

# SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

UDC 316.422  
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## Modernization as social becoming (ten theses on modernization)\*

*The paper presents thesis characteristic of modernization in keeping with the key ideas of the social establishment theory. Modernization is a specific way of social establishment that provides the population with wide-open access to the expanding capabilities of human potential implementation. The important task for the pro-modernization authorities is creating the structural and institutional grounds on which people can implement their human potential completely. The era of globalization incorporates numerous types of modernization. Mutual adaptation of that types as well as preservation of local traditions and conditions within the frames of transformation is of crucial importance for the era of globalization and modernization. The composition of innovations with social memory and traditions is the optimal course of modernization. It is important to understand that, besides creation of the new, modernization involves destruction of the old. That is why the ambivalent balance is significant.*

*Modernization; social establishment theory; social, cultural, human potential.*



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Modernization, as a crucial type of macro-social change, is an ambiguous and contested concept. Like the idea of social change itself, modernization is treated in two opposite ways in sociological theory. One, characteristic of evolutionism or developmentalism, dominant in the classical 19th century social thought, puts emphasis on its inevitability, unilinear course and single final destination. Another, emerging

from the critique of determinism, fatalism and finalism assumes contingency, multilinearity and open-endedness of modernization. It looks at modernization as a possibility rather than necessity, as an achievement rather than fate. And claims that whether this possibility is achieved depends on the actions, decisions, choices of the members of society plus the conducive circumstances for mobilizing and

\* The keynote address presented at the 1st International Modernization Forum at Beijing, August 8, 2013.

facilitating such actions. The contingent character of these actions and circumstances produces various trajectories and outcomes of modernization, in other words, multiple modernities.

I take the latter perspective and in this article will attempt to apply to the analysis of modernization my general theory of social becoming as put forward in two books in the nineties: one a monograph by Polity Press, Cambridge [30] and another a textbook of the sociology of social change by Blackwell, Oxford [31], which also came out in the Chinese translation by Professor Lin Juren [33]. This very general model of social becoming has a number of implications which have been hinted or formulated here and there in the rich literature on modernization. I propose to put them together in a synthetic picture by means of ten theses on modernization. Each could be elaborated in a separate article, but within my space constraints I will only present a list, a sort of agenda for future research.

**Thesis 1. Modernization is the particular implementation of social becoming.** Therefore the inspiration for the theory of modernization can be found in one of the most important sentences in the history of sociology: “Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please, only in circumstances given to them, encountered and inherited from the past generations”. I guess you recognize the author – Karl Marx [18, 19]. Applied to modernization, “making history” means that the process results from the transforming potential of human agency, understood as a synthetic force ascribed to a society as a whole. Such a transforming potential emerges as a combined product of three factors:

(a) The quality of the actors, their endowment (e.g. pro-modern motivations, aspirations, beliefs, relevant knowledge). An interesting ideal type of a modern personality, as a pre-requisite for modernizing actions was

proposed by Alex Inkeles and David Smith [14]. They mention such traits as: readiness for new experience, openness and tolerance for the variety of opinions and beliefs, treating time as a precious resource, planning the future, optimism and activism. Here the key to shaping such personalities is socialization and education.

(b) Structural circumstances opening the field of opportunities for modernizing actions (e.g. level of technology, economic regime, cultural values and rules). Here the key to shaping pro-modern structures are institutional reforms, and wise policies.

(c) The inherited shape of society produced by our predecessors in the earlier phases of cumulative social becoming. Here the key is the respect, cultivation and continuation of indigenous tradition.

The combination of these three types of determinants facilitates or hinders modernizing praxis: choices and decisions undertaken by human actors - individual, collective and authoritative. And it produces various routes of modernization and its multiple outcomes.

**Thesis 2. Is there one modernization or many?** All three components of the model - (a) personalities of the members of society, (b) economic, political and cultural institutions, and (c) inherited traditions – are contingent and variable. Therefore the idea of multiple modernities, put forward most forcefully and elaborately by Shmuel Eisenstadt [7], Bjorn Wittrock [38], Johan Arnason [2] and others, is clearly implied by the model of social becoming. It leads to the relativization of modernizing processes, where so-called Western (or Euro-American) modernity appears as just one of historical trajectories and outcomes of the process of modernization. The ethnocentrism of the early theorists of modernization: Talcott Parsons [24], Daniel Lerner [15], Marion Levy [16] is excluded by the logic of our model.

**Thesis 3. Is the impact of multiple modernities equal, or some versions are dominant?** The corrective factor is the process of globalization, as grasped by Roland Robertson [26], Manuel Castells [3] and many others, which has allowed the influence of Western modernity to spread to other parts of the world, due to the hegemonic, expansionist power – economic, political, military, cultural – of leading centers of modernization and the popular appeal of technological novelties, mass culture and consumerism. But the epoch of conquest and colonialism with imposed Westernization is over. Apart from its own, original civilizational area Western modernity is no longer accepted wholesale, but only selectively. In the era of globalization multiple modernizations merge.

**Thesis 4. Isn't such dominance and hegemony pushing toward the uniformization, homogenization of the modernizing processes (proverbial MacDonaldization [25], refuting the claim of multiple modernities?** The answer is no, because modernity is a multidimensional condition – economic, political, cultural, religious, mental – where various dimensions may appear in multiple configurations and permutations. And the globalization and imposed homogenization in line with the Western syndrome of “capitalism plus democracy plus individualism plus secularization” evokes defensive reactions to preserve unique, indigenous formats of modernization responding to local traditions and circumstances, incorporating only some elements of Western modernity. Such alternative scenarios of globalization and modernization are discussed for example by Ulf Hannerz under the labels of hybridization, creolization or mutual adaptation [12]. The mark of modernization should be an open and enriching dialogue with other modernizations.

**Thesis 5. But if there are many trajectories of modernization, how do we know that in concrete cases we witness authentic, true**

**modernization?** Is there any common denominator; are there any universal criteria of modernization? This is perhaps the most difficult question, and the answer cannot be given on purely factual grounds. It must invoke valuations and ideological convictions, refer to philosophical anthropology and ethics.

For me modernization is not a value, or a goal *per se* but the means, an instrument for making more people happier, living more full and dignified life. More concretely it means the access of more and more members of society to the growing opportunities for the realization of human potential.

I accept the romantic and optimistic rather than cynical and pessimistic image of a human person. I believe there are three crucial human potentials (a) creativeness, inventiveness, innovativeness, (b) reason and reflexivity, (c) impulse of community, embeddedness in rich and satisfying moral bonds with others, such as trust, loyalty, reciprocity, solidarity and sympathy. Similar claims are phrased by a number of authors, e.g., Erich Fromm contrasting being-syndrom with having-syndrom [9], Ralf Dahrendorf focusing on life-chances, in his language the combination of “options and ligatures” [4], Norbert Elias emphasising civility, gentleness, recognizing the dignity of others in everyday interpersonal contacts [8].

**Thesis 6. Must the natural human drives always be realized?** The answer is no, because as implied by the model of social becoming, there must be conducive structural circumstances mobilizing the people for modernizing praxis.

There are some pre-conditions for human self-realization, three of which are for me most important: (a) some level of technological and economic development ensuring comfort and prosperity, (b) widely available education, including ethical and aesthetic formation, and providing the people with what I call

“civilizational competence” i.e. necessary skills to effectively use the technological, economic and cultural opportunities that modernization offers [32], (c) cultural institutions providing easy access to higher forms of art and culture raising sensitivity and enriching experiences. Neither of these three pre-conditions emerge spontaneously; they require political vision, political will, effective implementation. Building structural and institutional field allowing people to engage their full potentialities is the task for enlightened leadership cultivating the project of modernization. Modernization must involve both the reforms from above and the mobilization of the people. Somewhat parallel observations can be found in the work of Charles Tilly [34], Mayer Zald and John McCarthy [39], Aldon Morris [21] and others proposing the “resource mobilization theory” of social movements.

**Thesis 7. Does modernization mean complete social change and absolute novelty?** No, modernization must be linked with tradition of a given society, its unique social memory, cultural heritage, religious or ideological creeds. They provide intellectual and moral resources for modernizing action, both for the authorities using the wisdom of generations for rational reform, and for the people who in the rootedness and continuity with the past find existential security in the time of chaos and change. The emphasis on the importance of tradition may be found in the work of Edward Shils [27], or again Shmuel Eisenstadt [7]. Optimum course of modernization is some historically and culturally determined mix of innovation, novelty with social memory and tradition.

**Thesis 8. Is modernization a synonym for progress, bringing only the beneficial changes, the betterment of societies and improvement of human condition within societies?** The answer is no. Fetishization of modernity is a mistake. Our world is so constructed that every benefit

has a price, entails some cost. As the famous saying has it: “There is no free lunch”.

Among the indisputably progressive achievements of modernization one may list: the growing length of life, health, comforts and hygiene, technological inventions making life easier and more attractive, expanding social capital, raising level of education and awareness, etc. But already the classical theorists of modernity have been aware of side-effects, dysfunctions, and pains of modernization. Marx was raising the theme of alienation [22], Durkheim of anomie [6], Weber of the iron cage of bureaucracy [37], Toennies of the lost *Gemeinschaft* [36], Simmel of the hypertrophy of stimuli and impressions in the urban life [28], Ortega y Gasset of degradation of mass culture [23], Jürgen Habermas of the colonization of the life world by the bureaucratic systems [11]. Later writers, as well as leaders of social movements, were raising the theme of wars and genocide with recent scourge of terrorism, ecological destruction, depletion of natural resources, pollution, climate change. All these refer to concrete adverse consequences of historically specific modes of modernizations, and in any estimates of the success of modernization an ambivalent balance of functions and dysfunctions must always be taken into account.

But at a more general level, modernization as such means a comprehensive, rapid and often unexpected social change. The fetishization of change as good in itself is a mistake, change is often progressive but not necessarily so, and it also incurs costs. Again the ambivalent balance must be considered. To refer to negative consequences of such change, myself together with Jeffrey Alexander and others [1] have proposed the concept of trauma, and particularly cultural trauma. By this we understand the painful experiences of disruptive social change due to the breaking of continuity, routines, accustomed modes of everyday life, earlier strategies of adaptation, strongly internalized

beliefs and rules, revising cherished memories. At the cultural level such trauma may become widespread, reaching the status of shared and constraining “social fact *sui generis*” in the sense given to this concept by Emile Durkheim [5], and in effect paralyzing activism. Traumas of modernization seem to be a common phenomenon in modern society, perhaps more unstable than earlier ones, pervaded with radical mutability and accelerated change, some of the revolutionary scale. Thus a new challenge is not only to modernize but to relieve traumas of modernization and effectively cope with them.

**Thesis 9. Is the course of modernization smooth and gradual?** The evolutionist and developmentalist tradition of Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer, as well as all proponents of the sequential stages of growth, would respond in the affirmative. For them societies move as if on a single escalator, with the same speed, along the same path and constantly upward, driven by a constant impulse toward structural and functional differentiation. But from the perspective of social becoming, the answer is no.

Whether influenced directly or only indirectly by dialectics and revolutionary logic of change of Hegelian and Marxian provenience, the picture of modernization incorporates antagonisms, conflicts and struggles, resulting in contingent, variable routes and outcomes. The reason for that is that human society is never homogenous, but always divided between groups of different interests, aspirations, horizons and ideologies. Hence the question “modernity for whom?” becomes relevant. It happens that benefits of modernity – economic, political or cultural goods – are never equally distributed. They fulfill the interests and aspirations of some groups, e.g. modernizing elites, middle classes, professionals, while costs of change, deprivations and traumas of all sorts, the “bads”, burden other groups, e.g. unqualified working class, peasantry, dwellers of poorer

rural areas. Modernization may also uproot cherished traditional ideas, creeds, customs, ways of life, and evoke clash at this level. Hence modernization often encounters conservative contestation, it becomes the focus of conflict which may lead to stagnation, blocks, backlash or even – to use the concept couched by Edward Tiryakian – prolonged de-differentiation [35]. The conflict-ridden and permanently contested nature of modernization is strongly emphasized by Shmuel Eisenstadt, who summarizes his analysis with a sentence of a Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski who says that modernization is on “endless trial” [7].

**Thesis 10. Can the future of modernization be extrapolated from present trends, or rather we may expect some qualitative turns?** In view of the complex dialectics of modernization is the prediction of the future at all feasible? The heritage of evolutionist or developmentalist approach with its inclination toward prophecies was influential in the heydays of futurology, in various theories of postindustrial society, or of systems convergence. In contrast the theory of social becoming implies the activist and dialectic image with no assured future. To foresee where the contingent and open-ended process of modernization will lead seems impossible. But with some probability and risk one may venture with Ronald Inglehart the prediction of major cultural and ideological turn from the current focus on material and survival values such as economic prosperity, abundant consumption, hedonistic experiences, toward higher, more spiritual concerns, or “postmaterialist values”, such as harmony with nature, health and fitness, peace and security, aesthetic sensitiveness etc. [13].

Of course the condition of their ascendance is the continued economic growth and satisfying of fundamental survival or mundane needs of large segments of human population. We are far from that, and whether it is at all attainable is far from certain. But similar intuitions, or



perhaps dreams about new, higher level of needs and values have been expressed by numerous scholars coming from completely different disciplines or theoretical traditions: psychologist Abraham Maslow with his hierarchy of psychological needs [20], cultural anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski with his sequence of necessary social functions [17], sociologist Pitirim Sorokin in his cyclical theory, with a prophecy of the next idealistic epoch after a long rule of hedonistic materialism [29].

Perhaps, just perhaps, this convergence of views may be a source of hope that further modernization of the human society will not necessary mean just more and more cars, bigger and bigger cities, higher and higher buildings,

richer and richer shopping galleries, more and more crowded beaches, quicker and quicker computers and jets, more and more pixels in the cameras and applications in the mobile phones, louder and louder rock concerts, more and more amusing TV programs – but something more ambitious.

But the theory of social becoming assumes that hopes are not enough. To make the hopes come true, actions and struggles are necessary. As Antonio Gramsci puts it, in the social world predicting means acting for the embodiment of prediction [10]. Maybe the next phase of modernization will witness the conflicts and fights about its own deeper, humanistic meaning.

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