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Rescuing/Abandoning the Convergence Claim: Modernization Processes and Criticism

Andreas Langenohl

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to move beyond the bipolarity characterizing contemporary discussions of modernization theory between positions that stick to some kind of convergence argument – that modernization processes put societies onto the same developmental track – and such that reject this argument and with it a defining feature of sociological theory. This bipolarity has opened up since the breakdown of the Soviet Union, which initially gave rise to the hope that now all societies, regardless of their cultural, historical or economic background, would follow the modernization path marked by the western democracies (thus making Talcott Parsons' famous prediction become true that in the end Socialist systems would be transformed due to the contradictions between structure and popular expectations inherent in them (Parsons 1971)). However, this was not to be. In the beginning of the 1990s two works of major influence were published that have come to stand for the sharp opposition mentioned above: Francis Fukuyama's »*The End of History*« and Samuel Huntington's article »*A Clash of Civilizations?*«. It was not the first time that popular theory with some sort of political affinity served as a low-key version of modernization theory proper: Walt Rostows »*The Stages of Economic Growth*«, an example of US-centered modernization theory of the 1950s and 1960s, apparently stood in close connection to the State Department and the White House (Gaddis 1997: 184).

As Huntington's proposal has had a greater impact on policy makers than Fukuyama's, so have its equivalents on the level of general sociological theory. The retreating defenders of classical modernization theory try to rescue some sort of convergence claim, albeit without much resonance in the academic community. Most of those theorists attempt to incorporate the undeniable fact of divergent societal developments into »transition theory« or »path dependency«, thus construing different types of societal development (Berger 1996; Zapf 1996). Meanwhile those who explicitly stress this divergence and developmental or »cultural« pluralism tend to reject any notion of convergence and indeed that of modernity in the singular, most

recently substituting it, like in the famous »*Daedalus*« special issue (2000), by »multiple modernities«.

However, it seems to me that both arguments suffer from similar flaws. Those who have tried to fan out the convergence argument into different types of societal development have up to now not come up with persuading criteria upon which such types can be construed. The same is basically true with the multiple modernities approach which sometimes seems to imply that there are as much modernities as there are societies; but if so, what, then, is modern?

In trying to delineate an alternative to these shortcomings in contemporary modernization theory, I first discuss the meaning of Max Weber's work in regard to the convergence claim and show that it is much more ambivalent than usually thought (1). I then use this discussion for an assessment of the convergence claim in different stages of modernization theory in the 20th century (2) and for a characterization of an alternative approach to convergence that can be instrumental in conceiving of processes of change in contemporary societies (3). Then, I try to relate this approach to the multiple modernities paradigm (4). In conclusion, I turn to some consequences and research prospects (5).

1. Max Weber: Levels of Convergence before the Convergence Claim

Many researchers have considered Weber as one of the first to propagate the convergence claim of modernization theory (Eisenstadt 1987; Kaviraj 2000: 137–138). The most prominent of these is Shmuel Eisenstadt who has recently stated that Marx, Durkheim and Weber assumed, even if only implicitly, that the cultural program of modernity as it developed in modern Europe and the basic institutional constellations that emerged there would ultimately take over in all modernizing and modern societies; with the expansion of modernity, they would prevail throughout the world. (Eisenstadt 2000: 1)

Most researchers, furthermore, tend to look for the theoretical roots of Weber's notion of convergence in his works on the sociology of religion, especially in the comparative studies treating Protestantism, Hinduism/Buddhism and Confucianism/Taoism. However, it should be borne in mind that what Weber was aiming at was not the construction of a universal *model* of societal modernization but instead the reconstruction of the universal-historical *meaning* of the Western pattern of modernization. This is evident if one considers the fact that Weber's treatment of the non-Western religious systems stops at a historical point in time before the

beginning of western colonization, while his studies on the process of rationalization in western contexts cover this period of time most explicitly. His basic question is not under what conditions non-western societies would emulate western developments but instead how occidental rationalization could produce a societal constellation with the potential to virtually encompass the whole planet »until the last hundredweight of fossil fuel has been burnt to ashes« (Weber 1978: 170). For Weber, the question whether convergence occurs or not is of no significance.

It is, though, precisely this indifference that is instrumental in singling out different meanings of the term »convergence«. My question, precariously based on the counterfactuality of the convergence question in Weber, is: what *would* convergence mean if Weber *had* stated a similarity between processes of rationalization wherever?

First, convergence would regard everyday *value orientations*, *id est* the question of life-conduct. For Weber, it is predominantly the specific Protestant way of making sense of the world, encompassing certain articles of faith, a resulting work ethics and technologies of the self that accounts for the rapidity of capitalist-economic development in Europe and the Unites States. Conversely, other world religions produced different semantics that did not allow for an instrumental rationalization of one's life-conduct, whence they did not develop the cultural basis for a self-sustaining process of economic growth.

Secondly, convergence would involve *interdependencies* between value orientations on the one hand and social structures on the other. This aspect of convergence covers the mutual relations between different partial processes of modernization, for example the relation between the cultural rationalization of Protestant ethics in Calvinism and the development of economic structures within and between predominantly Protestant areas and their communities.

Thirdly and historically last, convergence would take place on the level of the *decoupling* of value orientations from the systems of action that they once had engendered. According to Dirk Kaesler, »(w)hat was most absorbing for Weber (…) were the processes of unintended decoupling of subjective interpretations of meaning from the actors and their crystallization as obligatory norms of (economic) everyday action.« (Kaesler 1995: 123, my translation) It is Weber's observation that processes of rationalization have become untied from the collective consciousness that had made them possible in the first place. This is crucial for the understanding of Weber's work since it allows him to explain the emergence of »rationalist utilitarianism« as a pattern of economic action that was once inspired by immaterial interests; that is, it allows him to trace the historical-motivational structures behind the differentiated patterns of action.

As mentioned above, it was not Weber's question whether processes of societal rationalization would take the same shape and course everywhere. Rather, he was concerned with explaining why historically western modernization processes were

so successful that they would ultimately impact on the whole planet. His work, though, allows to conceptualize the different levels of what would later be called »convergence«. It should be noted that, apart from the level of value orientations, the two other levels encompass not so much societal structures but rather societal processes, that is, *relations* between different spheres of society.

2. The Convergence Claim in 20th Century Modernization Theory

The different levels of societal convergence gained from Weber's work can be used to discuss the convergence claim in different periods of modernization theory. In this attempt I follow Jeffrey Alexander's (1995) useful distinction between altogether four stages of modernization theory in the 20th century. In relating his tableau to the levels of convergence deduced above, I quickly summarize the respective implications for the convergence claim in each theory stage (cf. table 1).

Theory stage (according to J. Alexander)	Levels of convergence (gained from M. Weber)		
	Value orientations	*Interrelations between value orientations and social structures*	*Decoupling of value orientations from systems of action*
modernization theory		X	
anti-modernization theory		X	
postmodernism	X	X	
Re-convergence approach			(X)

Table 1: Theory stages and levels of convergence

In classical modernization theory of the 1950s and 1960s (T. Parsons, W. Rostow, D. Lerner), convergence was thought of as occurring on the level of interrelations between structures and value orientations, *id est* between a self-sustaining economic growth and liberal-democratic value orientations. The central assumption was that once modernization on the structural level, namely industrialization, had »taken off«, people would develop an interest in an institutionalization of political and social structures that secured industrialization. In anti-modernization theory (I.

Wallerstein, *dependencia*), which presented itself as a critical assessment of the classical works of modernization theory, the level of the convergence claim was the same, the main difference being the argument that convergence would *not* occur due to the parasitic nature of western processes of capitalist modernization. The »capitalist world-system« fitted the interests of the bourgeois class in the industrialized countries of the West who were not interested in seeing the Third world developing the same standard. In the 1980s and since, postmodernism (F. Jameson, Z. Bauman, S. Seidman) has explicitly rejected the convergence claim as imperialistic. Where convergence occurred, it would take place only in the regrettable forms of »westernization«/»Americanization« or economic exploitation (and thus cover the levels of value orientations and interrelations between value orientations and societal structures).

It is worth noting here that at no time during the formative years of modernization theory (1940s–1970s) there occurred the idea that convergence would take place solely on the level of societal patterns, cultural or structural. Instead, the convergence argument was always related to the level of *interrelations* between structure and culture (postmodern theory being the sole exception), the implication being that convergence is a *relational* phenomenon.

»Re-convergence theory«, a term coined by Alexander, resembles the most recent attempt in sociological modernization theory (due to the publication date, Alexander was not yet able to include the multiple modernities-approach into his account). It loosely assembles theoretical approaches and notions that were launched to grasp the post-1989 societal and world-political shifts (A. Giddens, U. Beck, J. Cohen/A. Arato). Common to them is the rejection of the earlier theory stages and especially postmodern thought. In Alexander's formulation, the re-convergence approach consists in the program to »acknowledge that it is a renewed sense of involvement in the project of universalism, rather than some lipid sense of its concrete form«, that drives modernization processes (Alexander 1995: 101). In the following section I discuss how this paradigm can be situated in relation to the convergence claim.

3. Convergence: Social Change and Its Criticism

At first glance, re-convergence seems to refer to everyday value orientations. However, bearing in mind that since the classical period of modernization theory convergence has been conceptualized as a relational phenomenon, it is hardly plausible to fall behind this argument and lapse back into some sort of modernization essentialism. Instead it is my interpretation that the re-convergence approach situates the convergence claim not only on the level of the decoupling of value orientations and societal structures

but rather on the level of the *cultural forms of coming-to-terms with this process of decoupling.* The »sense of involvement« Alexander makes out for the post-1989 period presupposes the perception of a *cultural distance* to the societal structure one inhabits. Although different people in different social contexts may maintain very dissimilar feelings about their respective »sense of involvement«, what they have in common is that a distance between modernization processes on the structural level and such on the level of value orientations becomes perceptable and accounted for in further modernization processes. The common perception of being inserted into societal macro-processes goes along with a cultural distanciation from these same processes and potentially makes them subject to collective reflection.

This comes close to saying that modernity has become a »global condition« (Wittrock 2000: 56–59). Such condition, though, is not just a matter of fact but open to reflexivity. The decoupling of value orientations and systems of action leads to the emergence of a cultural potential within society that, in principle, sets the stage for criticism of the very same processes that brought it about.Cultural reflexivity, one might say, catches up to societal rationalization.Describing the effects of modernization processes in this way proceeds from Weber's observation of the emergence of a self-driven rationalization on the societal-structural level, but also moves beyond it: The process of decoupling leads to results on the level of *societal self-description* that put a limit to teleological models of societal development since they make such development subject to reflection and potentially criticism.

Thus, the re-convergence paradigm, as I see it, allows for *rescuing* the convergence argument in that it makes the consequences of a global cultural condition comparable, namely the reflexive distanciation from processes of societal change. In the same move, though, re-convergence *abandons* the (at the core entirely unsociological) claim that history bypasses what people think of it: the claim that all societies would develop the same concrete cultural and structural patterns regardless of their assessment by social actors.

4. Re-convergence Theory and the Multiple Modernities Approach

The insistence on the possibility of a modernized convergence claim in modernization theory is what sets the re-convergence paradigm off against the multiple modernities approach. Or rather, the re-convergence approach spells out certain general implications of many case studies in the spirit of »multiple modernities« which these, however, find hard to acknowledge. Many studies on non-western societies in the »*Daedalus*«-volume referred to above delineate as a genuine feature of modernization processes some sort of coming-to-terms with »own« traditions that have to

be set into relation with changing societal structures (cf. Göle 2000; Eickelman 2000; Ortiz 2000). In doing so, however, they put the stress rather on the *specific* meaning of culturally distinct traditions in modernization processes rather than on the attempt to *generalize* on the formal conditions within which such meaning can develop.

It is precisely at this point that the re-convergence approach can be fruitfully applied. Proceeding from the assumption that the commonality in processes of macro-societal change – convergence – is situated on the level of societal self-description and problematization, it follows that the interconnectedness between modernization processes and the meaning of specific traditions in them should be viewed from the perspective of different types of *conflict* arising from modernity's built-in propensity to auto-criticism. (Here, it is surely promising, though not necessary for the purposes of this paper to refer to theoretical approaches that point out the productive meaning of conflicts in societal and cultural change, such as in H. Dubiel (1999) or D. Senghaas (1998).) If what is common to modernity is the cultural distanciation from processes of macro-societal change the implication is that »own« traditions move into the focus of critical evaluations just as well as modernization processes themselves.

The multiple modernities approach, as I see it, is instrumental in discerning an empirical basis for the sociological reconstruction of the conflictive dynamics of modernization processes: if combined with the re-convergence approach, it can single out for study the stressful coming-to-terms with the integration and legitimization of traditions in the course of modernization processes. While the multiple modernities approach, in its present shape, focuses on the historically grounded interrelation between different civilizational types and the appropriation of western aspects of modernity in non-western contexts (cf. Göle 2000), what I want to highlight here is a *representational* dynamics of modernization processes in which the societies involved are forced to critically confront themselves with what they identify as »own«, as »tradition« and as »modern«. Auto-criticism, which has an inextinctably political aspect to it, can be regarded, to adopt a phrase from Björn Wittrock (2000: 55), as a modern »promissory note«[1] that, as a regulatory idea, cannot be ignored once it has entered collective imagination and is coupled with social interests. Eisenstadt himself has similarly pointed out that »it is only with the coming of modernity that drawing the boundaries of the political becomes one of the major foci of open political contestation and struggle.« (Eisenstadt 2000: 6) However, taking into account the meaning of the conflictive integration of divergent

1 His definition reads as follows: »(M)odernity is a set of promissory notes, i.e., a set of hopes and expectations that entail some minimal conditions of adequacy that may be demanded of macrosocietal institutions no matter how much these institutions differ in other respects.«

traditions into processes of macro-societal change empasized by the multiple modernities approach, modernization theory has to dedicate more attention to the representation of traditions and their role in practices of auto-criticism in modernizing societies than it has used to (cf. also Eickelman 2000: 122).

5. Implications and Future Research

I conclude with some remarks concerning the research prospects and consequences of the re-convergence approach outlined in this paper. First, this approach avoids the container metaphor of societies typical of many branches of modernization theory (and not least the postmodern model), according to which societies or »cultures« are entities within which self-sufficient and systemically closed processes of change occur. The re-convergence paradigm provides an alternative insofar as »society« is seen mainly as a framework of cultural construction processes through collective and conflictive self-thematization. The boundaries of societies are not simply there but are validated in discursive processes that construe them in the first place.

Second, the re-convergence approach historicizes the functional role of teleological models in explaining contemporary societal change. Although such models have been part and parcel of modernization theory since the 1950s, they might prove their value mainly in the retrospective reconstruction of historical modernization processes and not so much in regard to the explanation of contemporary societal change. Whether it is possible or fruitful to reconstruct the historical development of societies in terms of a general modernization model has to be checked in each single case. However, once the emergence of a *critical potential* within society has led to the establishment of criticism as a regulatory idea within society's self-description, the question whether societal change should be viewed as teleological or not becomes itself a matter of *political* processes. Therefore, re-convergence theory restricts itself to explaining how the common condition of a cultural distance from processes of change is translated into concrete practices of criticism and conflict.

Third, the re-convergence approach accounts for the eurocentristic bias in modernization theory so far. The differentiation between more modern and less modern societies that has characterized modernization theory was, as research in postcolonial studies has shown, a part of Europe's »constitution of the self-consolidating other« (Spivak 1999: 409–410). As the main point of departure of the re-convergence approach is the cultural frame conditions and the emergence of a critical potential, the question is not on which modernization »stage« societies find them-

selves but with what historical trajectories – traditions – and how they critically confront themselves in their collective imagination.

This, forth, generates a research program that has at its focus of interest the institutional and cultural conditioning of social conflicts arising from the auto-criticism that modern societies are bound up with. The major question is in which institutions and through whose interests the auto-criticism of modernity takes place. In this respect, »globalization«, for instance, would not so much appear as a signifier of modernity gone global but rather as a specific metaphor within the collective articulation of social conflicts in which modernization processes are critically assessed. The meaning of this metaphor probably consists as much in it being an indicator of the innovativeness of transnationally distributed and accumulated modes of production as in its potential to confront historically western societies with the consequences of their own worldwide success. Through the metaphor of globalization the auto-critical potential that stems from the decoupling of value orientations and systems of action *returns*, as it were, to the historical centers of modernization. »Globalization« thus de-centers the traditionally western societal self-conception as a self-sustaining and closed system on a mass scale. Citing, with Eisenstadt (2000: 26), Leszek Kolakowski, it is as if modernity now is »on endless trial« in its metropolises, too.

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