

COMMUNICATIONS

On the Meaning of Modernization

In recent years numerous social scientists and historians have reached beyond the boundaries imposed by their disciplines and national borders in an effort to comprehend the vast and profound social change which has fundamentally altered human existence in the Twentieth Century. As a result of their multidisciplinary and comparative studies, they have formulated a powerful tool for analysis embodied in the concept of "modernization". While not all of these scholars have used the specific term, modernization, and those that have, have defined it in various ways; still a remarkable consensus has been reached with respect to what constitutes modernity and the process by which it is attained.

In his landmark study, *The Dynamics of Modernization*, C. E. Black provides us with a broad definition which can serve as a point of departure for our discussion. He defines modernization as, "the process by which historically evolved institutions are adapted to the rapidly changing functions that reflect the unprecedented increase in many's knowledge permitting control over his environment, that accompanied the scientific revolution."¹

For purposes of elucidation, this definition can be broken down into three sequential parts — In the first which we shall label the phase of potentiality, new knowledge is acquired — primarily through scientific discovery but this is not to exclude knowledge of a more empirical nature nor knowledge acquired by means of acculturation. In the second, or activation phase, knowledge is applied — primarily in the form of technological innovations. Many would consider this phase to be the focal point of the process. Indeed, Levy equates it with modernization itself: "The greater the ratio of inanimate to animate sources of power and the greater the multiplication of effort as the effect of application of tools, the greater is the degree of modernization."² Black's definition, however, clearly encompasses a third or resultant phase in which the effects of technology on the society as reflected in and by its institutions are considered.

Thus, it is possible to speak of the degree of modernity of a society's institutions such as its system of agriculture or educational system and, although in a less precise way, the degree of modernity of the society as

¹C. E. Black, *The Dynamics of Modernization: A Study in Comparative History*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), p. 7.

²Marion J. Levy Jr., *Modernization and the Structure of Societies: A Setting for International Affairs*. (2 vols.; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966) I, p. 35.

a whole. When viewed in the perspective of this definition, modernization is a broad, social process brought about by man's application of knowledge to his way of life.

Although usually discussed in national terms, modernization is at the same time a world-wide process affecting every corner of our "global village." When we speak of the modern world, we refer not merely to a compendium of nations but, as Lucian Pye reminds us, a veritable world culture, "based upon a secular rather than a sacred view of human relations, a rational outlook, an acceptance of the substance and spirit of the scientific approach, a vigorous application of an expanding technology, an industrialized organization of production, and a generally humanistic and popularistic set of values for political life."³

This is not to suggest that a leveling of nations, in terms of modernity has occurred as the products and methods of modern science and technology have been diffused throughout the world. Knowledge by its nature is cumulative and leads to more knowledge. Hence, nations which have had or created the needed base for developing and profiting from the scientific revolution have modernized in far greater proportionate measure than those whose resources and social institutions were in varying degrees less capable of supporting such a revolution. This is reflected in the "technological gap," which is often a source of strained relations between the United States on the one hand and western Europe and Canada on the other, as well as the more obvious gap between the rich nations and the poor nations.

The essential argument being advanced here is that before attempting to answer the questions, why have some nations advanced further along an assumed continuum of development than others and the ultimate question of application — *how* can a particular nation become more modern; a clearer understanding of the nature and ends of the process is needed. (Underlying this quest for meaning is, of course, the question of whether modernization is a universally valid concept or a peculiarly American brand of ethnocentrism.)

As is generally the case when any continuum is suggested, the two ends of the development scale are more clearly revealed than the territory in between, and, as a consequence, the literature is replete with contrasts between traditional societies and developed or modern ones. As understanding has increased, varying degrees of modernity have been discerned culminating perhaps with Black's ambitious attempt to rank-order nations.

The usual yardsticks used in determining a nation's modernity are the income per capita and the level of education expressed in terms of the proportion of various age groups in school attendance. The latter, incidentally, has been found to correspond even more nearly than the former

³Lucian W. Pye, "Democracy, Modernization and Nation Building" in *Self-Government in Modernizing Nations*, J. Roland Pennock, ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1964, p. 15.

to a nation's modernity, causing some educators to exaggerate education's significance and overlooking the inherent measurement of wealth contained in educational indices.

Analyses of modern societies reveal one major, common distinguishing characteristic; that is a high level of organization. As Sahlins and Service point out, cultures which have proceeded further along the evolutionary scale of development, "have more parts and sub-systems, more specialization of parts and more effective means of integration of the whole."⁴ Whether political systems are labeled democratic, socialistic, or communistic; bureaucracy has been the logical and inevitable response to the complex problem of marshaling the human and natural resources in a technological society.

The corollary of this high level of organization for the individual member of society is an increased degree of participation in the total life of the society and a corresponding shift in orientation from the local to the national and increasingly the international sphere. This process of social mobilization whereby the individual becomes increasingly integrated into the total social order and the bureaucratization process described above stem logically and inevitably from the technological transformation of the means of production and communication in the society, and they signify an increase in the rationality of man and his social institutions, just as the scientific revolution has resulted in the increased rationalization of the means of production.

Thus we describe and measure without a clear conception of our object. Granting that modernization is an evolutionary process, we still need a definition that will do more than describe modernity of Black's definition, standpoint. This, in particular, is the chief deficiency of Black's definition, for it does not identify technology's impact on society's institutions and thereby creates the impression that whatever the impact might be is *ipso facto* modernization. Similarly, the dimensions and distribution of wealth and education within a nation furnish excellent guides to the extent of a nation's modernity, but they cannot be equated with it.

It is necessary then that we go beyond Black's focus on technology's impact on society's institutions. True it is the institutions of a society whether they be political, economic, educational or whatever which provide the means by which its goals are achieved, and a society can only be as modern as its institutions allow. But for the purpose of determining modernity results in terms of the individual rather than institutional aims or means would be our primary considerations for they constitute the essential conditions of modernity.

It should be recognized that the conception of modernization as with any theory of progress, "however much it owes to the growth of cumulative knowledge and to the increasing ability of man to produce material wealth from their natural environment, is a theory of morals and indeed meta-

⁴Marshall D. Sahlins and Elman R. Service, *Evolution and Culture*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960) pp. 35-36.

physics."⁵ Whether or not they are made explicit, certain basic assumptions about the nature of man and the quality of life underlie any discussion of modernization.

By way of illustration, rather than "the ratio of inanimate to animate sources of power," the degree of modernity of a nation's agricultural sector, for example, ought to be determined by the quantity and quality of its products, and finally, it, along with the system of distribution, should be judged in terms of how well the population being served is nourished. No matter how abstract such a notion might seem, it is ultimately in terms of the quality of life of the individual that modernization should be defined.

As a tentative proposal for determining the modernity of any society, we would suggest a frame of reference paralleling the three phases of modernization revealed in Black's definition; the phase of potentiality, the activation phase, and the resultant phase. Each of the three phases could be considered from the point of view of the individual. In the first phase we would be concerned with the extent to which the individual's human potentiality has been developed. The more a society allows for the fullest possible development of every member's human potential, the more modern it is. In the activation phase we would attempt to assess the individual's participation in and contribution to the society. This would include a consideration of the extent to which the members of the society were meaningfully and productively engaged, not only in the economic sphere, but in the civic and social sphere of human activity as well. For the resultant phase, we would want a quantitative as well as a qualitative measurement of the goods and services available to the members of the society, and we would want to know the extent to which the individual shares in and enjoys these goods and services.

Hopefully, this can serve as a starting point in the creation of a framework for analysis. When we are able to determine the answers to these questions of man's development, contribution, and benefit, we will be able to determine a nation's modernity. But let us not be mistakenly led to the belief that because these factors are not quantifiable or capable of precise measurement, they do not exist.

Finally, we should note that the measurement and the attainment of the goals of modernization, although related, are not one and the same thing. Contrary to the view of many critics, the modernization theorist is not promising a millenium, nor does he have any simple cures for the ills which are plaguing the modern world. In the end, I would interpret his contribution as a call to educators for understanding and action.

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⁵Crane Brinton, *Ideas and Men. The Story of Western Thought*. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1960) p. 379.