

## Modernization theory - and the non-western world

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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Konferenzbeitrag / conference paper

Zur Verfügung gestellt in Kooperation mit / provided in cooperation with:

SSG Sozialwissenschaften, USB Köln

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Zapf, W. (2004). *Modernization theory - and the non-western world*. (Discussion Papers / Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung, 2004-003). Berlin: Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung gGmbH. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-110362>

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**Modernization Theory –  
and the Non-Western World\***

Best.-Nr. P 2004-003

**Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin  
für Sozialforschung (WZB)**

**Juni 2004**

Beim Präsidenten  
Emeriti Projekte

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\* Paper presented to the conference "Comparing Processes of Modernization",  
University of Potsdam, December 15-21, 2003.

## **Modernization theory –and the Non-Western World**

In this paper I want to deal with three topics: first, with the development and the ups and downs of modernization theory and its treatment of the non-Western world (I); secondly, with some basic social structure distributions and trends of human development for selected societies, including Islamic countries (II); thirdly, with modernization and modernity in the non-Western world, especially in the Arab world (III). This third part is based only on my reading of some works by area specialists and specialists on Islam; therefore, it barely represents more than the average layperson's current level of information today in Western Europe.

### **I**

On several occasions I have described the multi-faceted field of modernization theory as having a threefold reference: 1) the process since the industrial revolution and the political revolutions at the end of the 18th century when the small group of today's modern societies developed in Western Europe and North America; 2) the many successful and unsuccessful efforts to catch up and reduce the gap to the leading societies by poorer and less developed countries; 3) the efforts of the modern societies to cope – via innovation and reform – with new internal problems and, more importantly, with the changing international and globalizing environment (Zapf 1991).

Briefly, I will give you two definitions of the main features of modern societies. My own definition refers to the mechanisms of inclusion, value pluralism, differentiation and status upgrading (i.e. welfare development), and,

also in the sense of Talcott Parsons, to the basic institutions, which means basic societal inventions, namely, competitive democracy, the market economy, mass consumption, and the welfare state (Zapf 1991). A more dynamic definition is given by Johannes Berger: "Modernization is the internal achievement of a society; the particular processes of modernization support each other in combination; the leading nations do not impede the followers; the processes of modernization are converging in a common goal" (modern society, modernity) (Berger 1996: 46). This means that development cannot be explained by exploitation nor can it be accomplished by simply copying institutions. Despite the basic fact of rising differentiation there is the parallel process of rising interdependence. Despite visible trends of globalization the indigenous forces are decisive. But such concepts have been bitterly disputed in the last 50 years of the modernization discourse, and they also are disputed in the Islamic world today.

Jeffrey Alexander (1994), a critical American sociologist, has outlined the story of the modernization discourse in his essay: "Modern, Anti, Post, and Neo: How social theories have tried to understand the 'New World' of 'Our Times'". He distinguishes four stages which coincide roughly with the last four decades of the 20th century: the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s and the 1990s. Early modernization theory reconstructed Western development and, in its liberal belief of granted progress and the universalization of American values, projected them world-wide, especially on the developing countries. One popular model combines political development (state- and nation-building, participation, redistribution), economic growth, and social mobilization with cultural rationalization, psychic mobilization and international transformation (Zapf 1969: 23; Berger 1996: 53).

Against this doctrine a radical Marxist criticism of capitalism arose in dependencia theory and in world-systems theory. Both explained

underdevelopment at the periphery by exploitation through the capitalist centre. The dependencia school believes that dependency is an external condition, that the centre nations get all the benefits from unequal exchange, and that the peripheral countries should sever their ties with the core countries. The world-system school adds the concept of semi-peripheries with an economic emphasis on import-substitution; this school shifts its focus from the nation-state to the whole world; long-term historical trends are its units of analysis (So 1990). Both theories predicted the transition, already underway, of late capitalism into socialism. However, when this transition failed to occur and when some developing countries, especially in East Asia, made spectacular progress, the controversy lost its momentum. Several theories of post-modernism tried to "deconstruct" liberal modernization theory as well as the Marxist alternatives. Post-modernists ridiculed these approaches as out-dated "great narratives" and tried to substitute them with multiple cultural and constructivist contingency theories. But with the breakdown of Communism and with the success of some Asian and South American countries attention again turned toward the preconditions and achievements of democracy and the market economy.

Since 1987/8 the number of democratic regimes has increased from 66 to 121 states (Freedom House: 9). This stage is called by Jeffrey Alexander, Edward Tiryakian and others (including me) as "neo-modernism" or "modernization II" which indeed relies on democracy and free economic development, this time however without the concept of convergence to Western cultural patterns and without underestimating nationalist and fundamentalist counter-movements. Tiryakian has summarized neo-modernization analysis (NMA) as follows:

1. Modernization is the result of actions by individuals and collectives, not an automatic development of systems.

2. They seek new ways to achieve their goals and fulfil their values; but whether these aims can be accomplished, will depend on their resources.
3. Modernization is not a consensual process, but a competition between modernizers, conservatives and bystanders.
4. Science is a major driving force, but religion and tradition must not be underestimated.
5. The general criterion for the success of modernization is the welfare development of the whole population.
6. Centres of modernization may change and move.
7. Modernization is not continuous-linear; it has also cycles and regressive crises (Tiryakian 1998).

Only a few years ago we considered neo-modernism as the state of the art but, in the meantime, we seem to have already entered a new stage (for which I do not yet have a good label); fundamentalist and/or terrorist threats in several parts of the world would seem to rectify S. Huntington's (1993) hypothesis of a "clash of civilizations" as the most relevant conflict at the beginning 21st century. "The fundamental source of conflict is shifting from ideological or economic to cultural. ... Lines between cultures are defined as 'fault lines', and the Velvet Curtain of culture is ... the latter day equivalent of the divisive and provocative iron curtain of old" (Hartmann 1995: 115/6). But before I take up that topic I would like to give a brief account of the treatment of the non-Western world during the stages of modernization theory just described.

As you know, the modernization of the West was already the subject of the classics of sociology around the turn of the 20th century: industrialization and

the growth of productive forces in Marx, differentiation in Spencer, differentiation as specialization and, at the same time, new forms of solidarity in Durkheim, rationalization in Max Weber. But Weber, other than Marx or Durkheim, stated that the encompassing process of rationalization was a speciality of the "occident", the West, and he asked, "What linkage of circumstances has led to the result that just in the occident and only here, cultural phenomena appeared which represented a developmental direction of universal importance and validity?" Weber's explanatory variables, as you also know, were the drive to capital accumulation in conjunction with the rational ethics of ascetic Protestantism (Weber 1920/2002: 557-572).

As to the early modernization theory of the 1950/60s one must remember that this theory was designed as a program explicitly directed to the non-Western world, that is, it was devoted to the "export" of Western institutions and values. An early classic, Daniel Lerner's "The Passing of Traditional Society" from 1958, states (p. 51): "Our concern is with large historical movement, now becoming visible in the Middle East, of which an enlarged capacity for empathy is the distinctive psychic component. Our interest is to clarify the process whereby the high empathizer tends to become also the cash customer, the radio listener, the voter". The data in this study came from early survey research of 1950/51 in Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Syria and Iran.

Dependencia and world-systems theories by definition concentrate on the non-Western world, as the periphery of a capitalist centre which, according to proponents of these theories, gained its leading position by exploitation, that is, by "the development of underdevelopment" (Baran; Frank). During the stage of culturalism and constructivism, which still has influence today, the non-Western world was considered to have committed the same fallacies as the West by not being aware that there is no reality outside our interpretations of it, and that even

"tradition" is invented or constructed. (As an aside, the merit of the cultural or constructivist view is the distinction of modernization qua process and modernity qua civilization, and the discussion of the "dark side", namely, the violence, social cost and alienation produced in this civilization; cf. Mergel 1997: 203-232.) The neo-modernism stage was also challenged, for example, by theories of globalization, even "cosmopolitization", on the one hand, and by non-Western resistance/opposition, which Huntington described as a "clash of civilizations", or even shorter as the "West against the rest". I shall turn to these challenges more briefly in the third section of this paper.

## II

I would like to digress here to discuss some comparative data on human development in selected countries. The data are taken from the Human Development Reports (1993; 2002) of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), published annually since 1990. For comparison I have selected six Arab countries, two Post-Communist countries, five OECD countries, Niger as the poorest country, and the aggregates for the Arab states and the OECD states. Human Development is measured by a combination of three components: life expectancy at birth, literacy of the population over 15 years of age plus the school enrolment ratio for all students (as a percentage of all youth), and the GNP per capita in U.S. dollars (at purchasing parity). The Human Development Index HDI is presented as a fraction of 1.0; for simplicity I have multiplied it by 1000.

## Human Development 1975 – 2000, Selected Countries

Country	Life expectancy in years	Literacy in % 15 ys.+	School Enrolment in %	GNP per capita PPP US \$	HDI rank	HDI Index (max. = 1000)				Change 1975/2000 in %
						2000	1995	1985	1975	
Saudi Arabia	71.6	76.3	61	11367	71	759	737	670	587	29
Turkey	69.8	85.1	62	6974	85	742	717	654	593	25
Iran	68.9	76.3	73	5884	98	721	688	607	556	30
Algeria	69.6	66.7	72	5308	106	697	663	600	501	39
Egypt	67.3	55.3	76	3635	115	642	605	532	435	48
Morocco	67.6	48.9	52	3546	123	602	569	508	429	40
Czech Rep. (CSSR)	74.9	97.6	70	13991	33	849	843	(931)		(-9)
Russian Union (UdSSR)	66.1	99.6	78	8377	60	781	779	(827)		(-6)
Sweden	79.7	99.0	100	24277	2	941	925	883	863	9
United States	77.0	99.0	95	34142	6	939	925	898	863	9
Japan	81.0	99.0	82	26755	9	933	923	893	854	9
Germany	77.7	99.0	94	25103	17	925	907	868	(967)	(-4)
Spain	78.5	97.6	95	19472	21	913	895	855	819	11
Niger	45.2	15.9	16	746	172	277	262	246	234	18
Arab states	66.8	62.0	62	4793	(32-144)	653				
OECD states	76.8	99.0	87	23569	(1-28)	905				

Sources: Human Development Report 2002, pp.149-156; 1993, pp.135-137.

Theoretically, the chosen indicators are the elements of a "basic needs" approach but they are also the elementary building blocks of any modernization theory: health, elementary and further education, economic resources from basics to mass consumption. Substantively, I want to draw your attention, for the moment, only to the following findings:

1. The Arab states are in a middle position in the world ranking, having made impressive improvements over the last 25 years. If we go back further, since about 1950, the Arab states have evolved from mostly illiterate populations to mostly literate ones, as D. Lerner predicted (Russett 1964: 223/4).
2. The gap between the Arab states and the OECD states, in terms of the HDI, is around 30%, but the former nearly equal Eastern Europe with Russia, and they surpass most of Africa.
3. The change among OECD states is limited because they are near the ceilings. The change in some post-Communist countries is negative, and even Germany still shows the burden of unification.

### III

Now let us return to modernization theory and the Arab world.

It was not just the ideas of Huntington that dashed the hopes of neo-modernism which had been so welcomed by many post-Communist countries, their politicians and social scientists. Several dramatic social-structural events and some new accents in the theoretical modernization discourse contributed to this reversal. In the 1990s three developments did

not fit into the neo-modernist scheme. Initially, we had the Asian “miracle” and the doctrine that Asian values (achievement with high discipline and low individualism, economic growth before democratization) would win the future, but the subsequent breakdowns in Asian economies soon ended this euphoria (Zapf 1996: 72/73). Second, disappointment has prevailed in many post-Communist countries because they have not been able to manage simultaneous development of democracy and economic growth in the liberated markets, and they have not been able to offset the growing poverty and increased inequality among their citizenry with functioning welfare-state institutions and provisions. Third, religious fundamentalist attacks in several, mostly Islamic, countries have culminated in terrorism against centre states and warfare in the countries from which the fundamentalism emanates.

Two “grand old men”, critics of the world-system and culturalist schools of modernization, have become active again. Immanuel Wallerstein (2003) gives a sobering account of the failures of the anti-capitalist movements (including socialism); at the same time, however, he also sees no possibilities for neo-modern capitalism. Wallerstein gloomily speaks of “entering global anarchy”, a dark period of struggle between the major actors in the world system, the outcome of which is unknown and uncertain. Shmuel Eisenstadt (1999: 37-50; here p. 40) vaguely sketches a picture of “multiple modernities” with no visible trend toward convergence; his vision, however, also does not crystallize in Huntington's clash of civilizations. According to Eisenstadt, multiple modernities have similar problems, but the solutions differ greatly; the result should be “several modern civilizations”, perhaps even including fundamentalist and new communal-national movements.

What do we learn from specialists on Islam regarding the clash of civilizations, global anarchy and multiple modernities? The first lesson is that there is not at all any unified, comprehensive organization of a fundamentalist Islam: rather, we are observing competition between fundamentalism, Islamic reformism and secular modernism. Fundamentalism or Islamism is understood basically as a modern reaction to Western dominance, based on a dogmatic interpretation of the holy scriptures, designed to build up an aggressive offensive of Islamic peoples. Islamic reformism has been present since the early 20th century. The underlying aim of this movement is to overcome the degradation of the West through reforms within Islam societies; implied here is technological/economic catch-up, but in accordance with the tenets laid out in the Koran. Modernism is the movement to establish democratic institutions within the Islamic religious diaspora, whereby some European ideas will be incorporated but Arabic socialism soundly rejected (Elger 2001:100, 260, 203).

The second lesson is that Arab nations show remarkable differences in adapting and transforming modern patterns. "Islam [does] not equal one Islam" (Metzger 2002: 7). Where Islamists participate in government they are least inclined toward violence and their countries develop in the direction of an "Islamic democracy". Lebanon and Jordan get good grades in this respect; Morocco is praised for her reforms, especially women's rights; Turkey and Egypt have or had made successful steps toward democracy. Even Iran, despite the revolution, is credited for achieving some democratization, including holding free elections and restoring civil rights; Schirin Ebadi, for example, just receive the Nobel Peace Prize. One German observer summarizes thus: "(The modernity envisaged by Islamic

intellectuals does) not equal the Western-liberal model but it contains important principles of a democratic order, like political participation, government responsibility, protection of human rights" (Metzger 2002: 7-15).

Problematic, in the eyes of Islamists, is internal strife within individual Islamic societies, especially conflict between political interests disguised in religious terms, and discontent fomented by religious aspirations (fundamentalism) beyond the existing states and nations. Another source of internal conflict is the "rentier state"/rentier economy in practice, which serves the interest of small elite groups and clashes with Islam-centred models of politics. The rentier state model attributes the wealth of some Arab states to the effect of petrodollars, i.e. windfall profits from oil exports; this gives the ruling elites of those states near independence from other domestic groups and social classes (Moaddel 2002: 376-378). The Western nations must develop a better understanding of all these features, including the counter-intuitive facts that most terrorists do not belong to the very poor, but rather to the well-educated, and that suicide missions are regarded by some as a holy service. The Western nations can no longer expect to be regarded by the rest as the masters whose life styles and values can (and are to be) simply taken over.

Overall, to summarize, recent modernization theory regards the Islamic route to modernity as one of several paths with an uncertain ending. It does not change the basic notion that uneven development and gaps in individual and collective welfare – and not foremost civilization differences – are the main reasons for conflict up to the extremes of suicide attacks. "Taking an evolutionary-functionalist perspective on change alters the debate about the

'clash of civilizations' because it suggests that seemingly irreconcilable cultural differences are more a product of different rates of modernization than of permanent cultural divisions" (Chirot 2001: 345). This is still the hard-nose position of modernization theorists who would point to indicators like the HDI. Indigenous improvements, albeit in international cooperation, are irreplaceably necessary in order to loosen the present tensions and the threat of violence.

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