Modernization ‘Theories’: A Critical Re-Examination

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Modernization approaches to societal transformation dominated the intellectual theorizing and activities for about two decades from the late 1960s. Why the approaches failed to apprehend the complexity of the developmental problems of the third world countries in general and Africa in particular was not just because of the approaches’ ethnocentrism and their neglect of external factors as important considerations for development. Their problem is more fundamental than that. The major fault, in our opinion, is that modernization approaches with their strong theoretical pretensions were too empiricist. They lacked the reflective sophistication and the theoretical depth of the positivism of the previous century.

Modernization ‘theories’ were the products of twentieth century’s confidence in the ability of science to solve any human problem including social ones. This was because there had been tremendous achievements in science especially in physics and mathematics and so, it was believed that everything and anything could be laid bare by science. And yet, the twentieth century can be described as the most brutal century.

What happened was this: just as major developments in biology and physics propelled the scientific study of man (sociology) in the nineteenth century, tremendous achievements in physics and mathematics at the beginning of the twentieth century influenced first, philosophy, and next, the other intellectual attempts at the scientific understanding of social man. The interaction of physics, mathematics, and natural sciences with philosophy, on the one hand, and the communication among themselves of pure scientists, philosophers and social scientists, on

the other hand, influenced and enhanced the impact of physics and mathematics on philosophy in particular and on social thought in general. For example, it was Einstein who suggested to Piaget that he investigate children's intuitive notions of speed and time, thereby inspiring one of the psychologist's most illuminating lines of research.

And then, the twentieth century itself started off, and continued to be, an age that demanded empirical answers to the urgent questions and problems of the day. As a result of the two factors mentioned above (i.e. interaction between the various disciplines and communication across disciplinary boundaries between individual scientists), the profession of philosophy had to move toward a narrow and specialized meaning it never had before. It not only became a specialized theoretical discipline, it constrained itself up the ladder of abstraction of physics and mathematics. Logical positivism and then pragmatism appeared to be natural outgrowths of that momentum - that strong desire of philosophy to be un-avowedly scientific. William Barrett may not be carrying things too far when he commented that "the movement known as logical positivism... actually trafficked upon the guilt philosophers felt at not being scientists, i.e. at not being researchers producing reliable knowledge in the mode of science".

Well, why would philosophers and social thinkers in general not feel guilty for not being scientific enough - for not being able to predict and perhaps prevent the first catastrophe (First World War, 1914-1918) that shocked, if not destroyed, the optimism with which the century began. In 1900, Europeans could look back on at least two centuries of astonishing growth. Whether the criteria they used were intellectual and scientific, or material and economic, Europeans justifiably persuaded themselves that both they and the world were set on a progressive course. They had to include the rest of the world in their calculations - after all, European 'civilization' was spread worldwide. So, limitless advance seemed to lie ahead! We must remember that the time

between 1815 and 1914 was a period of unprecedented peace in Europe - a period in which coalition wars did not take place. That was the time when industrialization had the enabling environment for tremendous upsurge,³

The great historian, J.M. Roberts has commented that Europeans showed in 1900 “much the same confidence in the • continuing success of their culture as the Chinese had in theirs a century earlier. The past, they were sure, proved them right.”⁴ About a decade later however, events began to prove them wrong! Strains began to emerge in the European world: poverty in the midst of plenty, unrest, international socialism, women suffragette movements, upsurges of nationalism and revolutionary potential. All these fed not only on technological advance, but also on ‘scientism’ - the confidence in science in its crudest form. Then came the First World War and the optimism with which the century opened was shattered. Just two decades later, the Second World War, with more devastating technological means of destruction at Europe’s disposal, erupted like a volcano with more ruinous effects. After the two wars, the stage was now set for a new way of thinking. A complex array of questions about social man arose which needed urgent answers that must be supplied with scientific exactitude.

Modernization ‘theories’ emerged during that period and attempted to supply, knowingly or unknowingly, answers to two problems (or questions) forced on mankind by that war - or better conceptualized - by a two-level failure of that war. One was that the desire of one race for total domination of the world generated, instead, increased desire for freedom and a proliferation of different nationalisms. The second was that increased scientific knowledge, instead of improving the understanding of social man actually confused it.

We shall now discuss six characteristics of modernization. Although our reference point will be the third world in general, Africa will be the focus of concern. The first major characteristic

of modernization is that it is not a theory; as Anthony Smith has said, "it is a methodological framework no more!"⁵ Its prescriptive propensity is so strong and 'visible' but it cannot be a theory. Theories do not prescribe, they describe! The 'obviousness' of the modernists' message as shown by its weak positivism also helps to exaggerate its pretensions to being a theory. On that latter point, modernization has become equated with Westernization, - and Westernization indeed it has become in theory and practice for both the modernizers (whether elites or the masses), and the already modernized (i.e. Westerners) especially in the latter's perceptions and policies. But looked at more critically beyond this 'obviousness', is it not more appropriate to conceptualize 'Westernism' as a historical form of modernism? In that case, 'Westernization' becomes the process (or the processual route) of becoming modern, or of achieving modernity of a particular historical type.

One fundamental reason why modernists, especially Africans, have conflated modernization with Westernization is what is generally referred to as intellectual imperialism. Claude Ake carefully analyzed the imperialization of social science in Africa.⁶ But what we are pointing out here is a deeper, far more damaging penetration of the African mind and episteme by Western ontologies. Until recently, Western interpreters as well as African analysts have been using categories and conceptual systems, which depend on a Western epistemological order. As V.Y. Mudimbe says, "even in the most explicitly 'Afro-centric' descriptions, models of analysis explicitly knowingly or unknowingly, refer to the same order."

The second characteristic of modernization, which is closely related to the first, is that modernization is also an attempt to theorize process, and processes, because their mutability and consequent uncertainty, have always eluded the grasp of purely positivistic explanation - even at the level of meta-theory which modernization tries to assume. Modernists, blinded by cultural

chauvinism and ideological bias - all embroidered in excessive positivism - failed to typologize, synthesize and effectively conceptualize the processual fluidity and complexity of the emerging post-war nationalisms. This failure strongly arose from the modernization theorists over-dependence on the • epistemologies of sociology's founding fathers and their typologies of societies. Although, prophecy, "which had hitherto been the province of religion and the preserve of mystics and astrologers...became the province of philosophers of history and the fathers of sociology" and although social and political thinkers in the nineteenth century were aware of nationalism as a dominant movement of that age, "the great masters did not foretell the huge proliferation of national pride" of the twentieth century and "indeed did not predict it at all".⁸

This was because in the second half of the nineteenth century and indeed up to the First World War, as the great philosopher, Isaiah Berlin pointed out, nationalism was thought to be waning. Where could the great thinkers draw their inspiration or examples! Nationalism "unlike tribal feeling or xenophobia, to which it is related, but with which it is not identical, seems scarcely to have existed in ancient or classical times". So if the nineteenth century thinkers could not draw concrete historical examples from their ancestors, then their predecessors, the modernists, cannot draw any theoretical or perceptual inspiration from them! Rationalists and liberals, and of course, the early socialists, virtually ignored nationalism. For them, it was a mere sign of immaturity, "an irrational relic of, or a retrogressive return to a barbarous past..."¹⁰ Karl Marx displayed unique powers of prognosis in identifying the central trends at work in the emerging capitalist societies. But neither he nor Engels, his collaborator, saw anything else fundamental beyond the emergence of, and the war between classes, as accounting for profound social change in human history. Nationalism, like religion, was seen as a temporary phenomenon. And again like religion, would evaporate together

with other politically potent and historically conditioned illusions.¹¹ So, the failure of Western thinkers in general and modernists in particular to apprehend the complex confluence of social action in parts of the world that came to be dubbed the 'Third World', led to a mechanistic conceptualization of development. The positivism of the modernization 'theorists' constrained them to believe that essentially, all social beings are the same and must therefore follow the same unilinear evolutionary route to modernity. But, to borrow from the profound perception of Isaiah Berlin again "universalism, by reducing everything to the lowest common denominator which applies to all men at all times, drained both lives and ideals of that specific content which alone gave them point".¹²

The third characteristic of modernization 'theory' is its shallow empiricism. The modernists 'experienced' the Third World peoples as the colonialists experienced the colonized in the nineteenth century. This is visibly a continuation of orientalism. It is empiricism with the empty symbolic quality of mathematics. Modernization theory in its distinction of Third World societies from the industrialized ones simply establishes isolated propositions or empirical generalizations. A common and obvious example is the proposition that traditional societies lack achievement orientation and rationality. This is neither a theory nor an explanation of a behavioural pattern; it is more of an observed behavioural disposition that needs to be first proved, and then explained.

The fourth characteristic of modernization approach to development concerns the two most important interrelated processes of change central to the modernist. These are industrialization and urbanization with the consequent structural differentiation. According to Neil Smelser who attempted "a Theory of Modernization", it is possible to isolate the effects of several "interrelated technical, economic, and ecological processes frequently accompanying development".¹³ In the realm of techno-

logy, he posited “the change from simple and traditionalized techniques toward the application of scientific knowledge”.¹⁴ In industry, he posited “the transition from the use of human and animal power toward industrialization proper...”¹⁵ All these together with other changes in agriculture and ecological arrangements would give rise, according to him, to structural •differentiation as well as “integration” but also to “social disturbances”.¹⁶ Neil Smelser typified modernization ‘theorists’ and in that write-up, he not only gave details of such changes, but expanded fully on the various aspects of the structural differentiation. But what did Smelser mean by “industrialization proper”? The more important question to ask perhaps is: what really is industrialization? Furthermore, what socio-historical conditions enabled the West to industrialize before any one else? In fact, did industrialization not start in other regions of the world at the same time as or even before, the West, and what are the consequences for the Third World and for world development in general, of the interaction between the West and the various industrialization processes? The general modernist notion that industrialization and urbanization, led to development is simplistically teleological. We need rather to attempt answers to the substantive questions just posed.

Industrialization is not the same as industrial revolution. The two have always been used wrongly to the detriment of the apprehension of reality. One is an evolutionary process, which emerged slowly over centuries in different regions of the world; its history is fragmentary and inchoate, and its composite picture by the seventeenth century, everywhere, was a collage of intercultural borrowings with everything taking shape in fits and starts in what can only be called mechanization • of various degrees of ‘sophistication’. Industrial Revolution on the other hand is the culmination of the achievements of those isolated efforts, and their rapid application to all spheres of life at a particular point in man-kind’s history - specifically between the eighteenth and nineteenth

centuries. Indeed, one must remember that spinning and weaving, pottery using the potter's wheel, grinding of grain by composite mechanisms, moving of machines by wind-mills and water-mills, the transmission of power by shafts and gears, whose basic ideas later transformed ordinary guns into revolvers, the operation of atmospheric pumps like the water pump and the fundamental processes of metallurgy were "transmitted from the ancient past to modern man..."¹⁷ These developments took place autonomously (sometimes simultaneously) in all parts of the world, in Asia and Africa especially. They should, therefore, not be seen as European monopoly only capable of being brought about by Europeans and their civilizations only.

We know that "at some point in time, probably In the late eighteenth century, a crucial corner was turned..."¹⁸, in the West and in a short period of time, the rapidity of improvements in the mechanization processes turned an evolutionary process, industrialization, into a revolutionary one the industrial revolution. What factor forced or enabled the West to make a turn into that "crucial corner" is what needs to be explained. But before we do that, another important analysis should be made. Industrialization is itself a secondary phenomenon in human evolution. It was preceded, though strongly helped along, by technology, i.e. all those things that mankind skillfully constructed for the purpose of reducing manual or physical toil in the process of reproducing its existence. "The history of technology begins with human beings using tools to act on nature"¹⁹, said a Japanese writer. That cannot be disputed! Technology is an art, a skill, which applied as practical arts, created crafts, mechanical artifacts and other goods. The practitioners of this art became artisans, craft-men and other kinds of skillful technicians who eventually invented machines and ideas and also created occupational techniques. All through history, all regions of the world have at various stages had their quantum of technology and some of these regions

have been industrializing, i.e. producing goods in some meaningful quantity within an emerged and continuously growing network of production 'spots' (i.e. factories). Even those we might want to label as primitive have been known to develop to this level long ago. Archeologists, for example, have known for a long time that the Maya of Central America who flourished between about AD 250 and 900, perfected the most complex writing system in the hemisphere, mastered mathematics and astrological calendars with astonishing accuracy and built massive pyramids all over the area.²⁰ Joseph Needham, the British scientist, historian, and author of definitive texts in both biochemistry and sinology, has demonstrated how the Chinese had developed complicated technology long before Europeans. In a monumental history of Chinese mathematics, science, medicine, and technology, he demonstrated that science and technology are not the preserve of Europeans; in fact, these Asians were more pre-eminent in scientific inventions long before Europeans.²¹

One last but very significant factor first, about technology, and later, about industrialization concerns iron. Once this metallic chemical element was discovered in any region of the world, technology gained a new momentum, which later infused new significance and expansive dimensions to various occupations and the organization of society. Whatever the type, whether magnetic, malleable, meteoric or specular iron, it slowly but surely revolutionized technology and continuously altered social life and culture everywhere. But again, its discovery took place not in what eventually became Western Europe but in various regions of the world from Antiquity. For example, China entered the Iron Age about 500 BC and it was quickly (as it happened quite naturally everywhere), applied to farming technology. Consequently, a great variety of agricultural iron implements began to appear.²² Iron also appeared in classical antiquity between 1200 and 2000 BC, increasing the productive capacity of the workers through better

tools, and improving in the process, the social and political status of the craftsmen.²³

Smelting of iron demands special knowledge and it has to be shaped by hammer using red heat. But it seems that the earlier stages, different types of minerals were smelted and there were different types of smelting furnaces, which existed in different regions of the world. In Nigeria, for example, iron had been in use since about 500 BC particularly among the Yoruba in the southwest and in the Nok area in the northern parts.²⁴ An indigenous writer also confirmed that “iron smelting was one of the important occupations of the Yoruba before the Europeans ‘brought their own iron’”.²⁵

Professor Andah pointed out that “in Sukur, a hill village in northeastern Nigeria, black river sands have been smelted for ages with traditional shaft furnaces and drum bellows”.²⁶ He went on to say that “such an independent, even if rudimentary technique, is known to have been used to produce excellent iron where the magnetite form of ore was in fact available”. And most interesting for us here, Andah stated that it was “also striking that people of Sukur decided to revive the smelting of these locally produced ores on discovering that iron imported from Europe and available in markets made poor quality tools”.²⁸

Ethnographic data have also indicated the survival of three main types of iron smelting furnace in Nigeria. These, according to Professor Andah, are: (a) the domed furnaces found largely below the course of the Niger; (b) the bowl or shaft furnaces; and (c) the Catalan furnaces. Andah pointed out that the slag pit variety of furnace has been found to have “been in use at Taruga in the Jos Plateau in early Iron Age times. This form was present in Cartage around the same time as at Taruga..”,²⁹

The point here is that all the rudiments of the evolution of technology emerged and grew in numerous parts of the world. The question then is: why did they not all evolve to the level of industrialization as was the case in the West? The answer lies, not

in the absence of either rationality or a Protestant ethic, but in values and, cultures, and consequently in social structure. Technological discoveries and inventions, especially at the initial stages, were usually applied more massively to two crucial areas of social life for a singular purpose: survival! One area where it is applied is agriculture. The other is warfare. The history of the West demonstrates strongly that it was applied more to warfare. Consequently, the culture and the growth of institutions of that region have been deeply moulded by savage and frequent warfare which continued into the twentieth century and which must have 'left deep imprints on the psyche of the peoples. The brutal and unimaginable crimes often committed in Western societies tempt us to believe that they are manifestations of the indelible imprints of the sub-culture of war of earlier ages. In their cold savagery, many of the crimes -have no counterpart anywhere else in the world. Let us expand on this history of war.

Reflecting on the history of European state making, Charles Tilly argued that military strength was a major factor influencing which states survived and which did not. He pointed out that in 1500, there were 500 or more states in Europe, but by 1900, the number had shrunk to twenty-five.³⁰ Geoffrey Parker also talked about financing war. Nowadays he pointed out, governments are criticized when defence spending reaches 17 percent (France), 29 percent (United States), or 41 percent (Israel) of total public expenditure. "However, military outlays were far higher in early modern times". He went on, "in the 1700s, Louis XIV appears to have devoted 75 percent of his revenues to war, while Peter the Great spent 85 percent. Even more extreme was the situation of the English Republic during the 1650s, where no less than 90 percent of public spending seems to have gone on the army and navy".³¹ We learnt further from Parker that warfare became such an entrenched occupation that supplying armies was put in the hands of private contractors. Said Parker, "...during the thirty-year war, the system reached its apogee, with some 1,500 individuals raising

troops all [over] Europe, under contract for ... warlords”.³² So, for people who for centuries derived income and daily survival from wars, every new idea, every invention, every discovery must have been applied to warfare. For the West, therefore, wars helped to accelerate technological development and the growth of bureaucracy, which later propelled the emergence and fast expansion of industrialization (especially between 1815 and 1914) and finally gave Europe an edge in development generally.

As for urbanization, the modernists’ linkage of it to industrialization lacks sociological strength, and is devoid of any theoretical or historical validation. Urbanization antedates industrialization. The inevitability and determinism imposed on the relationship between the two by modernists is, therefore, false -especially since for the modernists, only industrialization appears to create urbanization and also for them, the absence of both phenomena denies development to the Third World. Urbanization has always been created by economic activity entailing production for market, long distance and large-scale trading, the use of money currency, or even exchange by barter of a well-established and systematic fashion. Cities constitute a secondary phenomenon derived from ‘natural’ or ‘ordinary’ aggregation of people in societies and brought about initially by the compulsive drive for ‘central’ and/or visible location of power - either political or purely military - although the two often meshed. Cities were therefore originally locations or centres of power and culture, and later inevitably, of high level economic activities and production -production in cultural and handicraft. terms but not necessarily industrial.

It has been pointed out that in Nigeria, for example, the history of urbanization “dates back at least to the early medieval period and derives in part from the revival of trade which characterized the whole of the Old World during this period.”³³ Just as Henri Pirenne effectively documented economic activities and the growth of cities in Europe,³⁴ and just as Raymond Mann’s

historical geography of medieval West Africa constitutes “a monumental opus covering the literature of this period”³⁵, Akin Mabogunje’s work effectively demonstrates that urbanization has been a feature of Nigeria’s growth since the thirteenth century. He shows that external trade with North Africa and Europe, plus equally intensive internal trade with parts of Sudan, “based on regional specialization in craft and agricultural production” generated extensive urbanization in all parts of what later became Nigeria. We also know that by the mid-thirteenth century, there were between thirty and forty city-states in East Africa. Merchants brought these about mainly because of long time trade with East Africa from South Arabia, the Persian Gulf and northwest India. In the course of time, some ‘of these Asian merchants settled permanently in East Africa helping to consolidate those city-states. “These settlements existed on, and for, trade; modern historians have characterized them as the “city-sates” of medieval East Africa.”³⁶

Perhaps, with all this, another question to ask is: why did western type capitalism not emerge in these urban centres? Karl Marx is not of much help in these matters. But Max Weber, to some extent, is! If we synthesize with what Weber said about cities in his various works, as Andreski has done, we can distil a thesis which reads something like this: “the more advanced capitalist forms of production and exchange can develop only where the cities are dominated by the mercantile class.”³ May we ask: who are the members of the mercantile class? What is of utmost importance in the relationship between trade and development? Industrial capitalism had of course taken root in Europe at the time of Weber; such consideration must surely have affected his thesis. But the entrepreneurs of Africa and Asia also had profound influence on the economies and therefore developmental evolution of their societies. There must be a similarity between them (by the nineteenth century) and the merchants of Western Europe at that same period. What is most significant about mercantilism – the

action, not the doctrine, - is commercialism; and that is what the European merchants (of Weber's time) share with those labelled entrepreneurs in Africa and Asia. They all directed business undertakings and assumed the risk for the sake of profit.

So, mercantilism (i.e. commercialism) and the consequent urbanization existed in many third world societies too and yet industrialization never emerged. Why? We must look for answers in other factors. Perhaps, we should look deeper into Weber. He made some distinctions, which constitute his most important conceptual innovation as he tried to explain why western civilization departed from the normal human pattern. The explanations are indeed complex ideas, representing Weber's profundity. He made a distinction between producers' cities and consumers' cities. This he linked with another distinction between productive (i.e. industrial or 'rational') and parasitic (i.e. political or 'irrational') capitalism. In supporting Weber, Andreski pointed out that it was an aspect of the normal human pattern that cities were centres of exploitation and consumption rather than production. However, he further explained that the "small but largely independent cities of western Christendom during the latter middle ages, were the first to be populated mainly by producers (if we include the traders) and to give to the producers juridical security, a high status and a share in the government".³⁸

These, I believe may be seen as necessary but not sufficient conditions for converting commercialism into industrialism. • In fact, Andreski's explanation also sounds Ideological. Industrialization probably preceded the merchants in the cities or was brought into the cities by producers. What became the-most important precondition for industrial development was technology. And the absence of the emergence of modern technology in Africa and Asia was due to, among others, three factors: first, is the destructive effect of colonialism, which cannot be over-stated. Secondly, (the consequence of the first), is the distortion of the natural evolution of the *gemeinschaft* social structures of those

societies into their own *gesellschaft*. And thirdly, the absence in their histories, of centuries of acute deprivations made worse by continual savage warfare. As we pointed out earlier, one should look deeply into history and the social structure, for the ontologies of the precondition of the emergence of industrialization.

The fifth characteristic of modernization approach to development is a well-known one, which is so obvious it almost needs no mention: that is ethnocentrism — with its stress on imminent change with very little empirical evidence. Ethnocentrism is really a major feature of western social thought. Was Prussia not at the highest stage of evolution for Hegel? Or would Condorcet or Tugort, before Hegel, have agreed that France was not the most civilized nation that historical evolution had thrown up! Who else had the 'right' to be more culturally chauvinistic than modernization theorists whose nations (mainly America and Britain) had emerged victorious after the Second World War!!

The sixth characteristic of modernization approach to development is that in theory and practice, the phenomenon of modernization created an unnecessary, unnatural and destabilizing historical stage in the evolution of Third World societies. Modernization as process and practice gave birth to underdevelopment! The processes of change in those societies can be conceptualized as a four-stage evolution: undeveloped -developing - modernization - under development - developed! The first stage is dubbed undeveloped only in comparison with what we know of development in modern times. It is not to be confused with primitivism. For want of a better term, it can be labeled a traditional period. From the fifteenth to the nineteenth century, Africa and Asia certainly cannot be described as primitive compared to Europe. In-fact, vis-a-vis Europe, the opposite might be the case. A lamentation about India by Paul Baran suddenly springs to mind. Baran wondered why and how India, which had manufactured and exported "the finest muslin's and other luxurious

fabrics and articles at a time when the ancestors of the British were living an extremely primitive life...failed to take part in the economic revolution initiated by the descendants of those same wild babarians”.³⁹ The comparison between the two continents is obvious even if it may not be acceptable to some! Baran pointed out that up till the eighteenth century, the condition of India was relatively advanced, “and Indian method of production and of industrial and commercial organization could stand comparison with those in vogue in any other parts of the world”.⁴⁰ Baran was talking about a period which we will describe as ‘developing’, i.e. between the seventeenth and early nineteenth centuries. This was a period, in most of Africa and Asia, in which a highly developed *gemeinschaft* social formation had begun to evolve its own *gesellschaft* form.⁴¹ Then suddenly came a new stage • brought about by the forcible linkage of the highly evolved traditional societies with the West through various forms of colonialism. This was when the so-called ‘modernization’ began which lasted in most cases, until over a decade after independence. During that period, the natural *gesellschaft* formations of those societies were whipped off while a totally strange one, with a mixture of pleasure and pain, was grafted on. The grafting of the alien *gesellschaft* on a perfectly formed *gemeinschaft* led to a withering away of various enabling values, which had previously existed in those societies. Innovativeness was twisted and altogether the natural propensity to, and the desire for, development were undermined. It was a period of the unification’ of ‘theory’ and praxis. Given the prescriptive propensity of modernization ‘theories’, United Nations officials, international aid practitioners, as well as elites in developing countries, imbibed modernization prescriptions and attempted to convert them into policies and practice. Initially, the result came back to feed the ‘theories’. The modernists’ neo-evolutionist economist model became firmly entrenched in the public consciousness. The final result was the entrenchment and

the perfection of the mechanisms of the development of under-development.

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