

The Failings of Liberal Modernisation Theory

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THOMAS M. DUNN, JUN 26 2013

A macro-theory with historical, economic and sociological inspiration, modernisation theory seeks to establish how different societies progress, which variables affect this progress, and the effects of societal progress on human communication. The theory adopts a unilinear evolutionary perspective on social change, defining less developed countries (LDCs) as being at an earlier stage of development and assumes that these 'traditional' societies would undergo the same type of nation-building as that undergone by more developed countries (MDCs) if they adopted similar economic and social structures (Linklater 2008: 548; O'Brien & Williams 2010: 316). Modernisation, as a concept, includes the full transformation and transition that an LDC has to go through to become modern (Hussain & Tribe., 1981; Lenin, 1899:). Although there is a difference of opinion over whether institutions, economics or societal aspects define what is modern, there is general agreement that an identification of variables conducive to social and economic progress, and the application of these variables, would allow 'traditional' countries to modernise. Furthermore, many theorists in the field have examined how modernisation processes, especially economic growth, relate to democratisation and democratic consolidation (Huntington 1971: 146). A recurring theme, therefore, in modernisation theory is the opinion that globalisation and international connectedness lead to a consensus that the most desirable systems for modernisation are liberal democratisation and Western models of capitalist development (Johannessen 2009: 6).

Liberal modernisation theorists see modernisation as a lengthy, irreversible, and complex evolutionary process that completely transforms a society. Rostow (1960: 4-16) presented a definitive account of how countries evolve in order to become modern, claiming that there were five stages of development. Countries pass through these stages — traditional society, preconditions for take-off, take-off, drive to maturity and age of mass high consumption — when evolving from 'traditional' societies, dominated by institutions such as the family and agricultural production, to the modern stage, where most of society lives in urban areas and enjoys a comfortable lifestyle of mass consumption. This is achieved, according to most modernisation theorists, including Rostow, through the introduction of material forces such as capital and investment from the West, the acceptance of Western institutions such as the nuclear family and democratic establishments, and the export of manufactured goods to the West (Rostow 1960: 12-16). Rostow argued that economic growth follows a quantitative pattern in economies as they go through the processes of industrialisation, and LDCs develop 'in the shadow of more developed economies until they are capable of self-sustained economic growth' (Smith et al 2008: 9). Furthermore, democratisation is also the inevitable conclusion of modernisation, evolving from the rationalisation and secularisation of the inhabitants of the 'age of mass high consumption' as a result of their economic development and social mobilisation (Huntington 1986: 152).

Modernisation theory can quite obviously be criticised from a neo-modernist or Marxist viewpoint as Western-centric. The countries of Western Europe and the North Atlantic, evidently, evolved through the process outlined by Rostow. Nevertheless, the theory is unsustainable when applied globally, due to the abundance of counter-examples and anomalies to this hypothesis, evident by analysing the international political economy. Scholars such as Rostow and Huntington could be criticised for attempting to enforce upon African, Latin American and Middle Eastern nations the liberal-democratic, capitalist values of the West (Matunhu 2011: 65): an attempt to force LDCs to follow in the developmental footsteps of their former colonisers whereas many countries have modernised, or are modernising, through different economic, political or social means. India, which has been a constitutional democracy since its independence, seems to have become less democratic as it has modernised. Whilst its economic cooperation with

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the Western world has increased and Gross Domestic Product increased from \$37.6785 billion in 1960 to \$1.848 trillion in 2011 (Google Public Data 2013), its politics have become 'less tolerant, less secular, less law-abiding, less liberal' (Zakaria 2003: 30). Furthermore, China is industrialising at an unprecedented rate. Its government, though repressive and unlikely to relinquish power through democratic elections, is open to capitalist investment and business. This has led to the country modernising to a level where it has equalled much of the Western world in terms of economic strength, but it has not 'modernised' to the same level politically or socially. The richer China gets, and the more successful it gets in terms of capitalist industrialisation, the less 'modern' it gets in the structural functionalist, 'Western' sense of the term (Karbon 2008). In other words, the Chinese Communist Party does not support or seek to implement the liberal-democratic values, which the modernisation theorists have hypothesised they would eventually embrace. This surely proves that, whilst countries modernise, there are different paths to, as well as different branches of, modernity.

Using such modernising and industrialising countries as examples, we could be justified in coming to the conclusion that the failure of modernisation theory stems from 'the collapse in the belief in the United States as the inevitable ideological and technological model which the rest of the world is destined to follow' (Gilman 2008). In other words, by establishing the US model of democracy and liberal-capitalism as the end product of modernisation, modernisation theorists completely disregard other paths to development. Seeing history as a linear process in this way, as Fukuyama did in 1989 when he pronounced the triumph of liberal-democracy, capitalism and 'the end of history' after the fall of communism, is deeply flawed. Ethnic and religious conflicts, the rise of terrorism, military regimes and economic stagnation have proven that modernisation theorists had underestimated the challenges that LDCs face on the route to modernisation (Linklater 2010: 548). Diamond (2002: 23) argues that a different path to modernisation might be the increasing trend towards hybrid regimes in areas such as Latin America, where elections are held, but none of the usual constitutional checks and balances exist. Islamic states, also, are examples of countries that 'develop their own models of modernity, ones that value the role of reason and are pluralist, but also religious' (Sonn 2005: 80). Whilst such states might not be on the same socio-political 'level' as Western liberal-capitalist societies, they are not necessarily any less modern.

On the other hand, there is little evidence to support the claim that all countries will develop to the same level economically, let alone socially or politically. Not all states have seen their economic growth and rise in wealth come from industrialisation, which modernisation theorists claim is the only route to modernity. Many countries rich in natural resources, such as the Middle Eastern, West African and Latin American states, have been incapable of turning this enormous wealth into national economic success. Many studies have shown that such countries have had even less economic growth than states without abundant natural resources (Auty 1993: 45; Sachs & Warner 1995). The link between possession of natural resources and poor economic performance can be proven by considering the recent economic history of the OPEC states. Between 1965 and 1998, the average Gross National Product per capita growth of the countries receded by 1.3%, whilst other areas of the developing world saw growth increase by 2.2% (Gylfason 2001: 850). This 'resource curse' is hypothesised to happen because the incoming revenue from the export of natural resources damages the other economic sectors of a nation, such as production and services, by driving up exchange rates. Increased revenue coming from the sale of natural resources would lead to a nation's other exports becoming more expensive to purchase, making the manufacturing and production sectors less able to compete globally, leading to even greater reliance on natural resources (Raphael & Stokes 2010: 384). Furthermore, whilst many countries in the Middle East have undergone rapid economic growth due to oil wealth, social mobilisation has yet to fully materialise (Johannesson 2009: 7). Some dependency theorists make the claim that economic influx due to foreign aid has a similar effect on a country's economy, preventing 'modernisation'.

Dependency theory argues that lack of development is not a consequence of 'the absence of modern values but instead (is) the direct consequence of economic exploitation' (O'Brien & Williams 2010: 316). The theory suggests that the countries of the global North and South are in a structural relationship with one another, and the development of the MDCs, mostly in the North, leads to the underdevelopment of LDCs as a by-product. It rejects the viewpoint that non-industrial states are merely more primitive versions of MDCs, instead claiming that such countries have their own structures and features, wholly different to developed nations. Additionally, the problem is not that LDCs are not integrated into the global political economy, but is instead how they are integrated (Woods 2010: 249). Dependency theorists suggest that although both first and third world countries benefit from investment, integration and

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technology transfers, the LDCs are paradoxically locked into a detrimental economic position (Brown & Ainley 2009: 164) where they rely on the developed countries for investment and work, but there is little chance of independent growth. The radical conclusion of this theory is that the only means of 'modernising' for such countries would be to delink from the capitalist international economic system altogether. Nonetheless, does not the success of Indian, Chinese and East Asian economies, which were once examples supporting this theory, suggest that LDCs can economically modernise in the liberal-capitalist system?

There is no doubt that many liberal modernisation theorists have the optimistic worldview that by adopting the liberal-democratic capitalist values that have been the cornerstone of Western modernisation, the less economically-developed countries of the world would be able to modernise themselves. Nonetheless, this one-size-fits-all approach towards international political economy can surely not be expected to succeed considering the vast socio-economic and political differences throughout the world. The rise of Islamic theocracies, the BRICS nations, the recent global financial crisis and the immense debts incurred by third world countries, all suggest that there will never be a time when all countries develop to the same level. In my opinion, the modernisation theory is merely an example of the West imposing its own values upon rest of the world.

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