Modernization Theory: A Critical Perspective

“Underdevelopment began [...] on 20 January 1949. On that day, 2 billion people became underdeveloped.”¹ According to Gustavo Esteva, the reverberations of President Harry Truman’s use of the term “underdeveloped” in his Inaugural Address on that January day in 1949 are still being felt today. Since that day, there has been an immeasurable amount of time, effort and money put into solving the development “problem” by academics, politicians and professionals, alike. Does a development problem even exist? If so, what are its causes and how can they be addressed?

One of the predominant ways of understanding the problem of underdevelopment is through the framework of modernization theory, which asserts that traditional, or underdeveloped, societies² can transform into modern, developed societies³ by a linear series of incremental steps of economic growth. However, this theory, and the development practices resulting from this theory, are simplistic, ahistorical, and ultimately informed by an imperialistic worldview. Development, in the way it is conceived by modernization theory, focuses largely on the economic phenomenon of national economies shifting from rural, agriculturally based to urban, manufacturing based. First, I will examine the ways in which modernization theory is too simplistic to describe the reality of development and underdevelopment in our world. Secondly, I

² Traditional societies refer to those societies that are predominantly agrarian, family or clan based, and pre-Newtonian in science in technology, according to Walt Rostow (1960).
³ Modern societies refer to those societies that have widespread consumption of goods and services as well as increased spending on welfare services, according to Walt Rostow (1960).
will show the ways in which this theory lacks historical perspective. Lastly, I will analyze the underpinnings of this theory as informed by its westernized worldview.

Modernization theory is far too reductionist to be of any use, both as an explanation and as a practice, in our current world of international development. Walt Rostow, arguably one of the pioneers behind modernization theory, even acknowledges that his explanation is simplified and doesn’t reflect reality completely in his book *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto*. He clarifies that his stages of economic growth are “an arbitrary and limited way of looking at the sequence of modern history” and they “dramatize […] the uniformities in the sequence of modernization.”

However, in the next chapter, he seemingly contradicts himself by explaining that all societies fall within one of five categories, economically. This is a very simplistic way of looking at how modernization occurs and it focuses solely on the economic dimensions and indicators without taking into account the complexities of the interaction between economic, social, cultural and political dimensions of a given state.

Modernization theory also makes some basic assumptions that render it far too simplistic to be a good explanatory tool or a framework for development practices. For example, modernization theory assumes that there are only two real types of societies – traditional, or underdeveloped, and modern, or developed. Most societies fall somewhere in between and employ a more hybrid model on the development spectrum, such as “traditional” farmers in Africa using cell phones to find information about local market prices before taking their vegetables a long distance to sell.

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5 Ibid.
society based mostly on agriculture is deemed traditional, it is also using the technology of the most modern societies. The second assumption made by modernization theory is that the state is in control of its economic situation and outside forces don’t factor much into the equation. In the era of globalization, where we live in a world that is completely interconnected, this assumption strongly undermines the utility of modernization theory.

The second problem with modernization theory as an explanation for development is that it is ahistorical. This is closely tied to the assumption above that disregards outside influences on the modernization process. This is best exemplified by an answer Mahatma Gandhi gave to a question regarding India achieving Britain’s level of prosperity. Gandhi said, “It took Britain half the resources of the planet to achieve its prosperity. How many planets will a country like India require?”

Modernization theory neglects to account for outside influences on the way a society is able to develop, with its most glaring lack of acknowledgment of both colonialism and slavery. The systems of colonialism and slavery employed by the “modern” countries, historically, allowed for the constant supply of cheap or free labor as well as inexpensive raw materials. This, in turn, allowed the empires to become industrialized through the deindustrialization and destruction of their colonies.

It is especially through this ahistorical lens that modernization theory continues to persist today in development practices. The whole notion that a country can become developed with simply the right set of economic factors, despite outside influences, can be seen in the policies of agencies like United Nations Development, and the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, even today. It is because of this modernization framework that there has been a push for

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“good governance” in managing the economies of countries receiving development assistance.\textsuperscript{8} In the “good governance” model, corruption is seen as hindering development. Yet, modernization theory does not factor in why a government might become corrupt and under what circumstances corruption is created. The focus is being placed almost entirely on the government with little regard to outside factors that could play a significant role in shaping the actions and decisions of individuals within the government.

Modernization theory is also plagued by its imperialistic perspective on development, specifically its similarities, or overlaps, with processes of westernization.\textsuperscript{9} It is argued by some scholars that modernization, as it is put into practice, is essentially westernization.\textsuperscript{10} The very notion that modernization only comes in one shape and size (Western European or American style modernization) is an imperialistic point of view. Essentially, there is only one pathway to achieving modernization, according to this point of view. The way that this is implemented in development practice is to send experts from modernized countries to underdeveloped countries to create and oversee an economic plan that leads to modernization. It can be seen as a “West knows best” type of exchange, which belies the benevolent notion that the target society is being lifted up out of poverty and economic distress.

Modernization theory also creates, at its core, a dichotomy that presents the Western world as superior and the non-Western world as inferior. This is another way in which modernization theory takes on an imperialistic approach to development. This dichotomy harkens back to the times of colonialism, where the narrative was often that the “savage” was


\textsuperscript{9} Westernization is the process of a society adopting Western (primarily Western European and American) culture and practices in areas such as politics, technology, education, and even consumer spending patterns. While this term is not precise and riddled with a set of overgeneralizations, I use it because modernization and westernization are very closely linked and often conflated.

\textsuperscript{10} Willis, 2011, 45.
being benevolently “civilized” by those who were already civilized. It was the duty of the more civilized societies to spread their civilization across the world. Now, the modernization narrative is made to fit the times and is often framed in such a manner that the developed countries have a duty to aid the less developed countries of the world in the name of political stability, poverty elimination, and democratic values. I argue that this is just an extension of the imperial mission civilized brought about by modernization theory’s assertion that societies are either “backwards” or “modern.”

While modernization theory remains heavily criticized in our modern era of development, it does have some positives. One can argue that because of modernization theory, development, as a practice and an academic field, began. People began to study the ways by which to make the world better for all people living in it. While their ideas may have been shortsighted and even coopted by actors in the global system that seek only to capitalize on the international economic and political system, the pioneers of development, and specifically of modernization theory, are due credit for their advancement of development practices and studies. On the practical side of the spectrum, modernization theory can be given credit for the advancement of fields like medicine and healthcare in societies that are most in need. It can also be argued that in many situations, when local experts do not exist, then experts from the outside are needed to jumpstart processes for improvement. Healthcare is often one of those fields.

Modernization theory is a starting platform and a point of reflection from which other theories of development can launch. However, its weaknesses unfortunately render its utility, both in explanatory value and in practice, ineffective. It does not provide a whole and complete picture of explaining the ways in which developed countries became developed and its practical path does not often lead to an underdeveloped country becoming developed. While
modernization theory and the practices that come from it may not be effective in prescribing a formula for nations to become developed, it does help to call attention to the inequities in our world and it has provided us with a critical conversation on how to enact change.
Bibliography


