

ТЕОРИЯ И МЕТОДОЛОГИЯ ИСТОРИЧЕСКИХ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЙ

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Modernization Theory and the Problem of Historical Time

Annotation: *The paper tries to assess the meaning of historical time in the framework of the modernisation theory. Historical time is a difficult concept (as are all concepts of time), because it is used implicitly and differs from physical time and calendar time. The notions of historical time are often discussed as periodisation and use quite abstract labels for long periods of time (e.g. Middle Ages, Modern Times). The paper considers important and changing ideas about the qualitative characteristics of various periods of time and of the transitions between them.*

Key words: *Modernization theory, historical time, modern society, industrialization, World-Economy.*

Introduction. Soon after the Second World War a new social science theory emerged in the United States.¹ It gained a hegemonic position in Western social thinking for the following decades until at least the 1970s. And some of its basic assumptions proved even more enduring. Here I try to assess the meaning of modernisation theory on how we think of historical time. Historical time is a difficult concept (as are all concepts of time), because it is used implicitly.² For me it means collective ideas about time that differ from physical time and calendar time. Often we discuss notions of historical time as periodisation and use quite abstract labels for long periods of time (e.g. Middle Ages, the Renaissance, Modern Times). In addition, we have important and changing ideas about the qualitative characteristics of various periods of time and of the transitions between them.

Modernisation theory changed some basic ideas about historical time that had been prevalent in social sciences and history. *First*, the idea that there are several stages in the historical development of societies or civilizations was given up. The popular theory of stages

was reinvented in modernisation theory as only one important qualitative change in modern society, which is the change in society from traditional to modern. *Second*, the other important idea that was given up was the notion of a qualitative change in the history of capitalism (e.g. the German discussion of modern capitalism at the beginning of the 20th century or Lenin's theory of imperialism as the last stage of capitalism). Instead of discussing capitalism the creators of modernisation theory explain the nature or quality of our society or our (Western) civilization.

There are also two other aspects that should be taken up in an introduction to modernisation theory. Some of the central concepts were taken from biology (especially the concepts of development (*entwicklung*) and growth).³ Development and growth are usually thought to be natural or at least deterministic processes. Societies are seen in this way as some kind of organism. Something happens because there is a kind of "natural law" making it happen. The biologically flavoured concept of development did not sit well with an older view of also including periods of decline in the concept of historical time.⁴ Another important feature is the fate of Max Weber, whose thinking was transformed in the late 1930s and 1940s in the United States by American sociologists in order to support the theory of modernisation. Weber as one of the grand theorists

¹ See e.g. Michael E. Latham: *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and "Nation Building" in the Kennedy Era*. Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press 2000 on the use of the modernization theory in American foreign policy and Nils Gilman: *Mandarins of the Future. Modernization Theory in Cold War America*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press 2003 on the academic background of modernization theory in United States; and Harry Harootyan: *The Empire's New Clothes. Paradigm Lost, and Regained*. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press 2004 on a more critical perspective on the use of the modernization theory.

² Johannes Fabian starts his *Time and the Other. How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press 1983) with these conceptual problems of time.

³ On the metaphor of growth see, e.g. Robert A. Nisbet: *Social Change and History. Aspects of the Western Theory of Development*. London etc: Oxford University Press 1969.

⁴ The concept of decline had been important in the history of empires since Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–1788).

of Western social science was supposed to guarantee the quality of thinking in modernisation theory.⁵

New Ideas about Historical Time. The division of the history of human societies into two periods, traditional and modern society, is the most important idea in modernisation theory. Traditional societies include the lost civilizations of India and China or ancient Egypt, the tribal societies of the Amazon or the Pacific Ocean, and the older phases of our own societies. Traditional societies are somehow outside history; they experience only cyclical time, while in modern societies the experience of time is based on continuous development or progress – we are constantly progressing towards a certain goal or fulfilling a previously announced purpose. This is not a totally new idea. For instance, the cultural history of Jacob Burckhardt in 1860 was based on an assumption of a basic change in the structure of the mind of Western Man during the Renaissance. A similar idea was hidden in comparisons between the so-called *Naturvölker* (Savages) and ourselves by nineteenth century philosophers. Civilizations still living in oral culture without widespread literacy were living “outside history” (because they did not have written history).⁶ In modernisation theory these ideas were elevated to a fundamental position, as something on which we ground our basic conceptions of human history. And they were also extended to cover the past of our own society.

There is a second new idea about historical time in modernisation theory concerning the modern era of societies. Differences between modern societies are basically similarities because, in spite of existing at the same point in calendar time, societies can be thought to occupy different positions in the same “development curve” or “life-course”. This idea concerning the difference of historical time at the same point of calendar time has some fundamental preconditions. It is based on the independence of development in different societies, which are not dependent on each other in any meaningful way. There is, however, one important exception, the development aid that modern societies can give to those still prevailing in the traditional stage.

These assumptions of historical time are based on principles that are important from the point of view of history theory. First, modernisation theory is based on an idealistic explanation. The change from traditional to modern society starts with a new per-

sonality structure among the members of social elites. At this point it is often referred to Max Weber and the famous Weber-thesis about the Protestant Ethic as offering an ideal starting point for modernisation. On this reasoning, however, the leap from individual level to the level of society is usually left unexplained and it is taken for granted that methodological individualism is accepted without criticism.⁷ The explanation that starts from an emerging new personality structure is not explaining by way of new cultural phenomena as the prime mover of social change, because the new structure of personality is thought to be the key to social change.⁸ Second, during the modern period there are no important qualitative changes in society, because the Industrial Revolution (and the further development of industry) is thought to be the prime mover of history. This is, however, quite unsatisfactory to most observers of social change, and all kinds of qualitative changes are suggested for the analysis of modernity including, e.g., postmodernity and globalisation. There seems to be a need to discover one modernity after another. Third, several founding fathers of modernisation theory had dreams of developing a unified social science around the idea of modernization. I mention this minor aspect of modernisation theory to take note of one of the failures of modernisation, which, however, has been the dream of some of its critics, as well (e.g. such theorists as Fernand Braudel or Immanuel Wallerstein).

Modernisation Theory and Historiography. The first social sciences to propose versions of the modernisation theory were political science and sociology. But soon also historians started to participate. Two examples can be highlighted: the American economic historian W. W. Rostow and the British social historian Peter Laslett.

W. W. Rostow's *Stages of Economic Growth* (1960) is perhaps the most famous analysis of the modernisation process from the historical point of view. This book is (almost) the endpoint of a longer period of work devoted to developing a new theory of development. One fundamental aspect of Rostow's thinking was using Max Weber's ideas as a basis, although Weber is not mentioned in the final volume of his project. The popularity of Rostow's ideas is based on the fact that his famous contribution came so late to the discussion; by then the basic ideas of modernisation theory were already familiar to everyone. Rostow could be seen as someone who developed the idea further, as

⁵ Matti Peltonen: "The Weber Thesis and Economic Historians". *Max Weber Studies* 2008:1, 79–98.

⁶ These ideas seem to be part and parcel of the so called Orientalism that Edward Said criticized so vehemently in his *Orientalism* (1978). Orientalism was, of course, not applied to the history of Western society.

⁷ It is possible that W. W. Rostow escaped the problem of methodological individualism by speaking instead of the modern attitude of individuals of a more social phenomenon – that of applying the results of science to production.

⁸ See, e.g. Harootunian 2004, p. 66, commenting on this distinction in Daniel Lerner's classic *The Passing of Traditional Society* (1958).

a refinement of the quite clumsy theoretical starting point. Rostow reduces the idealism and voluntarism of the transition to modernity. He gives quite material and tangible criteria to the transition (making use of the contributions of science in production, a sufficient level of investment to start economic growth and so on). Politically, the promise of the future society as one of mass consumption was an improvement of the already popular idea of the society of consumers (where there were items to choose from).

Also Peter Laslett in his *The World We Have Lost* (1965) a couple of years after Rostow's contribution produced a concrete historical picture of a transition to modernity using as his example the case of Great Britain (without the colonies or the Empire).⁹ Great Britain had also been used as the main example in Rostow's thinking. Laslett gave a detailed picture of the British society before industrialisation and tried to produce criteria for traditionalism. The main criteria were the lack of common literacy and a communal structure of the personality, especially among those who could not read and write and, for that reason, were not whole personalities but formed somehow dependent parts of the personality of the head of the household. What this structure of personality meant on the level of the whole society is left unexplained and it seems reasonable to suggest that Laslett accepted the idea of methodological individualism. The over-all answer is the magic of "industrialisation" which makes all the difference. Laslett calls the traditional British society "patriarchal" and, in some contexts, a "one-class society" (because it was only the ruling minority of developed personalities who could act politically).

What is remarkable in Rostow and Laslett is that they are not concerned with the concept of historical time in a conscious manner. It is quite obvious that the fundamental difference between traditional and modern phases was so easily accepted because of the anthropological research and literature. The idea of using the example of Great Britain as a society comprised of only one country without any reference to the colonies or the Empire is characteristic of social science thinking in the Cold War period in the West.

While Rostow and Laslett were writing their works on modernisation based on the example of Great Britain, a new discussion concerning the industrialisation of the same society started to emerge – the discussion concerning the industrial decline in Great Britain. In his famous interpretation of this reverse process of modernisation the cultural historian Martin J. Wiener explained the phenomenon in his *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit* (1984) as concerning culture. Because economic decline of the "first indus-

trial nation" in the 20th century could not be explained by economic factors – they were all quite favourable to further success of the leading industrial society – in Wiener's interpretation the members of the British elite who were against important aspects of industrial society.¹⁰ Another problematic example of modernisation among the leading European industrial nations has been Germany. Was the "reactionary modernisation" during the interwar period only "a crisis of modernisation" or was it a more widespread aspect of modernity (that might have included Italy, Spain, Portugal, and perhaps even some other European cases)?¹¹ Jeffrey C. Alexander has recently suggested in his *Dark Side of Modernity* (2013) that modernity has "frictions". In this conceptual compromise modernity seems to have two aspects that exist simultaneously, progressive results and cruel costs that have been paid in achieving them.¹² Unfortunately, however, Alexander's view of modernity avoids concepts related to historical time.

The Criticism of Modernisation Theory . The most important criticism of modernisation theory came from the dependence school (Andre Gunder Frank) and world-system analysis (Braudel, Wallerstein). I concentrate here on the work of Braudel and Wallerstein from the point of view of historical time. What is common to both of them is that

-they tried to solve the two main problems of historical time in modernisation theory simultaneously (no break-up into two main eras; no denial of coeval development);

-both Braudel and Wallerstein included, as important aspects of development in their models, periods of decline; this is obvious already from Braudel's first monograph on *The Mediterranean* (1949) which explains the decline of the city-states of northern Italy in the first centuries of the early modern period;¹³

-they did not refer at all to historical time but rather tried to solve the problems by using spatial reasoning and spatially grounded metaphors in their conceptualisation.

¹⁰ Martin J. Wiener: *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit 1850-1980*. Cambridge University Press, 1981. Of more recent literature, see, e.g. F.M.L. Thomson: *Gentrification and the Enterprise Culture. Britain 1780-1980*. Oxford University Press, 2001.

¹¹ The concept "reactionary modernization" is from Jeffrey Herf: *Reactionary Modernity. Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich*. Cambridge University Press, 1984.

¹² Jeffrey C. Alexander: *The Dark Side of Modernity*. Polity 2013. Alexander's book includes essays published during the last 25 years.

¹³ On Braudel's and Wallerstein's conceptualisations of decline, see J. K. S. Thomson: *Decline in History. The European Experience*. Polity Press, 1998. Another study of periods of decline in history is Jürgen Kuczynski's *Gesellschaften im Untergang: Vergleichende Niedergangsgeschichte vom Römischen Reich bis zu den vereinigten Staaten von Amerika*. Pahl-Rugenstein Verlag, 1984. Kuczynski does not mention the work of Braudel or Wallerstein.

⁹ Peter Laslett: *The World We Have Lost*. London: Methuen 1965.

Braudel had been concerned about historical time in his *The Mediterranean* already at the end of the 1940s, but his other big economic historical project about civilization and capitalism in early modern times (1500-1800) introduced a spatial concept of the economy, consisting of three layers: material life (or everyday life), the market economy (in the widest sense) and capitalism. Wallerstein's theory of world capitalism got its inspiration from Braudel's *The Mediterranean*, not from its main idea of three speeds of historical time, but its concept of the world-economy. Developing these influences with other current ideas (e.g. those of Andre Gunder Frank) Wallerstein proposed a model for the capitalist world-economy consisting of three areas: the core, semi-periphery and periphery (and, of course, the areas not belonging yet or any longer to the capitalist world-economy).

Both Braudel and Wallerstein denied the fundamental division of world history into only two fundamental eras, traditional and modern. At least, the period of their concern did not feature that kind of fundamental change. Braudel especially commented on this aspect in his preface to the first volume of *Civilization and Capitalism 1500-1800*.

According to the textbooks, the development of the pre-industrial Europe (which was studied quite exclusively of the rest of the world, as if that did not exist) consisted of its gradual progress towards the rational world of the market, the firm, and capitalist investment, until the coming of the Industrial Revolution, which neatly divides human history into two.¹⁴

Similarly Wallerstein in his now four-volume opus *The Modern World-System* (1974-2012) denies the separateness of the different elements of the capitalist world-system; we all have been living in a single unit bound by internal relationships.¹⁵ He sees the rise of productivity and the volume of production during The Industrial Revolution only as one of many similar cases regarding economic progress. Likewise the

French Revolution of 1789 could not be explained as an internal French event of the national state, but as a phase in the development of the capitalist world-system.¹⁶ For Wallerstein, the "industrial revolution" was just the increase of mechanisation in the core region of the capitalist world-economy.¹⁷ It could not, according to him, however, divide the history of the capitalist world-economy, in a meaningful way, into two separate parts or eras. In quite a similar fashion to that of Wallerstein, Braudel also explained the nature of the English Industrial Revolution. It could only happen in a situation where Great Britain had a dominant position in the world-market.

The concepts of historical time in Braudel's and Wallerstein's thinking had to do with the change in the internal relationships of the historical systems that they investigated. For Braudel the answer seems to be in the extremely long waves from the Middle Ages to the contemporary age, and Wallerstein stresses two aspects of the world-system, its geographical growth and the power-political change (the struggle for hegemony) in the core region of the system. Braudel gives us the high point of four really long and slow movements (1350, 1630, 1817 and 1974)¹⁸ and Wallerstein proposes only three clear instances of hegemony at the core (Holland in the middle of the seventeenth century, Great Britain at the beginning of the nineteenth century and the USA after the Second World War).¹⁹

The emphasis on living the same historical time in spite of differences in state structures, political institutions or religious attitudes is stressed strongly in Fernand Braudel's *The Mediterranean*. In the 1970s both Braudel and Wallerstein used the concept "world-time" of this spatial idea of historical time in common with a historical system (world-economy or world system).

It is as if in this continuous history of violence, reaching from the Straits of Gibraltar and the canals of Holland to Syria and Turkestan, everything was in-

¹⁴ See, e.g. Fernand Braudel, *The Structures of Everyday Life. Civilization and Capitalism 15th -18th century*. Vol 1. London: Collins 1981, p. 23. One could also think that Braudel and Wallerstein belonged to the first one of Koselleck's modernisation theorists, those who thought it began in (around) 1500 and those who preferred (around) 1800 (Renaissance and Reformation or Industrialisation). Braudel and Wallerstein, however, did not consider Renaissance, but created a more comprehensive conceptualization for a social system (Braudel's economy with three different modes, and Wallerstein's capitalist world-economy with three different zones). See Reinhart Koselleck: "The Eighteenth Century as the Beginning of Modernity", Reinhart Koselleck: *The Practice of Conceptual History. Timing History, Spacing Concepts*. Stanford: Stanford University Press 2002, pp. 156-160.

¹⁵ Immanuel Wallerstein: "Modernization: requiescat in pace". In: Immanuel Wallerstein: *The Capitalist World-Economy. Essays*. Cambridge etc: Cambridge University Press 1979, 132-137.

¹⁶ Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System IV: Centrist Liberalism Triumphant, 1789-1914*. Berkeley etc: University of California Press 2011, (Industrial Revolution) p. xv and (French Revolution) p. xv. The French Revolution changed, however, Western ideas about historical time (Wallerstein does not use this term), afterwards it was normal to have political change (previously it was the other way around).

¹⁷ Immanuel Wallerstein: *The Modern World-System III: The Second Era of Great Expansion of the Capitalist World-Economy 1730s-1840s*. San Diego etc.: Academic Press 1989, pp. 33 and 60.

¹⁸ Fernand Braudel: *The Perspective of the World. Civilization & Capitalism 15th-18th Century*. London: Collins 1984, pp. 78-85.

¹⁹ Immanuel Wallerstein: "The Three Instances of Hegemony in the History of the Capitalist World-Economy". Immanuel Wallerstein: *The Politics of the World-Economy. The States, the Movements, and the Civilizations*. Cambridge etc: Cambridge University Press, 1984, pp. 37-46.

terrelated. This was a history operating so to speak at the same voltage everywhere; its variations were electrically identical. At a certain point in time, Christian and Moslems clashed in the Jihad and Crusade, then turned backs on one another, discovering internal conflicts. But this equation of confluent passions was also, as I shall try to show at the end of the second book,

the consequence of the slow rhythms of the economic conjuncture, identical throughout the known world which in the sixteenth century saw the beginning of its existence as a unit.²⁰

²⁰ Fernand Braudel: *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*. Volume II. London: Fontana/Collins, 1971, p. 844.

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