary education, and developing a unified media landscape; (3) introduction of political citizenship, accompanied by expanding political rights, eliminating legal barriers within the citizenry, creating organized political parties, and allowing for the participation of the masses in the political process; (4) and introduction of social citizenship, which entails the expansion of public spending on social security and the creation of appropriate institutions for its provision to the masses, redistributive economic policy, and introduction of progressive taxation (Rokkan, 1970). Once again, all of these stages would be in line with the Keynesian framework of the Western states' political economy, with the focus on the welfare state as an ultimate instrument of socio-economic and socio-political advancement. Thus, the modernization theory considered the political modernization of societies as a set of crises and challenges associated with the overall process of modernization. The intensity and sequence of different stages of political modernization are closely linked to the chances of success of modernization whole. Resolving such crises and overcoming development challenges was considered the task of the liberal-democratic welfare state, which should have to ensure the general harmony of public interests through technocratic regulation of social processes.

Critiques of the Modernization Theory and Attempts at Its Further Development

Although modernization theories provided a clear correlation between the level of economic growth and socio-political modernity, the objective reality of the post-colonial period, in

most cases, refuted their predictions about the future prosperity of the newly independent states. Simultaneous erosion of the model of the “welfare state” in the West itself, which according to classical theories of modernization was considered the ideal of socio-political development, also undermined the ideological foundations of modernization theories. All this led to the commencement of the process of the intensive scientific critique of the main provisions of the modernization paradigm and its subsequent decline. Since the late 1960s, critical remarks on modernization theories have been made by representatives of various schools of Western political science and sociology, such as Reinhard Bendix (1916-1991), whose 1967 article on tradition and modernity (Bendix, 1967) initiated the scientific critique of modernization theories, the proponents of the dependency theory (including Andre Gunder Frank and Fernando-Enrique Cardozo), and finally the theorists of the world-system approach (such as Immanuel Wallerstein and Giovanni Arrighi). The main aspects of the critique of the modernization theory as carried out by representatives of these approaches may be summarized as follows: (1) rejection of the construction of dichotomous models typical of the modernization paradigm, in which ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ societies are considered as system combinations of interrelated elements being qualitatively opposite to each other; (2) rejection of the claim of the existence of a unitary and standardized model of human society development; and (3) a critique of the characteristic emphasis of the modernization theory on endogenous factors of change whilst ignoring the relationships of dependence and interdependence that exist between countries at different stages of development within the world system.

As a result of scientific criticism from various flanks, the modernization paradigm would be steadily losing its dominant position among the political science and sociological schools of the West. In turn, among the supporters of the modernization paradigm, there was a kind of “internal revision” of many of the basic postulates of classical theories of modernization, which was reflected in the works of Shmuel Eisenstadt, characterized by an attempt to combine the modernization theory with the civilization approach. History, according to Eisenstadt, is a process not only of modernization but also of the convergence of ‘traditional societies’, resulting in the emergence of a single ‘modern society’ (Eisenstadt, 2002; 2003). Thus, the approach taken by Eisenstadt is characterized by rejecting a liberal-rationalist universalism of previous theories of modernization and attempting to achieve a synthesis of civilizational particularism and global universalism (Weil, 2010). However, the fall of the state-socialist regimes of the Soviet bloc in the late 1980s and early 1990s led to a temporary revival of modernization theories, as in their somewhat retouched classical form, the concept of “end of history” by Francis Fukuyama is one of the most popular manifestations whereof, as well as in the form of some more intellectually sophisticated theories, such as the neo-modernization theory by Edward Tirikyan (1991) and the post-modernization theory by Ronald Inglehart (1997).

Of all these theories, in the 1990s, the most popular – and the most ideological – one was the theory of the “end of history” as espoused by Fukuyama. The latter quite openly acknowledged the influence of the classical modernization theory paradigm on his ideas, which is especially clear from his uncritical acceptance of technological determinism characteristic of the latter. The fall of the Soviet bloc and the beginning of Westernization of its former member states, according to Fukuyama, marked the “end of history” in the sense of ending the ideological struggle between opposing social development projects (the Marxist and the liberal ones) in favour of the victory of the liberal project as a single version of ‘correct’ modernization. In any case, the triumphalist discourse of the “end of history,” which became the new orthodoxy in the

first half of the 1990s, would become increasingly at odds with objective macro-social reality in the early 21st century. The economic crisis of 1997-1998 was the first manifestation of the inconsistency of the ideas of the “end of history” with empirical reality. Subsequent processes that unfolded in the 2000s (the de facto failure of the ideas of “post-communist modernization” in the post-Soviet states, the aggravation of relations between the global North and the global South, and finally, the global economic crisis of the late 2000s) led to a final discreditation of the bias of Fukuyama’s model as an allegedly complete form of ‘modernity.’ The inadequacy of the modernization theory as far as explicating the reasons for the first significant successes and later the collapse of the Soviet and similar political and socio-economic systems of so-called ‘real socialism’ is also noteworthy. Concepts such as Peter Sztompka’s ‘fake modernity’ (Sztompka, 2000) are mainly descriptive and pay special attention to the ‘deviation’ of the Soviet model of development from the normative model of modernization, which does not allow to objectively consider the specifics of the historical development of Soviet-type societies, as well as the particularities of the post-Soviet development. It is with this in mind that post-Soviet scholars’ attempts to adopt tenets of the modernization theory to their studies would seem to be problematic due to the latter’s deterministic perspective.

Concluding the review of modern attempts to ‘renovate’ the modernization theory paradigm, one would have to draw attention to the post-modernization theory as developed by Jeffrey Alexander and Ronald Inglehart, which is characterized by a focus on the subjective-value dimension of social change since the 1970s. Alexander and Inglehart argue that the post-modern era is characterized by process of transition to a new quality of industrial societies and a departure from the ‘materialist’ mass worldview, characterized by an emphasis on economic efficiency and rationalism, toward the ‘postmaterialist’ worldview, which provides for the recognition of personal self-expression as the highest value (Alexander et al., 2011). The researchers have placed emphasis on the dimension of global value change while seeking to provide for empirical foundations based on extensive survey-based research to prop up their arguments (Tausch, 2015). However, it is obvious that the aforementioned forms of ‘materialist’ worldview continue to maintain a dominant position in the public consciousness, and technocratic management and market production continue to be the basic principles of modern society, so it may be doubted whether the post-modernization theory adequately reflects the nature of modern socio-political development. On the other hand, the post-modernization theory assumes that the development of contemporary societies is marked by such salient features as “disorganization, hyperdifferentiation and dedifferentiation, hyperrationalization and hypercommercialization” (He, 2012: 220), so that attaining a previously expected degree of political equilibrium as suggested by the modernization theory is likely to become hardly plausible in the situation of the development of political processes and identities in the contemporary world. As opposed to Rokkan’s (1970) emphasis on national identity formation as unification necessary for effective political transition, both hyper- and de-differentiated identities as typical for the present-day political world would be hardly permeable to the process of identity management by the traditional nation-state, whereas the phenomenon of hypercommercialization would undermine the welfare state’s previously mentioned integrative role in politics. It is in that sense that the post-modernization theory will both close and negate the development of the previous stages of the modernization theory paradigm, hence underscoring the need for a comprehensive departure from the latter.

Conclusions

In conclusion, although the modernization theory used to a form of scientific orthodoxy in the political and social sciences, its basic premises have been found to contain a number of ideological assumptions that make it impossible to speak of their truly objective nature. That is why it seems that a more multidimensional approach to the study of the dynamics of world political, economic and socio-cultural processes is certainly more commendable. The abstract evolutionism and the enthusiasm for welfare-state rationalism typical for the modernization theory proved to be misguided and even naïve by the processes of socio-political and socio-economic development in the late 20th and the early 21st century. The post-modernization theory that has so far sought to provide a postmaterialist remedy to the perceived fallings of the modernization theory has itself been beset with a number of serious methodological and philosophical flaws some of which have been touched upon in the present exposition. Altogether, the account of the development of the modernization theory from its inception in the 1950s till its effective decline in the 2000s may enable one to get a glimpse of the overall dynamics of a social science paradigm of the 20th century that would ultimately fail to live up to its promise in the changing social environment context.

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