



**TECHNIUM**  
SOCIAL SCIENCES JOURNAL

**Vol. 79/2026**  
**A New Decade for Social Changes**



**PLUS**  
**COMMUNICATION P**



International  
Communication & PR

## The Rise, Fall, and Resurgence of Modernization Theory

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**Abstract.** Out of the intellectual fermentation of the post-World War II era, modernization theory emerged as a pervasive theoretical force to exercise a spectacular hegemony for three consecutive decades. The enchanting appeal of modernization theory emanated from its theoretical claim to have discovered an emancipatory formula that could allegedly extricate economically backward nations from the gravitational force of underdevelopment. Despite the ubiquity of the concepts of modernity and progress in socio-economic discourse, which is an indication of the continuing influence of modernization theory, the strength of modernization theory began to dwindle by the 1980s. It will be demonstrated that modernization theory was based on structural functionalism, which itself had been shaped by the Eurocentric assumptions of historical transformation. With the emergence of economic crises in the 1970s, which contradicted the theoretical foundations of modernization theory, the edifice of both structural functionalism and modernization theory began to crumble. Despite the eclipse of modernization theory's appeal, its modified versions continue to be used by students of democratization and economic development.

**Keywords.** Modernization Theory, Eurocentric, Structural Functionalism, Development, Dependency Theory, Democratization

### Introduction

Emerging from the intellectual atmosphere of the post-World War II era, modernization theory became a pervasive theoretical force to exercise a spectacular hegemony for three consecutive decades. The appeal of modernization theory rested on its theoretical assertion for presenting an effective formula that could effectively extricate economically backward nations from the gravitational force of underdevelopment. Despite the centrality of the concepts of modernity and progress in economic development and democratization discourse, which reflects the continuing its influence, the appeal of modernization theory began to wane by the 1980s. It will be demonstrated that modernization theory was based on structural functionalism, which itself had been shaped by the Eurocentric assumptions of historical transformation. Modernization theory's association with Eurocentric thought became the source of its unravelling. With the rising of economic turbulence in the 1970s, which contradicted the theoretical foundations of modernization theory, the edifice of both structural functionalism and modernization theory began to crumble. Despite the eclipse of modernization theory's appeal, its modified versions continue to be used by students of democratization and economic development. In conclusion, the main themes in the paper will be recapitulated.

This paper is divided into Three parts. Part one discusses the connection between Eurocentric and Structural Functionalisms, Part two highlights structural functionalism as the basis for the rise of modernization theory. Part three reflects on the unravelling of modernization theory and the continuity of its modified version,

### **Eurocentrism and Structural Functionalism**

In order to trace and elucidate the linkages between Eurocentrism and structural functionalism that became a granite slab upon which modernization theory was formulated, it is essential to provide a compendious account of Eurocentric thought. More specifically, apprehending the sequential order of interconnectedness between Eurocentrism, structural functionalism, and modernization theory necessitates explicating the underlying methodological, theoretical, and conceptual assumptions of historical development that have led to the crystallization of Eurocentrism as a ubiquitous projection of historical sweep that has continued to prevail in the realm of social science. Eurocentrism can be succinctly expounded as a constructed panorama of historical transformation that establishes Europe as the vanguard and the epicenter of historical progress [1]. The roots of the Eurocentric mode of historical transformation can be traced back to the 16th-century Renaissance which triggered a shift in the path of historical thought that was reflected metaphysics and the emergence of science as the basis for an objective evaluation of reality [2]. This decisive break in the trajectory of socio-political thought not only culminated in the relegation of metaphysics to an inferior position, but it also led to a gradual compartmentalization of philosophy from science, which was gradually institutionalized in the structure of knowledge [2]. Alteration in the structure of knowledge which was heralded by the 16<sup>th</sup> century Renaissance, was a parallel response to the supersession of the pre-capitalist notion of economy as management of household by economics interpreted as the law governing market relations that was rationalized as the forces of nature to which societies are bound to adhere [3]. The shift from metaphysics as the quest for truth to science as an objective investigation of social, economic, and political phenomena was spearheaded by the emergence of market liberalism. The historical triumph of science over metaphysics was a direct response to the development of capitalist social relations, whose center of gravity was Europe:

Social science emerged in response to European problems, at a point of history when Europe dominated the whole world system. It was inevitable that its choice of subject matter, its theorizing, its methodology, and its epistemology all reflected the constraints of the crucible within which it was born [2].

The multi-dimensional assumptions of Eurocentrism that have become the basis for a scientific inquiry of historical development revolve around a particular projection of socio-historical transformation, which has acquired universal colouration. Within the scope of social science, it has become an institutionalized mode of historical investigation to depict Europe as the center of the social, cultural, and technological revolution that allegedly permitted humanity to leave behind the disabilities of pioneering existence [4]. It has been a logical corollary of this specific narration of historical progress to attribute the economic backwardness of non-European countries to their enthrallment within the bonds of tradition that have functioned as a gravitational force to prevent the escape of these societies from the black hole of underdevelopment [5].

As a legacy of this peculiar historiography, which is intended to glorify Europe as the birthplace of enlightenment, the dichotomies of civilized/uncivilized orientalism, and

modernity/traditionalism have permeated the terrain of socio-economic discourse [4]. Furthermore, since within the domain of social science, historical progress has been illustrated as successive stages of development, it has become habitual with Eurocentric analysts to identify underdeveloped countries as stumbling entities in the original stage of history [6]. The depiction of history as a succession of phases of socio-economic development has culminated in the crystallization of an illusory impression that the key to the emancipation of underdeveloped nations lies in their rational inclination to follow a historical process that Europe had already traversed [6].

### **Structural Functionalism and the Rise of Modernization Theory**

Apprehending the penetrative impacts of Eurocentric thought on the foundation of structural functionalism which during the 1950s and 1960s acquired a theoretical hegemony within the realm of sociological discourse requires providing a succinct account of the paradigm of societal metamorphosis theorized by Talcott Parsons who has been identified by numerous analysts as the pope of the school of structural functionalism [7]. Obviously, it would be beyond the scope of this paper to expound the entire gamut of Parsons's sociological thought, which, despite the relegation of structural functionalism to an inferior position within the domain of theoretical approaches, has continued to have an enormous influence on all social science theories [8]. It is therefore imperative to concentrate on those aspects of Parsons's paradigm of social evolution that are germane to the context of this paper.

In his theorization of the evolution of societies along primitive, intermediate, and modern stages, Parsons identified the degree of structural differentiation as the cardinal characteristic that distinguishes these phases of social evolution from one another [9]. In accordance with the functionalist paradigm of social evolution expounded by Parson, an increase in the magnitude of structural differentiation has an enormous potential to facilitate the emergence of evolutionary universals such as social stratification, cultural legitimation, bureaucratic organization, market economy, generalized universalistic norms and democratic associations which are striking dimensions of modern societies [10]. Under the paradigm of structural functionalism, the logic or dynamic of adaptation to changes within the environment of the living system propels structural differentiation in an evolutionary direction [11]. Within the theoretical framework of the functionalist analysis of social evolution, society is conceptualized as an organic entity comprised of several subsystems, such as educational, political, legal, and cultural spheres, which not only contribute to the overall functioning of society but also allow society to remain in an equilibrium state [12].

From the underlying assumptions of structural functionalism, it can also be extrapolated that modernity owes its triumph to the cultural innovations of Israel and Greece, which countenanced the crystallization of universal legitimation as an impetus for structural differentiation, which itself was an essential prelude to the looming of modernity [13]. Within the parameters of Parsons's evolutionary paradigm, there is an explicit mechanistic assertion of the process of modernization, which implies that the interaction between Western societies and non-western nations will not only drag the latter into the bosom of modernity but will also pave the path towards an eventual convergence of socio-cultural development [13].

What can conspicuously be inferred from methodological, theoretical, and conceptual underpinnings of structural functionalism is an irrefutable fact that Parsons had abstracted modernity from socio-economic conditions in Western societies and he had in turn read it back into history as an inevitable law of social evolution that would inevitably propel societies towards modernity as the final destination of humanity [14]. It is easy to detect the vestiges of

Eurocentric proclivity lurking beneath the edifice of structural functionalism. Under the aegis of structural functionalism, modernity is presumed to be the sole accomplishment of Western civilization, which insinuates that the architect of structural functionalism had advertently or insouciantly dismissed the scientific and technological breakthroughs of other civilizations [1]. The intrinsic proclivity of structural functionalism to rationalize the position of Western societies can also be discerned from an inbuilt assumption within its foundation, which accentuates those changes will occur at a piecemeal and gradual pace without bringing about a state of societal disequilibrium [15]. This conservative flavor inscribed in the structure of the functionalist model of historical transformation was intended to legitimize the social position of ruling strata within each society as well as the patterns of domination and subordination between Western societies and less and underdeveloped countries [16].

Structural functionalism's emphasis on consensus and social equilibrium accomplished through the mechanisms of socialization and social control was geared to consolidate " a metaphysical representation of the dominant ideological matrix" and justify the apparatuses of coercion [17]. An enormous accentuation of structural functionalism on social equilibrium and its enunciation of the diffusion of modernity from the West to traditional societies were conducive to propagating an impression that non-Western societies will eventually knock on the gate of modernity without undergoing a revolutionary transformation spurred by the paroxysm of their historical subjugation [18].

Despite its claim to universality as a theory of social evolution, structural functionalism indeed mirrored the image of Western societies, particularly, the United States, which ascended to the pinnacle of world hegemony after the Second World War, which was contemporaneous with the rise of structural functionalism to theoretical supremacy [19].

During the climax of its theoretical hegemony in the 1950s and 1960s, structural functionalism provided fertile ground for the proliferation of development theories, epitomized by the modernization theory, spearheaded by intellectuals such as Rostow, Gabriel Almond, and James Coleman.

In an assiduous quest to unravel the crux behind the perennial socio-economic differentiation that has marked the relations between Western and non-Western countries, Almond and Coleman attempted to compare political systems based on the degree of differentiation and functional distinctiveness of political and governmental structures.

Subsequent to the characterization of societies along the axis of modernity and traditionalism which was redolent of the theoretical influence of structural functionalism, Coleman argued that the impersonal, neutral, and detached patterns of social relations in modern societies are conducive to enhancing the efficiency of market forces. In contrast, the patterns of social relations in traditional societies are bound to impede the development of market forces [20]. According to Almond, unlike the modern system which regulates and controls traditional values, the performance of the political function of the non-modern system is not regulated by the differentiated and specialized structures [21].

In accordance with the theoretical assumptions of this functionalist model of interpretation, the inexorable forces behind economic stagnation in underdeveloped countries have stemmed both from the continuity of unregulated traditional patterns of social relation and the absence or low degree of differentiated structures which have in turn facilitated the transmission of social demands into political insurgency and social upheavals [21]. It was a logical extension of this cultural and functional explanation of economic development that surmounting and reversing the protracted patterns of economic backwardness in underdeveloped countries would require the latter to emulate their counterparts in the West [20].

The essence of modernization as an alleged destination of humanity was formulated by Rostow, who extended and confined the evolutionary dimension of structural functionalism to the realm of economy [22]. In his analysis of the historical trajectory of economic transformation, which he interpreted as an iconoclastic revelation on the image of Marx's panorama of historical march, Rostow conspicuously removed the role of class struggle as a decisive force behind historical transformation [23]. Rostow enunciated that the path to economic prosperity and the allocation of resources to social welfare and security would run through five stages of economic growth which he ascribed as the traditional economy, the precondition for the takeoff, the drive to maturity, and the age of high-mass production. According to Rostow, the forces that trigger the economic take off as the great watershed of modernity emanate both from the entrenchment of sociopolitical institutions which are conducive to facilitating the development of productive forces and the presence of entrepreneurial individuals who through harnessing the combined foreign and domestic capital contribute to the installation and the diffusion of production techniques [23]. It was Rostow's conviction that the sequence of economic development towards modernity is not only a universal surge, but it is also a lengthy, socially excruciating, and transformative process that would require a fundamental alteration in the traditional patterns of social relation that have a potential to stifle and thwart the path to economic growth [23].

As can be inferred from the contour of historical transformation articulated by Rostow, the central thrust of modernization theory was an attempt to universalize and project the Western version of economic development into the socio-economic conditions of underdeveloped countries. Modernization theory projected an insinuation that the advanced capitalist societies had evolved from an underdeveloped condition and that the underdeveloped nations would gradually move towards the economic status that has been accomplished by their counterparts in the West [24].

### **Unravelling of Modernization Theory and Resurgence of Its Modified Versions**

Without taking into consideration the historical contribution of colonization to the economic development of Western societies and its pernicious ramifications for the colonies themselves, modernization theory tended to promulgate an illusory anticipation that the key to the economic galvanization in underdeveloped countries lies in the rational propensity of these nations to imitate the course of action that had been taken by the advanced capitalist societies [25].

As a theoretical construct that acquired great currency in the 1950s and 1960s, modernization theory was not only intended to distort the image of historical transformation but was also geared to accomplish an ideological goal of containing and preventing the tumultuous tides of decolonization from being channeled into a socialist revolution. The illusory promises of modernization theory, which were inscribed in the policy operation of the World Bank and IMF in the 1950s and 1960s, were intended to deflect the specter of communism and retain the newly decolonized nations within the orbit of the capitalist order [26]. During the post-war period, the concept of development came to function as a re-colonizing mechanism to globalize the political economy of Western societies [27]. By elevating the role of imported foreign capital and technology to the status of a springboard that could allegedly catapult underdeveloped countries into a prestigious plateau of economic stature, modernization theory was geared to consolidate a holy alliance between the post-colonial expansionists and the national bourgeoisie in the underdeveloped countries [28].

It was due to its overt obfuscation of historical development and its concealed ideological aim of solidifying the inveterate patterns of the colonial tutelage that modernization theory encountered sustained theoretical assaults that were waged by the proponents of the dependency school and its theoretical extension, the World System approach [29]. In sharp contrast to the universal panorama of modernization theory and its divine revelation of propitious wind of economic prosperity anticipating underdeveloped countries, the advocates of dependency theory identified underdevelopment as a legacy of historical conquest that has conditioned less and underdeveloped countries as satellites of the advanced metropolitan centers [30]. Within the theoretical framework of the dependency school, it was asserted that the roots of economic doldrums in underdeveloped countries do not lie in internal factors as modernization theory had suggested but have rather emanated from unequal exchange relations which has not only conditioned the Third World nations as exporters of raw materials but has also cemented the structural dependence of these countries on capital, technology and finished goods of the advanced capitalist societies [31]. It was thus a central theoretical discovery of the dependency theory and the World System paradigm that the hierarchy of nations along core, semi-periphery, and periphery has been an outcome of the world capitalist economy and that the promise of economic development evangelized by modernization theory was nothing more than sustaining the protracted patterns of domination and subordination within the capitalist order [31].

The central thrust of modernization theory was to proselytize underdeveloped and less developed countries into the Western version of economic development, which William Irwin Thomson meticulously characterized as "the Americanization of the planet". Its theoretical survival was contingent upon a sustained economic growth under the hegemonic leadership of the United States [32]. The foundation of modernization theory as a model for explaining economic development was sapped by the looming economic crisis in the 1970s which was accompanied by a decline in economic productivity, the diminution in the economic superiority of the United States, and the immersion of the Third World countries into a swelling quagmire of debt which cumulatively oppugned the concept of development [33]. With the ensuing climate of disillusion that began to haunt the theoretical claim of modernization, both structural functionalism and modernization theory lost their explanatory strength [33].

Despite mounting evidence testifying to its abject failure in its predictions, modernization theory continues to be a cornerstone of political science, though its original version has largely been discarded. Though some students of development continue utilizing the modernization theory in studying development and democratization processes in underdeveloped countries, the modernization theory's Eurocentric bias continues to operate as a burden on its relevance to the study of social, economic, and political developments across nations. As Edmore Ntini has meticulously pointed out, despite its popularity as a historical term that sounds like a building block for contemporary globalization, scathing criticisms of its flaws have rendered modernization theory inadequate as a persuasive explanatory theoretical tool for today's world [34]. However, despite the eclipse of the attractiveness of the modernization theory, its modified version has still been used by those who study the interplay of democracy and socio-economic development [35]. Furthermore, instead of completely abandoning the theory, some researchers have extended it in new directions that could account for the anomalies that could not have been explained by the original theory. Some observers of democratization process have decorated the original modernization theory with concepts such as reflexive modernization, ecological modernization, multiple modernities, and global modernity [36].

### **Conclusion**

As demonstrated throughout this paper, the theoretical pillar of modernization theory has its roots in structural functionalism, which in turn was shaped by the Eurocentric view of epochal shifts that have marked history. Due to its narration of the historical trajectory of socio-economic development through the prism of Eurocentrism, modernization theory inadvertently or intentionally failed to consider the inveterately egregious structural imbalances that have continued to anchor underdeveloped countries within the parameters of subjugation. The élan and theoretical potential of modernization theory were tarnished by the socio-economic crisis of the 1970s, which revealed the perfunctory and contradictory basis of its theoretical claims.

Despite the eclipse of both modernization theory and structural functionalism from the terrain of development discourse, the vestiges of their legacy can still be traced in the policy exhortation of the supranational organizations such as the IMF and the World Bank, which have continued to impose the Eurocentric version of economic development on underdeveloped nations. The decline in the attractiveness of the original modernization theory as an explanatory tool has not prevented some researchers from utilizing its modified versions.

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