

introduction

a perspective on social change in america

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The essays collected in this issue explore a variety of subjects, but collectively they enrich our understanding of a major aspect of America's development known as modernization. In recent years, the concept of modernization has been employed with increasing frequency to explain long-term trends in the United States, and its use has generated considerable controversy among students of American history. I would like to discuss briefly the application of this concept to social change in America, since it provides a theoretical frame within which to consider the essays.

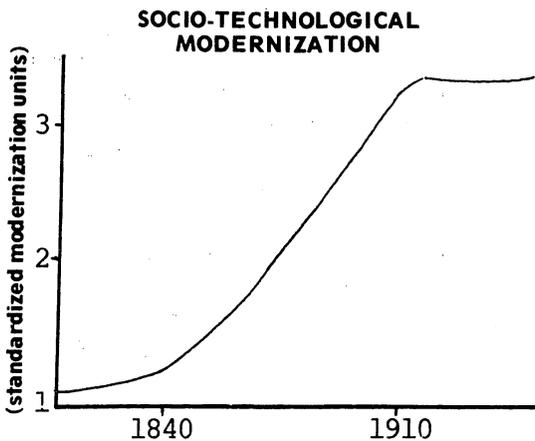
Modernization scholarship has not as yet produced a generally agreed upon definition of modernization. There are, I believe, two major reasons for this, one being that most of the evidence supporting the concept derives from cross-cultural analyses rather than studies of given cultures over long periods of time. Second, and perhaps more importantly, modernization is usually conceived of as open-ended. For example, C. E. Black observes, "Even the most advanced countries are still modernizing," and then he immediately suggests an important theoretical problem inherent in this interpretation: ". . . it is only by an effort of the imagination that one can conjecture which of their features

are likely to be characteristic of all modern societies and which are simply culture-oriented idiosyncrasies of individual societies.”¹ Since many of the changes associated with modernization never reach fruition,² it might logically be thought of as a continuous process. On the other hand, such an interpretation means that the definition of modernization will continue to be relative, descriptive and subject to continual up-dating. As part of a forthcoming study of political change in the United States,³ my two co-authors and I find compelling evidence that, in the American experience at least, the modernization process has a beginning and an end and therefore may be treated as a distinct period in America’s development. Such treatment may in turn help clarify the concept of modernization.

While writers on modernization agree that economic, social and political factors are interdependent, they tend to portray the economic sector as most important to the entire society. Neil Smelser adds an ecological dimension to this economic focus and, for our purposes, adequately identifies major modernizing trends in America’s history. He suggests that a modernizing society will move toward the following conditions: the application of scientific knowledge to technology; the commercial production of agricultural goods; men working in industry for wages at power-driven machines that produce commodities marketed outside the community of production; and urban concentrations.⁴ Following Smelser’s and other (less succinct) definitions, my colleagues and I combine in a single measure a series of social and technological variables commonly associated with modernization.

This modernization measure incorporates the following variables:

- production of mineral fuel energy per unit of population;
- pig iron shipments per unit of population;
- miles of railroad track owned by railroad companies per unit of population;
- patents issued per unit of population;
- proportion of the population living in communities of 100,000 or more;
- proportion of the work force engaged in non-agricultural pursuits; and
- the birth rate for white



females.⁵ If one traces the measure over the history of the United States, the result is a “modernization curve” that behaves as shown in the

figure on page 5. Once modernizing change “takes off” in the 1840’s, it continues to increase at a remarkable rate until 1910. Between 1910 and 1920, its rate of increase slows. From 1920 to the present, the measure indicates that modernizing change reaches a virtual “steady state.” During this most recent period, rapid change continues in American society but in areas other than those that were dominant in the last half of the nineteenth century.

Although modernization accelerates markedly at 1840, some modernizing change was occurring from the beginning of the Republic (and undoubtedly in some ways it was occurring long before that). The extent to which the United States was “pre-modern” or “traditional” in its early years is an issue that has received some attention lately in historical literature.⁶ In some respects the nation was probably “born modern,” but it is undeniable that during the nineteenth century it experienced profound changes in the composition of its population, in the living arrangements and working conditions of its people, and in the production and distribution of its goods, all of which created a society fundamentally different from the one that started the “Great Experiment.”⁷ Frank Fox’s article in this issue provides a definition of traditional society and explores the manner in which the United States broke away from its “pre-industrial” past.

The period of modernization as it is reflected in the graph above ended more abruptly than it began. I should emphasize that the “end of modernization” does not mean that processes begun in the early nineteenth century have come to an end. Rather, it means that modernizing change no longer increases, while other types of change “take off,” much as modernization did in the 1840’s. These other types of change are too complex to cover adequately here.⁸ Taken together, they appear to represent the emergence of new, we might say post-modern, social roles and organizations, as well as basic value-reorientations.

Others have noted this transition. For example, Kenneth Boulding sees the “developed society” (at the end of the nineteenth century) as producing a new era that he calls “postcivilization.”⁹ Focusing on political development, A. F. K. Organski distinguishes between “bourgeois politics,” which in the United States is essentially a nineteenth century phenomenon, and the “politics of national welfare,” which emerges early in the twentieth century.¹⁰ Elting Morison speaks of a non-material dimension of the transition:

For a long time the design of our technology was determined by our necessity to deal with certain external needs as efficiently as possible, dig more coal, go farther, get there faster, turn out a wider variety of goods . . . , things we required to increase our advantage over nature. The record of achievement here is beyond all reasonable qualification; it is, of course, astounding. But our mechanical triumph

may have produced a mechanical atmosphere we can't stand. So we may have reached a point where the design of our technology must take into greater account our interior needs.¹¹

There also were scholars living through the transition who were aware that a new culture was taking shape. Simon N. Patten, for instance, posits a shift in this country from a "pain" to a "pleasure" economy.¹² Lester Ward makes use of Patten's terms and adds the notion that the pleasure economy involves the satisfaction, not just of material wants, but of "higher spiritual aspirations" as well.¹³ Ward thought that under-consumption and lack of purchasing power would be the major problems of the "future," whereas the problem of the earlier era had been one of increasing production. To Stuart Chase, the new age would be marked by economic abundance, while the preceding was characterized by the development of the technologies that made abundance possible.¹⁴ Although they provide it with different names, it is clear that these writers are referring to the societal change expressed in the modernization curve.

The articles in this issue of *American Studies* support (at least implicitly) the historical fact of modernization, but they often do so from vantage points not included in conventional thinking about modernization. Fox explores the emergence of "inventive genius" in America and suggests that it resulted from the unique manner in which this society threw off the "trappings of the Christian corporate commonwealth." He describes this break with the past as a process of disorder and reorder. Thus, in an atmosphere of individualism, egalitarianism, personal ambition and optimism, American technological development was frequently marked by discontinuities rather than by a logical progression. To Hamilton Cravens, the case of American science, which was beginning to develop a firm institutional base early in the nineteenth century, runs counter to the prevailing view of an early America "characterized by widespread social and institutional disorganization." However, his interpretation is not necessarily contradictory to Fox's, since the bond between science and technology—though it grows stronger as the society modernizes—is comparatively weak at this time. Cravens shows that the distinct social role of "scientist" (the term came into common usage in the 1840s) emerged in the first half of the century. By the end of the century, fundamental changes in American scientific and educational institutions had created a new social role for the scientist, that of "trained, specialized researcher." The institutional changes that Cravens examines made possible the application of scientific knowledge to technology. They also set the stage for this country's rise to world prominence in science.

One of the ramifications of technological development is a constant stream of new and "improved" products. Quite often a product will have consequences far beyond its intended use. Fred Schroeder links

technological innovation in feminine hygiene to the changing social role of women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This linkage is not direct, however; Schroeder demonstrates how technological innovation influenced social norms and tastes, which in turn modified the woman's role.

Of course, scientific and technological trends represent only one part of American modernization. The artistic and philosophical expression of the American people was extended and modified as the physical and social environments that nurtured it changed; and in turn, that expression helped shape the evolving environments. Thomas Schlereth examines the interaction between the changing social structure and the artistic activity that abounded in Chicago over a fifty-year period, pointing especially to the strengthening institutional support for the arts. For many reasons, he sees this city as a microcosm of the nation's emergence as a modern society.

Another example of the interaction between social structure and artistic creation is provided by Arthur Margon, who traces the changing conception of the American hero in fiction to the rise of our urban culture. The turn-of-the-century urban environment, he suggests, was not compatible with the traditional formulation of individual heroism. According to W. T. Lhamon, the Horatio Alger hero personified the modern age. The Alger novels articulate a social formula offered to late nineteenth century Americans as a blueprint for living. This formula, which Lhamon terms one dimensional, proved to be so deeply ingrained in American fiction that it survived well into the post-modern era.

The studies included here concentrate on a diversity of events, but their observations about a changing United States form a composite picture of this country's drive to modernity. While it simply is not possible for six studies to express the totality of a process as momentous as modernization, they do provide new evidence and fresh perspectives on this increasingly employed model of social change.

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footnotes

1. C. E. Black, *The Dynamics of Modernization: A Study of Comparative History* (New York, 1967), 9.

2. For example, in modernized societies, a person's status is supposed to be achieved, not "ascribed"—earned, that is, not based on the status of his family. Societies plainly move in this direction as they modernize, but family status remains very important.

3. Alfred B. Clubok, Forrest J. Berghorn, and Norman M. Wilensky, "Political Modernization in the United States, 1820-1960," an unpublished book manuscript currently under publisher's consideration.

4. Neil J. Smelser, "The Modernization of Social Relations," in Myron Weiner, ed., *Modernization* (New York, 1966), 111.

5. It would be inappropriate to elaborate on each variable here. However, I should note that for a variable to be included in the measure, data had to be available over a long period of time and susceptible to quantification. For example, black fertility data in the

early nineteenth century are not available. The procedure through which the variables were combined into a single measure is a form of vector analysis.

6. See, for instance, Richard D. Brown, *Modernization: The Transformation of American Life, 1600-1865* (New York, 1976); Herbert G. Gutman, "Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America, 1815-1919," *American Historical Review*, LXXXVIII (1973), 531-587; Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven, 1971), particularly Chapter 2; Seymour Martin Lipset, *The First New Nation* (Garden City, N.Y., 1976); and Kenneth A. Lockridge, *A New England Town: The First Hundred Years* (New York, 1970).

7. Thorstein Veblen's discussion of "Natural Liberty" in *The Theory of Business Enterprise* (New York, 1904) remains one of the most interesting analyses of the consequences of such changes.

8. For further accounts of the transition, see particularly, A. F. K. Organski, *The Stages of Political Development* (New York, 1965), 158-197; and W. W. Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth* (Cambridge, England, 1971), 73-81.

9. Kenneth Boulding, *The Meaning of the Twentieth Century: The Great Transition* (New York, 1965).

10. A. F. K. Organski (see footnote 7).

11. Elting Morison, *Men, Machines, and Modern Times* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), 121.

12. Simon N. Patten, *The Theory of Social Forces* (Philadelphia, 1896).

13. Lester Ward, *Applied Sociology* (Boston, 1906), 329-330.

14. Stuart Chase, *The Economy of Abundance* (New York, 1934). My familiarity with these earlier writers derives in part from the dissertation in progress of Robert Kent, University of Kansas.