

# The Development, Application and Criticism of Modernisation Theory

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**Abstract:** Modernisation theory was developed by Max Weber and elaborated by Talcott Parsons. Modernisation theory is trying to explain the social progression process. And the supporters of modernisation theory believe that society will develop rapidly if they adopt modern practices. However, modernisation theory is also under tremendous criticism since the opponents believe modernisation theory is Euro-centric and cannot be applied in all scenarios. This paper will discuss how historians apply modernisation theory to different historical research and how modernisation theory developed in the different research fields. Also, has modernisation theory successfully reconciling critics against it?

## 1. Introduction

The Modernisation theory was originated by Max Weber in the 19th century, and the research on modernisation formed an upsurge in the late 1950s. Historians began to adapt the theory and relate it to other research studies. Modernisation theory appeared after industrialisation and began to relate to some industrial problems such as ecological issues. Recently, historians bond the modernisation theory with globalisation and have successfully reconciled the critics that modernisation is simply westernisation. Historians also connect modernisation with the studies of traditional cultures. Moreover, the rise of Western Europe and the United States was the reason for applying modernisation into institutional factors and inequality problems.

## 2. Industrialisation

Modernisation theory stresses not only the process of change but also the responses to that change. Historian Paul Bairoch got his idea from industrialisation. Paul's basic idea is that the nation such as United States, Australia, Canada was relatively poor places before the industrial revolution compared with Brazil, and Indi<sup>[1]</sup>. After the launch of industrialisation in the U.K., some nations like the United States, Canada quickly joined the process and applied industrialisation into their production, which improved efficiency and the economy. However, some countries, like Brazil and India, which chose to shut down and refused to join industrialisation, were left behind.

## 3. Environmental Issues

Industrialisation brought severe environmental problems to the world, and as a result, the modernisation theory faces many critiques. Thus, ecological modernisation theory suggests that energy is not used as efficiently as in the higher modernisation stages in the early modernisation period<sup>[2]</sup>. Arthur Mol's concept of ecological modernisation argues that the rationalisation processes inherent in modernisation can offset environmental degradation and protect the environment for a sustainable future. Marsh also carries a similar idea that the advancement of technology will eventually provide the recycling energies required to overcome the damage caused by

modernisation. Furthermore, Jürgen Habermas suggests that the standard for measuring a country's modernisation should also consider ecological resources' sustainability<sup>[3]</sup>.

#### **4. Globalisation**

In the past, modernised society was a normative westernised society. However, with the development of globalisation, polycentric modernity has emerged, and the modernisation theory is now more inclined to globalisation than westernisation<sup>[4]</sup>. In 1990 Anthony Giddens concluded that "modernity is inherently globalising, and the combination of modernisation with globalisation has been conceptualised as global modernity<sup>[5]</sup>." Robert M. Marsh has expressed a similar idea: "data from 62 developed and less developed societies in 2004 show that all ten of the most globalised societies are modernised societies. Nine of the ten least globalised societies are less modernised societies<sup>[6]</sup>." He drew a close relationship between modernisation and globalisation. Marsh argues that Japan itself has become a major globalising power, and globalisation is likely to mean Japanization, just as Americanization. In recent years, sushi is as likely to be considered fast food like McDonald's or Kentucky Fried Chicken; pop culture is just as likely to refer to manga and anime as Hollywood movies. Furthermore, the nightlife is likely to involve visiting a karaoke club just as it would involve going to a disco or a bar<sup>[7]</sup>. Also, another Asian country, China, gives a similar example. Since the 1970s, China achieved great success in development, explicitly referred to as "modernisation." There is a slogan of the "Four Modernisation of China – the modernisation of Chinese agriculture, industry, technology, and the military." Chinese people always speak proudly of their "socialist modernisation" based on the Chinese economic miracle. As such, the western dominance of the global modernity process has given way to polycentric modernity now<sup>[8]</sup>.

#### **5. Conflict**

The conflict arising from retaining traditional culture in social modernisation is inevitable, and the attitude towards traditional culture will determine the degree of modernisation in society. Jack A Goldstone thinks that one of the reasons England was a place where industrialisation started is because of the scientific culture of Britain. Newton's study was not to be taught simultaneously in the U.K. as the European continent. Even in the 1780s, Spanish universities were still resisting any attempt to teach Newtonian physics. Even the Dutch reformed church found Newton's study too sacrilegious to tolerate. Only the Anglican church accepted the teaching of Newton and allowed it to spread to society<sup>[9]</sup>. Furthermore, Inglehart and Welzel viewed early modernisation theory as the change from agricultural to industrial societies, bringing the transition from traditional values to secular values simultaneously<sup>[10]</sup>. Marsh got a similar conclusion from his research in China. Hong Kong is the most advanced, Taiwan second, urban China third, and rural China is the least modernised. Marsh then discovered that the higher the modernisation level, the lower the support for Confucian conception and the greater the support for the democratic notion<sup>[11]</sup>. Unsurprisingly, this theory has been massively questioned in China. Chinese historian Zhu Rongxian argues that it is meaningless to achieve modernisation at the cost of destroying native culture, including Confucian theory. No matter how good the development model is, it will be beautiful but not practical if it is divorced from the indigenous culture's reality. The only correct way is to learn from others and create your own<sup>[12]</sup>.

#### **6. Colonisation**

Historian Simon Johnson, based on colonisation studies' research, concluded that the modernisation of society also depends on the advanced institutions applied to society<sup>[13]</sup>. During the colonial period, the economies with the highest per capita incomes were those in the Caribbean. In comparison, the United States, Canada, and Australia, those currently defined as a modernised nation, were relatively poor during the colonisation era. The countries with high urbanisation in 1500 have a low GDP Per capita in 1995<sup>[14]</sup>. Karla Hoff believes that the reversal occurred

primarily due to different institutions within different areas. Relatively poor areas encouraged Europeans to develop settler colonies with institutions that encouraged investments. In contrast, a relative prospering colony like South America made it profitable for the Europeans to set up extractive institutions, with great inequality<sup>[15]</sup>. Kenneth adds that democracy is the core factor in institutions and significantly affects the extent of modernisation. The U.S. and Canada were the clear leaders in lessening restrictions to vote based on wealth or literacy.<sup>[16]</sup>

## 7. Conclusion

Historians have proved the rationality of this theory by changing the modernisation theory with the development of time and applying it to other fields. The industrial revolution provides the critical content of the modernisation theory: the importance of response towards change and how to use advanced products toward society's development. In addition, the criticism toward ecological modernisation theory has been reconciled by the idea that technological advancements will eventually solve ecological problems. The rise of China and Japan has transformed the perception of modernisation from westernisation to globalisation. Global diffusion of modern arrangements will produce several centres distributed worldwide and not just in Europe or the United States<sup>[17]</sup>. However, the debate about modernisation theory with traditional culture and institutions continues. Immanuel Wallerstein pointed out that “neither Great Britain nor the United States nor the Soviet Union is a model for anyone’s future”<sup>[18]</sup>. Hence, developing countries must consider their different external situations when applying developed countries' institutions<sup>[19]</sup>. In the future, the modernisation theory will likely change over time and be linked with more research studies.

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