

## Managing “Modernity”

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# Managing “Modernity”

*Work, Community, and Authority  
in Late-Industrializing  
Japan and Russia*

RUDRA SIL

Ann Arbor

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*To the memory of my mother*



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## Preface

# “Modernity” and Social Science— *Beyond Universal History*

The idea of progress is neither unique to the “modern” period, nor limited to those civilizations where “modernity” is commonly thought to have emerged. New techniques of crop rotation and irrigation incrementally altered people’s work habits and the structure of daily life long before the Industrial Revolution. Breakthroughs in mathematics and science led to the invention of the decimal system and to numerous discoveries in astronomy, chemistry, and biology long before the elevation of secular rationalism and the scientific method during the Enlightenment. New feats in engineering and architecture, creative advances in city planning, and bureaucratic forms of administration appeared across such diverse civilizations as ancient Egypt, the Indic cities of Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro, the Chinese empire under the dynasties, and the native peoples of the Americas. Long-distance trade, overseas exploration, and multiethnic empires began to bring many communities in contact with new goods, values, languages, and life-styles long before the arrival of mercantilism, colonialism, or globalization.

What marks the advent of the “modern” era is the *amalgam* of a great many nearly *simultaneous* transformations that began with the Industrial Revolution in the West and proceeded to affect developments all over the world within a span of just two centuries. The shift from subsistence agriculture to the mechanized production of goods through progressively more efficient technologies; the dissolution of the joint household and the spread of urbanization, literacy, and social mobilization; the idea of an accountable, rational-legal nation-state that can mediate diverse interests and advance the human condition; the rise of the industrial proletariat and a new class of employers as rival economic and political forces; the rise and fall of colonialism and its impact on the consciousness and desires of new nations—all these changes, taken together, are simply unprecedented in terms of their magnitude, interconnectedness, and wide-ranging conse-

quences. It is also via these very processes that “modernity” is thought to have emerged in the West, manifested in the concomitant elevation of such ideals as scientific and technological progress, secular rationalism, bureaucratic organization, industrial capitalism, political pluralism, and individualism—ideals often thought to *belong* together because they happened to *emerge* together in the course of the Industrial Revolution in the West.

This book, however, is not about the *emergence* of modernity in the West; rather, it is about the *engineering* of specific elements of “modernity” as variously conceived by elites and ordinary people across different *non-Western late industrializers* (NWLIs). The category of NWLI inherently suggests that the pressures of “catching up,” the temptation to emulate the institutions and practices of “advanced” referent societies, the absence of the conditions present in the early stages of Western industrialization, and the varied legacies inherited from distinctive histories and cultural orientations all combine to produce a set of challenges and opportunities that earlier industrializers never had to contend with. Ever since their encounters with the West, usually in the form of colonialism, conquest, or military defeat, most elites in NWLIs have come to share the basic desire to emulate or construct *some* features of Western “modernity,” even if they are frequently opposed to the wholesale replication of the West. In this process, they have also had to confront a fundamental challenge: how to define *modernity* in such a manner that its pursuit would bring international recognition and signify catching up to the West in material terms, while simultaneously representing a meaningful achievement in the eyes of ordinary people whose desires are shaped by distinctive historical memories and cultural sensibilities. The resulting discourses and policies in NWLIs point to quite varied conceptions of the essence of “modernity,” most limited to common aspirations for technological progress, industrial production, the bureaucratic state, and military prowess, but only a few concomitantly embracing unfettered markets, liberal democracy, or an individualistic ethos. Even the most recent waves of democratic transition and economic liberalization do not decisively indicate that actors in NWLIs are engaged in anything more than necessary adaptations in their own particular quest for “modernity.”

This basic observation is at the heart of some fundamental questions that will continue to be of relevance to social scientists in the new millennium: How exceptional was the appearance of those characteristics identified with “modernity” in Western societies? What ideas, practices, and institutions are transferrable to later industrializers elsewhere? How

have individuals uprooted from preexisting communities responded to the sudden appearance of new ideas, institutions, and practices considered to be of foreign origin? More broadly, does the diversity of historical experiences around the world suggest alternative conceptions of “modernity” or merely alternative routes or strategies that will converge upon a single, global “end of history”?<sup>1</sup>

During the 1950s and 1960s, an earlier generation of social scientists had offered a sweeping answer to these questions: The general laws of societal evolution, they contended, suggested that the path traveled by earlier industrializers in the West could serve as a reasonable approximation of the developmental path of later industrializers elsewhere; as a result of new technologies and an increasingly complex division of labor, all societies were thought to be evolving and converging upon a “modern social system,” the defining elements of which were assumed to be functionally interrelated.<sup>2</sup> This “modernization paradigm” later came under attack for its ahistorical conflation of change and evolutionary convergence, its treatment of societies as closed organic systems, and its lack of attention to external forces, varied historical inheritances, and the role of the state and individual actors.<sup>3</sup> Specific critiques also led to the formation of alternative research programs ranging from world-systems analysis and studies of state-led development to rational choice theory and new variants of structural, institutional, and cultural analysis. While these newer research traditions are quite sophisticated and may represent scholarly “progress” for their respective adherents, they have also tended to shy away from the “big questions” once addressed by modernization theorists in favor of more narrowly defined projects that bear elective affinities to the methodologies favored by a given research tradition.

There are, however, several reasons why we need to continue exploring problematques that can match those constructed by modernization theorists in scope while discarding the latter’s metatheoretical foundations and universalist assumptions about the origins, nature, and consequences of “modernity.” First and foremost, the teleological characterization of history in modernization theory and its expectation of convergence are portable and, in fact, are frequently reconstructed as claims or assumptions in much contemporary scholarship. Openly “neomodernist” perspectives, for example, insist on the validity of the universal history ideal and even suggest that the collapse of communism and worldwide trends toward economic liberalization and democratization vindicate this ideal in the terms suggested by modernization theory.<sup>4</sup> Others characterize the

present era as a brand new “postmodern” or “global” age, but contend that particular thresholds of material and technological progress are likely to bring about an increasingly convergent gestalt of institutions, technologies, worldviews and life-styles across regions and locales.<sup>5</sup> More focused explorations, while rooted in quite sophisticated theoretical frameworks derived from quite different research traditions, often reveal a common interest in the uniform logics and dynamics that can facilitate the proliferation of free-market economies, democratic polities, liberal international regimes, and secular worldviews—all assumed to be universally viable and desirable components of “modernity.”<sup>6</sup> These varied projects, although suggesting different loci for analyzing change in the contemporary era, still imply the unfolding of a universal history and, as such, their assumptions need to be subjected to the same critical scrutiny to which modernization theory has been subjected.

In fact, as many studies of ethnonationalism, religious fundamentalism, and grassroots social movements suggest, distinctive sets of interests, identities, and institutions remain very much a part of this global age, challenging homogenizing processes and their agents. These competing tendencies—what one scholar has polemically characterized as the “old world of Jihad” attempting to survive in “the new world of McWorld”—may not be unrelated although they tend to be analyzed as distinct phenomena within separate problematiques.<sup>7</sup> This coexistence of the universal and the particular, and the relationship between them, remain fundamental to the comparative study of political, economic, and social change worldwide. Thus, even as this book forcefully rejects the universalist assumptions and methods of modernization theorists and their successors, it articulates a problematique that matches theirs in scope by examining the mechanisms and processes through which elites and masses in the non-Western world encounter, and respond to, those values, institutions, practices, and technologies identified with the “modern” or the “global” in the West.

There is another reason for reconsidering the broad questions and interconnections of the sort examined by modernization theory. Area specialists and native scholars in different parts of the world have been producing rich empirical analyses of social change, often pointing to the persistence and functionality of traditional elements in modernization processes.<sup>8</sup> For modernization theorists and their successors, these mixtures have been viewed as evidence of incomplete transitions toward “modernity” rather than as evidence that social change frequently involves the reproduction or reconfiguration of traditional elements. Now, in the

midst of new debates over the nature and consequences of globalization, it is worth reassessing the contributions of area specialists over the years within the context of an alternative problematique that acknowledges the complexity and indeterminacy of change and considers how diverse historical legacies, external influences, and competing actors can facilitate, hinder, or redefine the quest for “modernity” worldwide.

Still another, quite different, reason for posing the kinds of broad, sweeping questions driving this book is to employ them in better integrating research conducted within the boundaries of disciplines, subfields, or contending research traditions in the social sciences. Modernization theory itself had transcended such boundaries, driving theoretical discourse and empirical research in fields as diverse as comparative politics, sociology, economic history, anthropology, organization theory, and even psychology. In moving away from all-encompassing grand theory, contemporary theorizing in the social sciences has tended to be characterized by increasingly narrow subfields and increasingly competitive research traditions, each favoring questions that it is particularly suited to address. Such trends, while certainly conducive to new insights and lively exchanges, can only contribute to whatever progress is possible in the social sciences if they are also accompanied by complementary mechanisms designed to integrate research across disciplines and research traditions. This does not require that we seek to build a new unifying paradigm, nor does it require that we dismantle or reject existing disciplinary structures or research traditions. It simply requires that we make some room for problematiques that are essentially interdisciplinary in character, incorporating relevant concepts, hypotheses, interpretations, and methods in an eclectic manner regardless of which disciplines or research traditions these may have originated in.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, I want to emphasize that while this book is primarily aimed at important theoretical issues in the social sciences, it is also the product of a humanistic concern for the millions of people worldwide who are still embroiled in the drama of political and economic development. The tension between, and interplay of, the “traditional” and the “modern,” the local and the global, remain an inherent part of their lifeworld, as individuals and communities continue to seek—and find—ways to protect their identities and interests in the face of unfamiliar institutions, practices, technologies, and goods that will supposedly bring them prosperity and prestige. For these people, it is still necessary to ask questions, at whatever level of generality, concerning the kinds of creative strategies and institu-

tional designs that can bring material well-being to those who seek it while reducing the levels of physical suffering, social turmoil, and psychological alienation, experienced individually and collectively in the course of large-scale processes of change. This requires keeping an open mind as to whether the quest for “modernity” can better the lives of ordinary people where the modern institutions and technologies eagerly sought by elites prove incongruous with long-standing norms and practices embedded in local communities. Even though the social sciences are fraught with uncertainty, scholars sharing some basic concern for human betterment must continue to address such big questions in a self-reflective manner regardless of whether they can be analyzed in terms of whatever concepts, approaches, and methods are currently fashionable.

I am indebted to several individuals whose advice, help, and support have made this project what it is, although I alone must bear the responsibility for remaining errors. First and foremost, I am grateful to Ken Jowitt, Ernie Haas, and Franz Schurmann for nurturing this project with constructive criticism and unwavering support. I also owe a huge debt of gratitude to the late Reinhard Bendix, whose final seminar I was fortunate to take and whose classic study *Work and Authority in Industry* served as an important source of inspiration for this book. Special thanks are due to Tadashi Anno, Stephen Hanson, Andrew Janos, and Mark Lichbach for the impact they have had on my thinking and this book.

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