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Modernization Theory and the Comparative Study of Societies: A Critical Perspective

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Use of the term 'modernization' in its present connotations is of relatively recent origin, becoming an accepted part of the vocabulary of American, if not international, social science only in the decade of the 1960s. Despite its relatively rapid rise to currency, the popularity of the term does not appear to be matched by any widespread consensus concerning its precise meaning. The proliferation of alternative definitions has been such, in fact, that the ratio of those using the term to alternative definitions would appear to approach unity. The popularity of the notion of modernization must be sought not in its clarity and precision as a vehicle of scholarly communication, but rather in its ability to evoke vague and generalized images which serve to summarize all the various transformations of social life attendant upon the rise of industrialization and the nation-state in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These images have proven so powerful, indeed, that the existence of some phenomenon usefully termed 'modernization' has gone virtually unchallenged. While individuals may differ on how precisely this phenomenon should be conceptualized and a number of critics have addressed themselves to the relative merits of alternative conceptualizations, both critics and advocates alike tend to assume the basic utility of the idea of modernization itself, treating only the manner of its conceptualization as problematic.

In what follows an effort will be made to subject this assumption to a critical examination. 'The function of scientific concepts', says Kaplan (1964: 52), 'is to mark the categories which will tell us more about our subject matter than any other categorical sets'. The issue posed here is whether or not the notion of modernization is capable of performing this function. What sort of problems beset current versions of the concept? Can these problems best be resolved within the framework of yet another version of the concept or are they such that the entire idea of modernization should be discarded in favor of some alternative approach? And if the latter possibility is to be seriously entertained, are there alternatives to the notion of modernization which do in fact promise to 'tell us more'?

My purpose here is to address the first two of these questions. The discussion is divided into two parts. As a preface to the subsequent analysis, the first section of the paper outlines some of the origins and characteristic features of modernization theory.¹ The core of the argument is presented in the second section. In order to obtain an overview of some of the problems raised by current usage of the concept, previous critiques of various formulations of modernization theory are reviewed, complemented where necessary, and codified, with the resulting codification serving as an analytical tool in the task of assessing the scientific usefulness of the modernization perspective.

I. PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

The Origins of Modernization Theory

The proximate origins of modernization theory may be traced to the response of American political elites and intellectuals to the international setting of the post-Second World War era. In particular, the impact of the Cold War and the simultaneous emergence of Third World societies as prominent actors in world politics in the wake of the disintegration of the European colonial empires converged during this period to channel—for the first time, really—substantial intellectual interest and resources beyond the borders of American society, and even of Europe, into the study of the societies of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. During the two decades after the war, American social scientists and their graduate students, with the generous support of governmental and private agencies, turned increasing attention to the problems of economic development, political stability, and social and cultural change in these societies.

A good portion of this attention was devoted to the elaboration of numerous conceptual schemes which in many respects served as surrogates for a tradition of inquiry into the problems of these societies which was almost entirely lacking (see Shils, 1963: 11–12; Schwartz, 1972: 74 ff.; cf. Nisbet, 1969: 240 ff.). Unable to rely for guidance in the design, execution, and interpretation of their research upon a previously accumulated literature, it is hardly surprising that social scientists engaged in this task should turn for assistance to the familiar intellectual traditions of Western thinking about the nature of social change. The influence of such received traditions is particularly evident in the case of modernization theory. Though their terminology may be somewhat novel, the manner in which modernization theorists tend to approach the study of social change in non-Western societies is deeply rooted in the perspective of developmentalism which was already firmly established in the conventional wisdom

¹ The term 'modernization theory' is used throughout this paper simply to refer to that body of literature in which the concept of modernization is prominently featured.

of Western social science well before the end of the nineteenth century. Indeed, Robert Nisbet (1969) has recently argued that this perspective—which may be traced to the idea that social change may be studied by analogy with the biological growth of individual organisms—has dominated Western thinking about social change from the Pre-Socratics through eighteenth- and nineteenth-century theorists of progress and social evolution to contemporary social science (see also Bock, 1964).

Within this tradition of thought, evolutionary theory and twentieth-century functionalism have been particularly influential in the shaping of modernization theory. Evidence of their influence may be found in many features of modernization theory: the frequent use of dichotomous type constructions and concepts such as ‘social differentiation’ and ‘social system’; an emphasis upon the ability to adapt to gradual, continual change as the normal condition of stability; the attribution of causal priority to immanent sources of change; and the analysis of social change as a directional process. These attributes of modernization theory, it should be noted, are not simply remarkable parallels with earlier theories; many of the leading contributions to modernization theory have come from men such as Lerner, Levy, and Eisenstadt who have been schooled in functionalist theory and the intellectual milieu from which it emerged.²

Some Characteristic Features of Modernization Theory

Beyond the very general sorts of attributes listed above, the task of identifying ‘characteristic’ features of modernization theory is not an easy one. The heterogeneous meanings which have been attached to the concept of modernization embody a wide range of substantive interests, levels of abstraction, and degrees of attentiveness to definitional problems. Still, since our purpose is not the piecemeal criticism of one or another version of modernization theory but the evaluation of modernization theory itself as a theoretical orientation or ‘idea system’, an effort in this direction is essential to establish some common ground upon which the critique can proceed.

Two methodological similarities may be noted at the outset. The first is the search by modernization theorists for definitional inclusiveness. Modernization is generally taken to be, in the words of one author, ‘a multifaceted process involving changes in all areas of human thought and activity’ (Huntington, 1968a: 52). Accordingly, the concept tends to be a ‘summarizing’ rather than a ‘discriminating’ one, as every effort is made to specify its meaning in terms which are sufficiently general to avoid ex-

² Some of the parallels between modernization and evolutionary theories are discussed in Mazrui (1968). Mazrui tends to overemphasize the impact of Darwinism on social evolutionism (on this point see Bock, 1964: 35–7; and Nisbet, 1969: 161–4). For a discussion of the influence of functionalist theory on contemporary comparative studies emphasizing the political aspects of modernization, see Collins (1968).

cluding any of the possible ramifications of this 'multifaceted process'. Attempts at definition are aimed more at telling us what modernization is (or might be) than what it is not (cf. Apter, 1965: 67; Black, 1966: 7; Smelser, 1967: 717-18; and Hall, 1965; a notable exception is Levy, 1966: 9-15, who carefully distinguishes the task of definition from that of description).

The second methodological similarity concerns the question of units of analysis. Though studies of modernization have focused upon many different levels, ranging in scale from the individual through local communities to national and international units, it is the national territorial state which is of critical theoretical significance, even if this does remain largely implicit. It is here at the national level that the various facets of the modernization process are seen to be aggregated. However it may be conceptualized, whether as industrialization, economic growth, rationalization, structural differentiation, political development, social mobilization and/or secularization or some other process, each component of the modernization process is viewed as representing a source of change operative at the national level, although it obviously may be studied at a variety of other levels as well. Even in the case of someone such as Inkeles (1969), who focuses upon individual responses to modernization in search of a cross-cultural personality syndrome of 'modernity', these responses are aggregated and compared at the level of national units. Thus, theories of modernization are fundamentally theories of the transformation of national states (which are implicitly taken to be coterminous with the boundaries of whole societies).

There are, of course, other similarities which are readily apparent among various conceptualizations of modernization as well. However, as might be suspected from the introductory comments to this paper, the greatest areas of agreement tend to be on those points which are most superficial. Thus, there is general agreement that whatever else it may be, modernization is a type of social change which is both transformational in its impact and progressive in its effects. It is also generally viewed as extensive in scope, as a 'multifaceted process' which not only touches at one time or another virtually every institution of society, but does so in a manner such that transformations of one institutional sphere tend to produce complementary transformations in others (for a forceful statement asserting the systemic character of modernization see Lerner, 1958).

Beyond these generalities, the task of sorting out similarities and differences between alternative approaches becomes somewhat more difficult. Such is the variety of usages that they cannot be easily encompassed within the framework of a single classification. In some contexts, the concept is used primarily as a classificatory device, as when Levy (1966, 1967) distinguishes between 'relatively modernized' and 'relatively non-

modernized' societies on the basis of the extent to which tools and inanimate sources of power are utilized. For others, the concept identifies a peculiar and open-ended type of social change, as when the historian Benjamin Schwartz (1972: 76) draws upon Max Weber to define modernization in terms of the expansion of man's rational control over his physical and social environment (see also Hall, 1965: 21 ff.; and Rustow, 1967). Yet another orientation to the definition of modernization views it not as a type of change but rather as a response to change, as in definitions such as that of Halpern (1966) which stress the capacity of institutions to adapt to or control rapid and continuous change. Distinctions between usages such as these are often tenuous, however, particularly since alternative orientations are often combined within a single definition. Thus, Eisenstadt (1966: 43), for example, argues that modernization is characterized by two features, one a type of change (structural differentiation) and the other a type of response to change (the capacity of institutions to absorb 'continually changing problems and demands'). Much of this definitional variety may be traced to the constant search for more inclusive conceptualizations. Thus, while some associate modernization with industrialization or economic development and others define it more broadly to emphasize man's increasing control over his natural and social environment, still others, not to be outdone, speak of a total transformation of all aspects of human existence, ranging from individual personality to international relations.

There is, however, one distinction which can be made between usages of the term 'modernization' that is of particular importance because it establishes a basis from which the following critique of modernization theory can proceed. Most conceptualizations of modernization fall into one of two categories: they are either 'critical variable' theories, in the sense that they equate modernization with a single type of social change, or they are 'dichotomous' theories in that modernization is defined in such a manner that it will serve to conceptualize the process whereby 'traditional' societies acquire the attributes of 'modernity'. The approaches of Schwartz and Levy, cited above, represent two instances of 'critical variable' theories: for Schwartz, 'modernization' may be taken as a synonym for the process of rationalization, while in the case of Levy it is defined in terms of two technological indicators of industrialization. In fact, in an essay published well over a decade before his more recent works on modernization, Levy (1953) employed this same definition to define not modernization, but rather the term 'industrialization' (cf. Levy, 1966: 9). Another example of a 'critical variable' approach to the conceptualization of modernization comes from Wilbert Moore (1963: 89-112), who is somewhat more straightforward in this respect than Levy. Arguing that for most purposes modernization may be equated with industrialization, he then proceeds to

discuss the former in terms of the conditions, concomitants, and consequences of the latter. As these examples illustrate, the distinguishing trait of 'critical variable' theories is that the term 'modernization' may be freely substituted either for or by some other single term. Perhaps it is because of this trait that the 'critical variable' method of conceptualizing modernization has not been widely adopted by modernization theorists.

Most modernization theorists have opted instead for the second method, choosing to set their definitions within the larger conceptual framework provided by the 'dichotomous' approach. Nowhere is the influence of nineteenth-century evolutionary theory more evident than here. Through the device of ideal-typical contrasts between the attributes of tradition and modernity, modernization theorists have done little more than to summarize with the assistance of Parsons' pattern variables and some ethnographic updating, the earlier efforts by men such as Maine, Tönnies, Durkheim, and others in the evolutionary tradition to conceptualize the transformation of societies in terms of a transition between polar types of the status-contract, *Gemeinschaft-Gesellschaft* variety (see Nisbet, 1969: 190-2). Modernization, then, becomes a transition, or rather a series of transitions from primitive, subsistence economies to technology-intensive, industrialized economies; from subject to participant political cultures; from closed, ascriptive status systems to open, achievement-oriented systems; from extended to nuclear kinship units; from religious to secular ideologies; and so on (cf. Lerner, 1958: 43-75; Black, 1966: 9-26; Eisenstadt, 1966: 1-19; Smelser, 1967: 718; and Huntington, 1968a: 32-5). Thus conceived, modernization is not simply a process of change, but one which is defined in terms of the goals toward which it is moving.

II. THE CRITIQUE OF MODERNIZATION THEORY

As noted in the introductory comments to this essay, individual approaches to the study of modernization have not escaped criticism. Unfortunately, however, such criticism has tended to be not only relatively infrequent, but partial in scope, widely scattered, and too often simply ignored. Still, these critiques, taken together, constitute a useful starting point. When systematized and supplemented where necessary, they provide the basis for a more general and thoroughgoing critique of the theoretical orientation embodied by modernization theory.

The task in this section, then, will be twofold: first, to codify the criticisms to which modernization theory is vulnerable and, second, to evaluate the implications of these criticisms for the future of modernization theory. To the extent that the criticisms leveled against modernization theory are valid, a choice must be made between two alternative courses. On the one hand, modernization theory might be reformed. This would require the formulation of yet another version of modernization theory, though

hopefully one better able to meet the various objections which have been raised against earlier versions. On the other hand, the idea of modernization may be rejected in its entirety. This second, 'radical' option implies the need for the formulation of an alternative approach more suitable to the analysis of the sorts of problems which modernization theory is intended to address. While previous critiques have been overwhelmingly 'revisionist' in orientation, the purpose of this critique is to consider the future of modernization theory in the light of both of these two alternatives.

Critical Variable Approaches

The contrasting strategies of the 'critical variable' and 'dichotomous' approaches to the conceptualization of modernization invite somewhat different criticisms. The 'critical variable' approach will be examined first not only because it is less frequently adopted but also because it may be criticized in relatively brief and straightforward terms. The 'dichotomous' approach, on the other hand, because of the complexity of the issues it raises and because it is more representative of the 'mainstream' of thinking about modernization, will require a lengthier, more involved discussion.

The 'critical variable' approach, though infrequently resorted to, is not without its advantages. It avoids many of the difficulties of the 'dichotomous' approach by conceptualizing modernization as an open-ended rather than a goal-directed process and by defining it in terms which are relatively narrow and concrete, thus giving the concept greater operational clarity. Unfortunately, however, the 'critical variable' approach suffers from deficiencies of its own. When defined in relation to a single variable which is already identified by its own unique term, the term 'modernization' functions not as a theoretical term but simply as a synonym. To equate modernization with industrialization, for example, or with indicators typically associated with industrialization, adds nothing to the utility of the latter concept and renders the former redundant. The only effect of such terminological sleight of hand is to superimpose, and at the cost of a considerable loss in precision, a term ('modernization') heavily laden with conventional meanings on an otherwise relatively unambiguous concept. Once decoded, of course, research conducted under the rubric of 'modernization' thus conceived may be of considerable merit, but the rubric itself, which necessitates such decoding, is superfluous and can only detract from that merit. In short, when 'modernization' is employed as a synonym for some already relatively well-defined variable it performs no useful function and, as a consequence, should be abandoned. Thus, in so far as 'critical variable' theories are concerned, the second, 'radical' option must be exercised concerning the future prospects of modernization theory.

Dichotomous Approaches

Conceptualizations of modernization incorporating some version of the tradition-modernity contrast are less easily dismissed. In order to assess fully the implications of the criticisms which may be directed at theories of this sort, it is helpful to distinguish between three levels of criticism: the first level is ideological, the second empirical, and the third methodological or 'metatheoretical'.

1. The Ideological Critique. One of the most frequently heard complaints against modernization theories in the dichotomous tradition is that they are the product of an essentially ethnocentric world-view. As modernization theorists began to adapt for their own purposes the dichotomous approach as it was developed by social evolutionists during the late nineteenth century, they did feel constrained to make certain changes. Not only were blatantly ethnocentric terms such as 'civilized' and 'barbarism' clearly unacceptable, but the explicit racism of the biological school of evolutionary theory had to be laid to rest. However, such changes were in many respects merely cosmetic. Though the language was changed and racial theories were discarded, modernization theorists have continued to be motivated by what Mazrui (1968: 82) has termed 'the self-confidence of ethnocentric achievement'. Thus, though the terminology of contemporary modernization theory has been cleaned up some to give a more neutral impression—it speaks of 'modernity' rather than 'civilization', 'tradition' rather than 'barbarism'—it continues to evaluate the progress of nations, like its nineteenth-century forebears, by their proximity to the institutions and values of Western, and particularly Anglo-American societies.³ The assumption upon which much of modernization theory is based is that, in the words of one author (Shils, 1965: 10), "modern" means being Western without the onus of dependence on the West'. By deriving the attributes of 'modernity' from a generalized image of Western society, and then positing the acquisition of these attributes as the criterion of modernization, modernization theorists have attempted to force the analysis of non-Western societies into what Bendix has termed 'the Procrustes bed of the European experience' (Bendix, 1967: 323; see also pp. 309–12, 316; and Rudolph and Rudolph, 1967: 6–8).

This attempt by modernization theorists to universalize historically specific values and institutions deriving from Western societies may be understood in part at least as a means by which fledgling students of the 'underdeveloped areas' could resolve the cognitive crisis they confronted

³ Thus, Nisbet (1969: 190–1) writes that 'the Comparative Method, as we find it in the writings of the nineteenth-century social evolutionists, and to a considerable degree at the present time, is hardly more than a shoring-up of the idea of progressive development generally and, more particularly, of the belief that the recent history of the West could be taken as evidence of the direction which mankind as a whole *would* move, flowing from this, *should* move'. See also *ibid.*, pp. 201–8, 284–7.

as they turned their attention during the 1950s and 1960s to the task of attempting to comprehend the course of events in societies whose history, culture, and social organization appeared alien and unfamiliar. The dichotomous approach, as it gradually took shape in the tradition-modernity contrast, was admirably suited to fill this intellectual vacuum.⁴ It provided the modernization theorist with a cognitive map consisting of familiar, stable categories derived from his immediate experience as a citizen of a 'modern' society, according to which data derived from 'relatively non-modernized' societies could be gathered, sorted, and interpreted. Moreover, this map not only provided a set of categories for ordering the present of these societies, but by depicting modernization as an inexorable process of change in the direction of 'modernity' it provided a glimpse of their future as well, a glimpse made all the more comforting to the West by the assurance it gave that these societies would follow along its own familiar path to modernity.

However, the specific character of this perspective was shaped not only by the cognitive disorientation of modernization theorists as they explored their new subject matter, but also by their ideological commitments and presuppositions. As the dichotomous tradition was taking shape during the initial period of industrialization in Europe in the nineteenth century, the ambivalence of many Western intellectuals toward industrialism was reflected in a nostalgic sense of 'Paradise lost' that pervaded many characterizations of the traditional past, leading to romantic visions of a society in which, though materially poor and uneducated, people led simple, contented lives in harmony with nature and bound by strong affective ties into an intensive and cohesive communal existence (see Bendix, 1967: 294 ff.).

Although this view of tradition has continued to be of some influence, as is illustrated by the persistent tendency to dramatize the supposedly traumatic impact of modernization on the individual as it wrenches him from his idyllic traditional setting,⁵ modernization theorists generally speaking have been animated by other considerations. By the mid-twentieth century the ambivalence toward industrialism which in many instances had tempered earlier versions of the tradition-modernity contrast had dissipated. Thus, contemporary versions of the contrast have been influenced less by a nostalgic view of tradition than by the self-confident optimism of modernization theorists to whom 'modernity' represented the

⁴ Earlier theories in the dichotomous tradition fulfilled similar functions. See Bock (1964: 28-9). On this point, it is interesting to note that theories of modernization seem to be least popular among anthropologists, whose discipline has a longer, more intensive exposure to non-Western societies than other social sciences; this point is also supported by the widespread failure of modernization theorists to apply their perspective to the study of their own societies.

⁵ For recent evidence contradicting this hypothesis, see Inkeles (1969: 223-4), Lauer (1971: 882-5), Singer (1971), and Khare (1971).

very embodiment of virtue and progress, and 'tradition' merely a barrier to its realization. Characterizations of modernity in this vein have tended to be no less selective and romantic than earlier characterizations of tradition (see Lauer, 1971: 884-6). Consider, for example, the following eloquent declaration:

'modernity' assumes that local ties and parochial perspectives give way to universal commitments and cosmopolitan attitudes; that the truths of utility, calculation, and science take precedence over those of the emotions, the sacred, and the non-rational; that the individual rather than the group be the primary unit of society and politics; that the associations in which men live and work be based on choice not birth; that mastery rather than fatalism orient their attitude toward the material and human environment; that identity be chosen and achieved, not ascribed and affirmed; that work be separated from family, residence, and community in bureaucratic organizations; that manhood be delayed while youth prepares for its tasks and responsibilities; that age, even when it is prolonged, surrender much of its authority to youth and men some of theirs to women; that mankind cease to live as races apart by recognizing in society and politics its common humanity; that government cease to be a manifestation of powers beyond man and out of the reach of ordinary men by basing itself on participation, consent, and public accountability (Rudolph and Rudolph, 1967: 3-4).

Combining strains of rationalism, progressivism, and libertarianism, statements such as this sound more like liberal utopias than analytical constructs; nowhere is found that ambivalence toward modern industrial society which characterized the writing of men such as Marx, Weber, and Durkheim (see Nisbet, 1966: 264-312; Hughes, 1958; and Huntington, 1971: 290-3; cf. Nisbet, 1969: 202 ff.).

Both the values and the cognitions embodied in modernization theory have been highly reflexive of the social and historical conditions under which they have been developed. The idea of modernization is primarily an American idea, developed by American social scientists in the period after the Second World War and reaching the height of its popularity in the middle years of the 1960s. Two features of this period stand out: a widespread attitude of complacency toward American society, and the expansion of American political, military, and economic interests throughout the world. American society tended to be viewed as fundamentally consensual, combining an unmatched economic prosperity and political stability within a democratic framework. Such social problems as might exist, moreover, were treated not as endemic but rather as aberrations which could be resolved by normal political processes within existing institutions. After two decades of turmoil, the postwar tranquility of prosperity and stability seemed no mean accomplishment. The future of modern society now seemed assured; only that of the 'developing areas' appeared problematic. Such an atmosphere of complacency and self-satisfaction could only encourage the assumption among social scientists that 'modernity' was indeed an unmixed blessing and that the institutions and values of American society, at least as they existed in their more

idealized manifestations, represented an appropriate model to be emulated by other, less fortunate societies.

It is important to remember, however, that these attitudes themselves were occasioned only by a new concern with the role of the United States in the international sphere. While the imperial societies of Western Europe were confronted with reconstruction at home and decolonization abroad, the United States emerged from the Second World War at the height of its industrial and military strength. It also emerged from the war with a peculiar conception of world politics as a struggle between Good and Evil; if Hitler was the embodiment of evil during the War, then Stalin and Mao became its embodiment in the postwar era. Spurred on by this belief, by the encouragement of its European allies, and by its expanding economic interests abroad, the United States assumed leadership of the 'forces of freedom', involving itself not only in the international but also the domestic affairs of scores of nations in its efforts to save the world from the menace of the Communist conspiracy and to secure a stable world order on terms favorable to its own political and economic interests.⁶

As decolonization proceeded in the face of emerging nationalist and revolutionary movements in the Third World, the acquiescence of Third World societies to these interests became increasingly problematic. As a result, these societies soon began to assume a significant place in the consciousness of American political elites both inside and outside the government as an arena of Cold War conflict. The rapid expansion of research by social scientists on Third World societies was in many respects a by-product of this new concern, as government agencies and private foundations encouraged and facilitated such research in order to expand the flow of information concerning these societies in the United States, and especially in official circles.

That ethnocentric theories of modernization should abound in this context is hardly surprising, especially if it is remembered that similar developmental theories were also popular during earlier expansionist periods in both English and American social history.⁷ After all, by virtue

⁶ For an interesting discussion of American imperialism see Zevin (1972), who identifies three sources of expansionist-interventionist policies: relatively narrow but well-placed private economic interests, the military bureaucracy, and (*ibid.*: 358) the 'extension of successful domestic efforts at political, social, and economic reform'.

The expanded international presence of the United States after the Second World War is reflected in the high level of military expenditures during this period. In contrast to the three decades after the Civil War and the two decades after the First World War when the percentage of the federal expenditures going to the military fell to less than 30 per cent of the national budget, in the two decades after the Second World War military expenditures averaged well over half of the budget—and this despite the expansion of the government's welfare functions in contrast to the earlier periods (Lieberson, 1971: 574).

⁷ Thus, evolutionary theory reached the height of its popularity in England during the Victorian period, while widespread acceptance of Social Darwinism in political and intellectual circles coincided with the growth of imperialist sentiment in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century. See Burrow (1966) and Hofstadter (1955).

of their underlying ethnocentrism, such theories are capable of providing an implicit justification for asymmetrical power relationships between 'modern' and 'traditional' societies since, whatever their other effects, they may be pointed to as advancing the cause of 'modernization' (see Nisbet, 1969: 201-12; and Rudolph and Rudolph, 1967: 9-12). Such an argument was in fact commonly offered to justify European colonialism. In keeping with the times and the liberal political persuasions of many modernization theorists, no explicit effort has been made to use modernization theory in this manner. Still, the idea of modernization has proven congenial to American policy-makers, so much so in fact that 'development' and 'modernization' came to be viewed as long-range solutions to the threats of instability and Communism in the Third World. Certainly, by virtue of its overriding concern with political stability, its often explicit anti-Communism, and its indifference to the entire issue of economic and political imperialism, there is little in the modernization literature that would seriously disturb White House, Pentagon, or State Department policymakers.

This analysis should not be interpreted as suggesting that all modernization theorists are necessarily apologists of American expansionism. This is, of course, far from the case. Nevertheless, regardless of how well-intentioned or critical of American policy abroad a modernization theorist might be, the limited cultural horizons of the theory tend to involve him in a subtle form of 'cultural imperialism', an imperialism of values which superimposes American or, more broadly, Western cultural choices upon other societies, as in the tendency to subordinate all other considerations (save political stability perhaps) to the technical requirements of economic development. On the other hand, the fact that some modernization theorists have applied their theories under the guise of scientific objectivity in the service of American national interests cannot be ignored. Thus, while condemning the critics of the Vietnam War for 'misplaced moralism' (as contrasted to the 'unwarranted optimism' of the American government), one modernization theorist could apply his theoretical perspective to the War to suggest that the answer to such 'wars of national liberation' is to be found in the forced concentration of populations in urban areas—a solution which clearly involves a number of moral choices of its own, a fact which the author conveniently chooses to ignore.⁸

I have discussed the ideological dimensions of modernization theory at some length because they are frequently touched upon only briefly or simply ignored. Once the relationship between modernization theory, the functions it performs, and the specific setting out of which it developed is understood, it is possible to place the theory in its proper perspective. Far

⁸ See Huntington (1968b) and the exchange on this essay between Huntington and Noam Chomsky in Huntington (1970).

from being a universally applicable schema for the study of the historical development of human societies, the nature of modernization theory reflects a particular phase in the development of a single society, that of the United States. Indeed, as the conditions which gave rise to modernization theory have changed—as, with the quickening pace of political assassination, racial and generational conflict, foreign war, and domestic violence, consensus has given way to conflict and complacency to concern about the future of American society—many of the fundamental values associated with ‘modernity’ such as those of rationality and progress have come under attack and, interestingly, the flow of new ‘theories’ of modernization also seems to have ebbed.

Essential as is the ideological critique to an understanding of the nature of modernization theory, however, it constitutes only the introduction to a critical evaluation of the utility of modernization theory. A critique limited to an analysis of the ideological elements which have entered into modernization theory cannot in itself provide an adequate basis for determining whether the notion of modernization merits further consideration or should be rejected in its entirety. There is in principle no reason to assume that the notion of modernization itself is inherently incompatible with a variety of ethnocentrism or that a revolutionary or socialist version of modernization theory could not be developed. That much of contemporary modernization theory has been Western-centered, reformist, and bourgeois does not preclude the possibility of alternative formulations. Even if one were to suggest that the idea of modernization should be dropped entirely because of the distortions these commitments introduce, whatever approach is substituted would be no less subject to these or other ideological distortions. The ideological critique of modernization theory is addressed to the motivations, cognitions, and purposes which gave it birth; it does not speak directly to the truth-content of the theory. While selective and distorted cognitions born of partisan commitments may be presumed to result in a disproportionate number of assertions which upon examination turn out to be false, incomplete, or misleading, this can be established in each case only by an appeal to the available evidence. Analysis of the ideological bases of modernization theory can help us to explain and predict its empirical shortcomings, but cannot confirm them. Thus, the ideological critique must be supplemented by other critical perspectives. This brings us to the second level of criticism, the empirical.

2. *The Empirical Critique.* Although this category has the appearance of something of a catch-all, the criticisms subsumed within it do share some important common ground in that each draws attention to some empirical inadequacy of modernization theory, in the form of either an erroneous or misleading empirical assertion that has been incorporated into its conceptual framework or of a critical range of phenomena which it has

overlooked. Since the bulk of criticisms which have been directed against modernization theory have been formulated primarily at this level, the main points of the empirical critique are already fairly well developed and can be summarized relatively briefly.

Like other theories in the developmental tradition, theories of modernization have been criticized for viewing the transformation of societies as largely the result of immanent processes of change (e.g., Bendix, 1967: 324–7; Collins, 1968: 57–61; cf. Nisbet, 1969: 170–4, 275–82). Viewed in the context of the above analysis of the origins and ideological components of modernization theory such criticism is not entirely unexpected. By focusing largely upon variables relating to indigenous aspects of social structure and culture, modernization theorists have either underestimated or ignored many important external sources of or influences upon social change. Even modernization theorists such as Lerner, for example, who emphasize the role of the ‘Western impact’ in modernization tend to look at this ‘impact’ only in terms of its consequences for the diffusion of particular cultural attributes, ignoring the structural mechanisms of the interactions between societies. The limitations of this perspective are particularly evident when applied to the new states of Asia and Africa, whose emergence did so much to stimulate the development of modernization theory. Any theoretical framework which fails to incorporate such significant variables as the impact of war, conquest, colonial domination, international political and military relationships, or of international trade and the cross-national flow of capital cannot hope to explain either the origins of these societies or the nature of their struggles for political and economic autonomy—struggles, it should be added, which all societies face, though perhaps in varying degrees and contexts at different historical moments.

Other difficulties are raised by the notion of ‘traditional society’. As Huntington (1971: 293–4) has recently noted, ‘modernity and tradition are essentially asymmetrical concepts. The modern ideal is set forth, and then everything which is not modern is labeled traditional’ (see also Rustow, 1967: 11–13). Thus, the notion of ‘tradition’ was formulated not upon the basis of observation but rather as a hypothetical antithesis to ‘modernity’. This fact is reflected in a number of the empirical limitations of the concept. Take, for example, the conventional stereotype that traditional societies are essentially static. From the perspective of the tradition-modernity contrast, history begins with the transition from traditional to modern society. Since this transition is generally assumed to have begun in non-Western areas as a result of contact with European societies, this amounts to an implicit denial of the relevance of the pre-contact experience of these areas to their subsequent development. As knowledge of pre-contact history has increased, however, such a static image of traditional societies has proven

untenable. In fact, 'traditional societies' appeared changeless only because they were defined in a manner that allowed no differences between traditions and recognized no significant change save that in the direction of the Western experience.

Since the tradition-modernity contrast focuses only upon the presumed similarities of traditional societies, moreover, it fails to allow for a multiplicity of traditions in a spatial as well as a temporal sense. Thus, social structures of the most diverse sort are thrown together in the same category, sharing little more than the label 'traditional' and the fact that they are not modern industrial societies. By thus ignoring the diversity of traditional societies, the dichotomous approach ignores precisely those differences between societies which contribute to the determination of the specific character of their development, as illustrated so well by Levy's (1953) classic contrast between the alternative courses of economic change in China and Japan (see also Rothman, 1961). Moreover, this diversity may be found within as well as between traditional societies. Clifford Geertz (1963: 155) comments in his essay on the 'integrative revolution' that 'a simple, coherent, broadly defined ethnic structure, such as is found in most industrial societies, is not an undissolved residue of traditionalism but an earmark of modernity'. While Geertz perhaps exaggerates the homogeneity of industrial societies, his basic point is a sound one: many 'traditional' societies are not highly integrated, socially and culturally homogeneous communities, but rather tend to encompass multiple 'traditions'.⁹ Even to apply the adjectives 'traditional' and 'modern' to the same noun—'society'—is misleading since it obscures the transformation of 'traditional' social and political units into national societies maintained by a territorial state. Indeed, the internal diversity of traditions is often compounded in the course of this transformation as a number of such 'traditional' units are consolidated into a single national society (see, e.g., Geertz, 1963; Kuper and Smith, 1969; and Harrison, 1960).

The colonial experiences of the new states pose an additional problem. Since the superimposition by conquest of one 'tradition', albeit a 'modern' one, upon one or more other 'traditions' produces a hybrid society neither 'traditional' nor 'modern' as these terms are usually employed by modernization theorists, these experiences can be assimilated to the dichotomous tradition-modernity contrast only with great difficulty, either by treating colonialism as an instrument of modernization—an argument, as noted earlier, which often has been asserted in order to legitimize colonial domination—or as a transitional phase between 'tradition' and 'modernity'. Neither solution is adequate. Like 'tradition', colonialism may be con-

⁹ Benjamin Schwartz (1972) has argued recently that this is true of *both* sides of the tradition-modernity dichotomy. See also Lauer (1971: 884–6). For additional evidence on traditional societies see Gusfield (1967), Levine (1968), and Heesterman (1963).

ducive to 'modernization' in some contexts but in others it may constitute a barrier. Neither can the effects of colonial domination be dismissed as 'transitional' since their scope and duration are often just as significant as is that of pre-colonial conditions, particularly in those instances where colonialism endured for a number of generations (see Bendix, 1967: 323; Geertz, 1966).

Another set of criticisms has been directed against the notion that tradition and modernity represent two mutually exclusive, functionally interdependent clusters of attributes. This notion may be broken down into two constituent assertions: first, that the attributes of tradition and modernity are mutually exclusive and, second, that the attributes of each are functionally interdependent. Several critics of the first assertion have pointed to the persistence of many 'traditional' values and institutions in supposedly modern industrial societies and to the importance of these institutions in shaping the development of these societies, while others have argued that in both 'modern' and 'modernizing' societies the dynamics of modernization have consisted not in the substitution of one set of attributes for another, i.e., of 'modernity' for 'tradition', but rather in their mutual interpenetration and transformation.¹⁰ To assert that tradition and modernity are mutually exclusive is to impose, in the words of two critics, 'an imperialism of categories and historical possibilities' by artificially constructing an 'analytic gap' which denies the possibility of innovation, mutual adaptation, and synthesis (Rudolph and Rudolph, 1967: 6-7, *passim*). Once these possibilities are acknowledged, modernization can no longer be equated simply with the destruction of tradition, for the latter is not a prerequisite of modernization—since in many instances 'traditional' institutions and values may facilitate rather than impede the social changes usually associated with modernization—nor is it in itself a sufficient condition of modernization—since the destruction of 'tradition' as, for example, by colonial domination may lead in directions other than 'modernity'.

This brings us to the second assertion, that concerning the 'systemic' character of tradition and modernity. Generally, critics of the first assertion have also been critical of the second, for once it is conceded that modernity and tradition are not mutually exclusive then the notion that each constitutes a closed, functionally interdependent system of attributes is also open to question. Specifically, three implications of this notion have been attacked. The first is that those particular functional interdependencies observed in the transformation of Western societies will be recapitulated elsewhere, a notion which strongly implies, moreover, acceptance of the 'convergence' thesis that as modernization proceeds

¹⁰ For evidence on these points see Bendix (1967: 316, 324, 326), Eisenstadt (1968: 40-52), Gusfield (1967), Huntington (1971: 295-6), Lauer (1971: 885-6), Whitaker (1967), Rothman (1961), Heesterman (1963), Singer (1971), and Khare (1971).

societies will become increasingly alike in their essential characteristics. Against these ideas it has been argued that because of differences in their starting points—i.e. in their ‘traditional’ institutions and values—and in the timing of their transformations, many of the institutional configurations which characterized the modernization of Western societies are unlikely to be duplicated in the subsequent modernization of other societies. At the level of technology, there is no need to recapitulate the stages of technological development in the advanced societies since the latest technologies lie ready for adoption. Moreover, the size of the gap between modern and non-modern societies and the availability of a variety of models of modernity create conditions which, when combined with the unique heritage of each society, make the reproduction of Western institutional patterns in the modernization process most unlikely. To ignore differences such as these in the setting of modernization is to risk an undue generalization of the particularities of the Western experience and to overlook diversity in the search for convergence (see Bendix, 1963 and 1967: 327–35; Huntington, 1971: 298; Lauer, 1971: 884–6; Gerschenkron, 1962: 3–51, 353–64; and Weinberg, 1969).

The last two implications derived from the assertion of the systemic character of modernization are closely related. They hold that (1) the attributes of modernity form a ‘package’, thus tending to appear as a cluster rather than in isolation, and, consequently, that (2) modernization in one sphere will necessarily produce compatible (‘eurhythmic’) changes in other spheres. Critics of these assertions have argued that, on the contrary, the attributes of modernity do not necessarily appear as a ‘package’. Rather, its attributes may be ‘unbundled’ and absorbed selectively. Moreover, as Bendix (1967: 329, 316) has observed, such piecemeal ‘modernization’ need not lead to ‘modernity’. Modern medicine, the transistor radio, and a modern military establishment are all instances of ‘modernization’ in the sense that each represents a case of the acquisition of a trait or set of traits associated with modernity. However, whether or not such ‘modernization’ implies eventual acquisition of the entire ‘package’ of modernity is problematic. Indeed, the introduction of modern medicine may only compound poverty by increasing population pressures, the transistor radio may be employed merely to reinforce traditional values, and a technologically sophisticated military may be placed in the service of the most reactionary of regimes. Thus, such selective modernization may only strengthen traditional institutions and values, and rapid social change in one sphere may serve only to inhibit change in others.¹¹

¹¹ This point is made by a number of the authors cited above in note 10. Political scientists have come increasingly to accept the view that ‘modernization’ is negatively correlated with the creation of stable political institutions. Perhaps the most influential advocate of this position is Huntington (1965; 1968a).

Taken together, the critics of modernization theory have marshalled an impressive array of argument and evidence revealing the inadequacies of modernization theory's view of the nature of tradition and modernity, their dynamics and interrelationships. Moreover, these limitations, which have been argued largely on empirical grounds, tend to confirm the prediction made at the conclusion of the ideological critique to the effect that the ideological distortions of modernization theory should be reflected in its empirical limitations. Thus, in one way or another, each point in the empirical critique may be related to some manifestation of the fundamental ethnocentrism of modernization theory in its conception of history as a unilinear process of progressive change toward a model of modernity patterned after a rather utopian image of 'Western' society. Indeed, the empirical critique strongly suggests that in its approach to the notion of 'tradition' and 'traditional' societies modernization theory is not only ethnocentric but temperocentric as well.

What implications concerning the future of modernization theory are to be drawn from the cumulative weight of these critiques? Should the appropriate response be sought in some form of 'revisionism' designed to retain the idea of modernization in the context of some new, more empirically grounded framework, or should a 'radical' solution be opted for which would simply reject the notion of modernization in its entirety? Among critics who have challenged modernization theory on empirical grounds, each of these alternatives has its advocates. However, the first, 'revisionist' option has proven by far the most popular, with critics such as Bendix, Eisenstadt, Huntington, and others continuing to see, even if only implicitly in some cases, sufficient utility in the idea of modernization and the tradition-modernity contrast to warrant their continued use upon suitable reformulation. By way of contrast, only Whitacker from among these critics has argued explicitly that the entire notion of modernization should be abandoned.

To those who would opt for the revisionist alternative, the question is simply one of eliminating some of the more glaring deficiencies of present theories. As a result, they argue for approaches to modernization which avoid dubious assumptions concerning the nature of traditional institutions and their contribution to the modernization process, which incorporate 'external stimuli' as significant variables, which view modernization as essentially multilinear, and which emphasize discontinuities as well as functional relationships in modernization (see, e.g. Bendix, 1967; Eisenstadt, 1968). Whitacker, however, is far less sanguine concerning the future prospects of modernization theory. In his view, if modernization is not an all-or-nothing process, i.e., if it does not either displace tradition or fail, then the entire idea should be rejected. Moreover, to argue that tradition and modernity are not mutually exclusive categories, he contends

(Whitaker, 1967; 190–2), is ‘to nullify the supposed significance of the terms, namely, that they identify distinguishable classes of societies.’ Noting that ‘there remains a paucity of comparably developed models’, Whitaker (1967: 201–2) suggests that the formulation of relatively limited, empirically grounded generalizations is more useful for the present than attempting to construct alternative models at the same level of abstraction as modernization theory.¹²

Upon reflection, neither the position of the revisionists nor that of Whitaker can be accepted. The essential difficulty with the revisionist position is that it ignores the fundamental issue because it fails to seriously question the usefulness of the modernization perspective. In this respect, Whitaker’s position represents an important advance over that of the revisionists. However, the underlying rationale of his position is open to question. As revisionists such as Bendix, Eisenstadt, and others have demonstrated, the notion of modernization cannot be rejected simply by showing that particular assumptions or hypotheses incorporated into modernization theory are false or misleading. Clearly, the cumulative weight of the ideological and empirical critiques provides strong presumptive evidence that Whitaker’s conclusion may be correct, that the usefulness of the modernization theory approach is questionable, to say the least. However, these critiques fail to specify whether its lack of utility is inherent in the notion of modernization itself or, rather, attributable to the inability to discover an appropriate framework for its analysis—a conclusion which would support the revisionist position. So long as this latter possibility may be seriously entertained, definitions, type constructions, and ‘theories’ of modernization are likely to proliferate endlessly and, like the mythological Hydra, every ‘theory’ of modernization attacked and destroyed will only raise two in its place.

3. The Metatheoretical Critique. The final critique is methodological, or ‘metatheoretical’, in the sense that it focuses upon the underlying strategy of conceptualization involved in modernization theory and its usefulness. Thus, it focuses directly upon the central issue raised by the choice between the revisionist and radical alternatives. In spite of its importance, however, this level of criticism has been less thoroughly explored than the previous two.

In the definition of any concept or set of concepts there is a perennial tension between the logical requirements of comparability and those of explanation, the first straining in the direction of increasing generality in

¹² However, it should be noted that the suggestion that research should concentrate on establishing limited-range empirical generalizations hardly constitutes a very promising alternative to modernization theory. The task of explaining the transformation of macro-level social structures cannot be accomplished simply by summarizing or accumulating the results of micro-level research. Moreover, such generalizations cannot be ‘established’ between societies in the absence of some larger framework of comparison.

order to extend the range of the concept's applicability to larger numbers of cases, the latter in the opposite direction of an increasing specificity which enhances its powers of discrimination. As noted earlier, modernization theorists have chosen to resolve this tension in the former direction. In their effort to achieve descriptive inclusiveness, however, they have relied upon conceptualizations of modernization which are both unparsimonious and vague. Rather than specifying the minimum conditions necessary for the appropriate application of the term, modernization theorists have attempted to encompass within a single concept virtually every 'progressive' social change since the seventeenth century. Moreover, to obtain this end, they have defined modernization in terms which are so open-ended that it is almost impossible to identify precisely the range of phenomena to which the concept is intended to apply.

These difficulties become all too evident when one considers the possibility of arriving at something approximating a theory of modernization. When the concept of modernization is defined as referring to the adaptation of institutions 'to the unprecedented increase in man's knowledge permitting control over his environment, that accompanied the scientific revolution' (Black, 1966: 7) or to 'the fact that technical, economic, and ecological changes ramify through the whole social and culture fabric' (Smelser, 1967: 717-18), it becomes very difficult to specify the limits of its applicability and, thus, to identify just what it is that an explanation of modernization would explain. Moreover, when modernization is seen as 'a multifaceted process involving changes in all areas of human thought and activity' (Huntington, 1968a: 32), the very comprehensiveness of the definition serves only to reduce theoretical statements to meaningless tautologies.¹³

There is, moreover, a certain amount of irony in the lengths to which modernization theorists have gone in their search for descriptive inclusiveness since, all the pretension of the theory to the contrary, it has done remarkably little to stimulate or facilitate the actual comparative study of societies. The reason for this is not hard to find; indeed, it has already been touched upon in the previous section of this paper: in their preoccupation with the attributes distinguishing the 'traditional' from the 'modern' modernization theorists have failed to consider the attributes of the noun to which these adjectives are applied, *viz.*, 'society'. As a result, the empirical referents of the term tend to vary according to the side of the dichotomy under consideration. At the 'modern' end the typical referent is, as noted earlier, the national society as defined by the boundaries of the

¹³ Much the same point has been made by Levy (1966: 10-11). It should also be noted that another important consequence of the revisionist position is that modernization theory has become increasingly conceptual rather than theoretical in its orientation as more 'open', indeterminate assumptions and hypotheses have been substituted for the more determinate but empirically dubious ones of earlier versions.

territorial state. On the 'traditional' side, however, the residual nature of the category is reflected in a variety of referents including civilizations, culture areas, empires, kingdoms, and tribes. Since the first requirement of comparative analysis is that the entities being compared be of the same domain or universe of discourse (Kalleberg, 1966: 75-6; Hempel, 1965: 137 ff.), the failure to specify a common set of operational criteria for application of the term 'society' imposes severe limitations upon the utility of the ideas of 'traditional society' and 'modern society' as comparative concepts. As they are currently employed in the literature, not only are comparisons between these two types ruled out but, to the extent the term 'society' in each of these concepts itself lacks a common set of empirical referents, comparisons within each type are precluded as well.

Yet another fundamental metatheoretical defect of modernization theory involves neither problems of definition nor of comparability, but rather the tendency to mistake concept for fact; indeed, the former difficulties are in many respects merely symptoms of the latter. This tendency, of course, is not unique to modernization theory; Nisbet (1969: 240 ff.) argues that it has been characteristic of all developmental theories of change. Nor can it be said that this defect has been recognized only recently. Over three quarters of a century ago Emile Durkheim condemned this very tendency, noting how easy it is for the social scientist to become caught up in the study of his own ideas and images while losing sight of their relation to observable social phenomena. Writing in *The Rules of Sociological Method*, Durkheim (1938: 14-5) discussed this tendency to substitute the study of concepts for the study of social phenomena in these characteristic terms:

Man cannot live in an environment without forming some ideas about it according to which he regulates his behavior. But, because these ideas are nearer to us and more within our mental reach than the realities to which they correspond, we tend naturally to substitute them for the latter and to make them the very subject of our speculations. Instead of observing, describing, and comparing things, we are content to focus our consciousness upon, to analyze, and to combine our ideas. Instead of a science concerned with realities, we produce no more than an ideological analysis.

... These ideas or concepts, whatever name one gives them, are not legitimate substitutes for things. Products of everyday experience, their primary function is to put our actions in harmony with our environment; they are created by experience and for it. Now, a representation may successfully fulfil this function while theoretically false. Several centuries have elapsed since Copernicus dissipated the illusions of the senses concerning the movements of heavenly bodies; and yet we still habitually regulate our time according to these illusions. In order to invoke the reaction required by the nature of a certain stimulus, an idea need not express that nature faithfully. . . . In fact, many times [these ideas] are as dangerously incorrect as they are inadequate. By elaborating such ideas in some fashion, one will therefore never arrive at a discovery of the laws of reality. On the contrary, they are like a veil drawn between the thing and ourselves, concealing them from us the more successfully as we think them more transparent.

Durkheim continued on, in fact, to condemn this tendency in an earlier developmental theory, that of Auguste Comte. Comte's mistake, observed Durkheim, was that he 'identified historical development with the idea he had of it', an idea, he adds, 'which does not differ much from that of the layman'. Specifically, Comte's error according to Durkheim was to assume the existence of a process of continuous, progressive human evolution and to then proceed to investigate the stages of this evolutionary process as if it were already an established social fact. Admitting that it is easy to understand how the superficial impression of a simple, unilinear evolution of mankind might arise, Durkheim (1938: 19–20) nevertheless maintains that for the social scientist 'the existence of this assumed evolution can be established only by an already completed science; it cannot, then, constitute the immediate subject of research, excepting as a conception of the mind and not as a thing'.

One need not subscribe to Durkheim's epistemological position in order to appreciate the value of his remarks here or their salience to the critique of modernization theory. His point, after all, is a rather elementary one. The essence of the social scientist's task is to formulate and investigate problems concerning some aspect of concrete social phenomena. The social scientist who loses sight of the empirical referents of his concepts and ideas, who is no longer concerned with the truth-content of his assertions, has ceased to be a social scientist and, in the end, his ideas and images of society become indistinguishable from those of the ordinary layman. This is not to say, of course, that the social scientist's task is ever completed. As Weber (1949: 104ff.) noted, the social sciences have been granted 'eternal youth', as their history 'is and remains a continuous process passing from the attempt to order reality analytically through the construction of concepts—the dissolution of the analytical construct so constructed through the expansion and shift of the scientific horizon—and the re-formation anew of concepts on the foundations thus transformed'. Moreover, an essential condition of this dialectical process, Weber emphasizes, is the constant confrontation of such analytical constructs with empirical reality. Thus, though writing from rather different perspectives, both Durkheim and Weber appear particularly sensitive to the dangers inherent in the social scientist taking the empirical referents of his concepts as given rather than problematic.

Unfortunately, modernization theorists have failed to demonstrate the same sensitivity. Though Durkheim directed his critique at Comte, it may be applied with equal force to modernization theory. It is generally assumed among modernization theorists that the concept of modernization 'is useful despite its vagueness because it tends to evoke similar associations in contemporary readers' (Bendix, 1967: 292). However, when the empirical content of these 'similar associations' is subjected to a critical

examination, it soon becomes evident that the concept of modernization is one of those 'products of everyday experience' of which Durkheim spoke. In the case of modernization, the 'everyday experience' which provides the basis for the concept and the 'similar associations' it evokes may be found in the consciousness that the social setting of the human species has experienced a number of profound transformations in recent centuries, including the rise of the nation-state and mass political participation, industrialization, urbanization, bureaucratization, the rapid expansion of human knowledge, and the increasing secularization of cultures, and that these various transformations have been unequally distributed among societies. Modernization theorists have attempted to define the concept of modernization in terms of some unique referent or set of referents which might serve to summarize or order the experience of these transformations. Thus, it has been defined in terms of some formal property (e.g. rationalization or structural differentiation) thought to be a common denominator of these transformations, or in terms of the acquisition of some attribute or set of attributes (e.g. those associated with the tradition-modernity contrast) thought to distinguish societies which have experienced these transformations from those which have not, or perhaps in terms of some aspect of these transformations (e.g. industrialization) thought to stand in a critical causal relationship to the others.

However, it is one thing to sense that societies have indeed experienced a number of profound transformations but quite another to attempt to comprehend all of these transformations directly by means of a single scientific concept. Inevitably, vague images of the former result in equally vague definitions of the latter. But this is not the only difficulty; indeed, as conceptualizations of modernization become more precise they seem even more problematic. Perhaps the most precise (and least frequent) formulations are those which focus on a single critical variable. However, as noted in the critique of this approach, when modernization is conceptualized in terms of a single variable such as rationalization or industrialization it functions merely as a synonym for other, already well-defined concepts, thus tending to be not only superfluous, but obfuscating. On the other hand, definitions of modernization as a collective term referring to multiple attributes or processes may be more common, but they fare little better. Many of the points made in the empirical critique are especially damaging to this sort of an approach. Perhaps the most damaging argument comes from those who have challenged the 'systemic' character of modernization by showing that many processes of change associated with modernization may occur in isolation from other such processes, that some of these processes of change may be incompatible with others, and that because of differences in timing and initial setting processes of institutional change associated with modernization in one context need not be recapitulated in

others. Given these observations, if modernization is to be conceived as a compound of elements, it is a very strange compound indeed, for it may occur even in the absence of some of its elements and apparently it is unaffected by the substitution of some elements for others.

Thus, the concept of modernization not only lacks a precise cutting-edge because of the vagueness with which it is defined, but many of the assumptions built into it concerning the nature of its empirical referents also turn out, upon examination, to be either false or misleading. The attempt by modernization theorists to aggregate in a single concept disparate processes of social change which rather should have been distinguished has served only to hinder rather than facilitate their empirical analysis. Reified images of some universal evolutionary process connecting the poles of a dichotomy which, by its nature, assumes that 'societies' are most usefully studied in terms of two or three all-embracing categories simply provide inadequate tools for comprehending the diversity of the human experience during several centuries of social transformation.¹⁴

In the end, however, the most important referents of the concept are normative, not empirical. Stripped of its scientific pretensions, the concept of modernization becomes little more than a classificatory device distinguishing processes of social change deemed 'progressive' from those which are not. Its effect is to substitute vague and superficial images of profound change—images, moreover, heavily laden with ethnocentric assumptions and the conventional wisdom inherited from earlier evolutionary theories—for the empirical analysis of these dimly perceived transformations. Thus, as documented in the ideological critique, the functions of the concept are primarily ideological and cognitive in precisely the sense in which Durkheim speaks of concepts which serve 'to put our actions in harmony with our environment.' As Durkheim also observes, a concept which is useful in this sense may be nothing more than an illusion, and as such it is all the more dangerous because it is represented as a scientific concept. The concept of modernization, alas, fits this pattern all too well.

For all the attention it has received, the conceptual apparatus of modernization theory has done remarkably little to advance our understanding of the many transformations which have been experienced by human socie-

¹⁴ Even a moment's reflection reveals the primitive nature of such formulations. A contemporary chemist would hardly be satisfied if he were forced to employ the fourfold typology of elements of the ancient Greeks in his investigations. Yet many social scientists seem perfectly content with attempts to explain three centuries or more of social change by use of half that number of categories. The implication would seem to be that the social world is less complex and more amenable to conceptual ordering than the physical, but what social scientist would accept such a premise? Rather, a more plausible inference is that the relationship of modernization theory to the future study of the transformations of human society is roughly analogous with that of the Greek classification of elements to the periodic table of contemporary chemistry.

ties.¹⁵ It has encouraged a preoccupation with questions of a descriptive and taxonomic nature while ignoring or obscuring more fundamental issues. Where modernization theory has not been wrong or misleading, it has all too often been irrelevant. It has stimulated few empirical studies explaining the supposed 'modernization' of actual societies, and even less in the way of systematic comparative research. Instead it has perpetuated a hiatus between 'theory' and research, between the work of modernization theorists on the one hand and the practitioners of 'area studies' on the other. Both the number and vagueness of attempts to conceptualize modernization are in fact symptomatic of its lack of utility.¹⁶ Perhaps the greatest single failing of modernization theorists lies in their inattention to the task of defining what it is precisely they wish their theories to explain. While modernization theorists obviously share a general concern with the analysis of variations in the transformations of societies, their 'theories' tend to be vague, diffuse, descriptive, and ultimately non-comparable, because they have failed to establish a fruitful, empirically-grounded problem structure which could lend focus to their work.

At some point in the future, perhaps, some all-encompassing process of social change which might usefully be termed 'modernization' may be discovered. However, the preceding critique suggests that such a point is not near at hand. For the present, the cumulative weight of the ideological, empirical, and metatheoretical critiques leads to the conclusion that the conceptual apparatus of modernization theory does *not*, to repeat Kaplan's dictum, 'tell us more about our subject matter than any other categorical sets'. Thus, the critique of modernization theory clearly supports the 'radical' position. Constant revision will not lend substance to the illusion of modernization; it must be superseded.¹⁷

III. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Kaplan's criterion that our concepts should 'tell us more' obviously is a relative one, implying the availability of alternative conceptualizations. If the argument against modernization theory is to be conclusive, then, it must be shown not only that the conceptual apparatus of modernization theory is inadequate and unworkable, but also that a more viable alter-

¹⁵ This is not to say, of course, that one cannot find useful insights scattered throughout the modernization literature. The point is rather that such contributions tend not only to be incidental to the modernization perspective rather than dependent upon it, but that they also tend to be obscured and undeveloped because of the inadequacies of that perspective.

¹⁶ Kuhn (1962) has noted that the proliferation of versions of a theory is a common sign of paradigmatic crises. By this criterion, modernization theory has been in a state of crisis from its inception. See, for example, Kuhn's (1962: 69-72) discussion of the decline of the theory of phlogiston in eighteenth-century chemistry.

¹⁷ This conclusion does not rule out the purely nominal use of the terms 'traditional' or 'modern' to refer to the past or present of a society; however, their contribution in this context is a linguistic rather than an analytic one. Nor does it imply that these or related terms should not be employed in the identification of more rigorously defined substantive concepts (as in Weber's discussion of modes of legitimation).

native is available. At present, no such alternative exists, a situation which may be attributed to the failure of modernization theorists and their critics alike to make, or even to consider making, a decisive break with the intellectual traditions of modernization theory.

While the preceding analysis has sought to provide a rationale for such a break, the critique of modernization theory must remain incomplete until such time as a more fruitful approach can be demonstrated. While such an approach must avoid the errors of modernization theory, it cannot abandon its concerns. Although modernization theory has been unable to provide a satisfactory basis for systematic comparative research into the causes and consequences of patterns of variability and convergence in the formation and transformation of national societies, this does not mean that the task itself must be abandoned for the comforts of monographic research or so-called 'middle-range' *ad hoc* theorizing. It does mean, however, that if the sorts of difficulties raised by the ideological, empirical, and methodological critiques of modernization theory are to be avoided, an alternative perspective must be rooted firmly in an empirically-grounded problem structure which clearly specifies both the problems which are to be explained and—most important for comparative research—the contexts within which they are problematic. Rather than attempting simply to describe the various transformations of societies, such a problem structure should identify in more or less operational terms the underlying core structural problems common to all national societies to which these transformations are a response—problems relating to the formation and maintenance of societal boundaries, the organization and performance of political and economic institutions, and the social distribution of power resources. Thus, such an alternative must take seriously the logic of comparative analysis by rigorously defining its units of analysis, classifying them, and comparing the ranges of variation they reveal in relation to a set of common problems. But whatever the ultimate shape which an eventual alternative to modernization theory might take, it will require a fundamental rethinking of how we approach the analysis of long-term, macro-level transformations of societies. The results of almost two decades of modernization theory do not justify a third. The time has come to begin working toward an alternative paradigm.

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