

Modernization as a Global Project: American, Soviet, and European Approaches

Konferenz am German Historical Institute Washington

veranstaltet von Corinna R. Unger (GHI) und David C. Engerman (Brandeis University)

Washington D.C., 28. bis 29. März 2008

Historians' studies of efforts to modernize the so-called Third World have accelerated in the last decade and show little sign of diminishing. Most of the first scholarship on modernization theory was American-centered, focused more on ideas than on practices, and examined only the 1950s and 1960s. The latest scholarship on modernization – some of which was discussed at a recent German Historical Institute workshop – has built on these studies but expanded dramatically in terms of chronology, approach, and perspective. As the American and European scholars gathered to discuss „Modernization as a Global Project“ agreed, new work on modernization is far broader. It is more global (looking from the perspective of the Soviet bloc and from the Third World countries that were the objects of modernization); it looks both before and after the heyday of modernization in the two decades after the end of the Second World War; and it includes intensive local studies as well as expansive interpretative approaches, very often in the same work. As a result, scholars are now able to gain a better understanding of events and concepts that shaped the course of Third World and global history in the context of decolonization and the Cold War.

Several key issues emerged over the course of the workshop, one of which was the question of historical continuities and ruptures; when were the major points of inflection of theories and practices of modernization, and what accounted for them? Many British colonial officers, for instance, continued their careers in the postcolonial era as development experts and advisors for post-colonial governments and international organizations, as *Joseph Hodge* (West Virginia University) demonstrated in his paper. Hence, conceptual continuities about development, modernization, and race tended to be strong, and experiences from the prewar era influenced postwar programs to a large degree. As a consequence, 1945 presented less of a caesura than often imagined, the participants agreed.

Similarly, many participants stressed the need to situate the Cold War rather than assuming that modernization was inherently a Cold War project. In many cases, the turn toward American or Soviet sponsors was driven by domestic circumstances, both political and economic; *Daniel Speich's* (ETH Zürich) paper on the domestic politics of modernization in Kenya was one example of the ways in which modernization was a global project that existed both within and outside of Cold War geopolitics. Strategic issues, as important as they were to the superpowers and their allies, often had a smaller impact on modernization approaches and practices in the newly independent countries than local circumstances, interests, traditions, and personal preferences. Many Third World countries were attracted to the example of Soviet modernization, but the reality of Soviet development aid – low-quality goods, insistence on a single model of central planning that took no account of local conditions, overly rigid models – proved disillusioning and encouraged cooperation with countries that could offer more practical and more prestigious aid – such as the Indonesian experience of Soviet aid, as *Ragna Boden's* (University of Bochum) paper illustrated. Hence, material advantages competed with, and occasionally outweighed, ideological preferences.

The rise of multinational discourses of expert (especially social scientific) knowledge also worked aside or against Cold War geopolitics. Key categories and measures, from Gross National Product to measures of food supply and population, contained embedded notions of progress, generally shared across ideological lines – and shaped both western and Soviet modernization programs. Some of the most influential knowledge was economic in nature, and contained within it a disposition toward economic planning, one of the main features of modernization politics in the 1950s and 1960s globally. Indeed, one of the principal contributions of the workshop was to open up the question of Soviet-bloc strategies in the Third World in competition with the range of western visions, as *Sara Lorenzini* (University of Trento) did in her comparison of East and West German approaches in the Third World. Beneath the cover of Cold War ideology, Western economic planning strategies shared a great deal with certain Soviet strategies – even though, as *Lorenz Lüthi* (McGill University) emphasized, there were multiple Soviet models in play, each drawn from a different period of Soviet history.

The interest in planning, even on the American side, should not be such a surprise; many of the proponents of postcolonial modernization were New Dealers committed to a mixed economy with a significant guiding role for government agencies. *David Hamilton's* (University of Kentucky) paper, for instance, traced the career of American agricultural economist Mordecai Ezekiel from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to the Food and Agriculture Organization. In the postwar era, Ezekiel and his fellow New Dealers continued to embrace its privileging of social scientific expertise, long-term planning, and state intervention to solve economic problems and create welfare states. The specters of fascism and global war had strengthened their belief that economic security was essential to achieve long-lasting peace within a stable international order. Technocracy in the optimistic sense seemed to hold the opportunity to overcome political and ideological strife and to improve the standard of living (another quantitative measure of the postwar era) of billions of people across the globe.

At the same time, technocratic planning would also provide expanded government control over peoples and regions that were difficult to monitor by traditional political means. Even during colonial times political control over the subjected societies had remained incomplete; in many cases, decolonization made such control even harder. Unsurprisingly, the military played an important role in helping to realize large-scale modernization projects. Apart from strategic considerations, the massive transfer of military equipment and knowledge from the First and Second Worlds to the Third World was regarded as one of the most effective ways of enabling traditional societies to establish the structures necessary to build a modern state that would be able to withstand external pressures and solve domestic problems. As *Brad Simpson's* (University of Maryland) paper on US aid to Indonesia and *Bernd Schaefer's* (Woodrow Wilson International Center) on East German aid to North Vietnam demonstrated, military aid could not only serve geopolitical ends, but also promote a version of state-building defined by pervasive control.

One of the new nations' most pressing domestic problems was the rural situation – long ignored by scholars of modernization. Historians have too often focused on industrial aspirations of modernization programs – dams, steel mills, and factories – without adequate attention to the massive transformations of agriculture and rural life that were an equal part of modernization programs. In the view of the postcolonial administrations and the modernizers from abroad, however, agricultural reforms were of utmost importance to make the Third World countries economically independent, politically stable, and generally modern. *Corinna Unger's* (German Historical Institute Washington) paper compared West German aid programs for Indian agriculture and industry, showing how vastly different approaches to modernization could be even within a single bilateral relationship. Usually, rural reform aimed at increasing agricultural production to create a surplus and provide the basis for domestic economic growth. This implied abolishing the traditional, supposedly inefficient methods of agriculture and introducing modern techniques and structures.

Model programs were initiated to convince the rural population of the advantages of modern agriculture and modern ways of living; *Jason Pribilsky* (Whitman College), for instance, described Cornell University's program in Peru, which put Cornell in charge of its own ‚hacienda‘ and combined persuasion with coercion. Land reforms, resettlement, educational campaigns, and technological measures (irrigation, the use of artificial fertilizers and new seed varieties, extension, etc.) were supposed to solve the „rural problem“, which seemed to prevent the decolonized nations from advancing toward prosperity. Yet whether based on socialist or capitalist ideas, most reform projects sooner or later came to be regarded as failures for a number of reasons: The local populations resisted the programs, which ran counter to tried practices; the new techniques, typically imported from another part of the world or even from a theoretical construct, did not account for local conditions and preferences; production often remained too low or increased only in selected areas; or the effects – for instance the Green Revolution – posed ecological and economic threats to the rural population.

Closely linked to the problem of low production levels and a low standard of living was the phenomenon of „overpopulation“, which Western observers came to regard as a danger to global security in the 1950s and 1960s. In some cases, racist Western notions about the value of Third World denizens encouraged such thinking. But even within the Third World, rural populations were designated as „surplus“, subjecting them to measures as diverse as resettlement and so-called population control. As in many other cases of structural and sociological modernization, from India to Indonesia to Peru, the line between voluntary and coercive implementation was very fine. Coercive measures in the field of public health, birth control, resettlement, or compulsory labor services to build infrastructure and lessen unemployment were legitimized in the name of modernization. Their sometimes brutal effects on the individuals involved and, in addition, on the environment were presented as unavoidable sacrifices in the interest of the larger goal of overcoming „backwardness“. Many of the postcolonial regimes considered human rights a luxury that only established modern societies could afford.

These efforts were not solely imposed by the developed world upon helpless Third World nations. Many Third World governments themselves promoted coercive measures in the battles against „backwardness“. *Daniel Maul* (University of Gießen) showed that even organizations like the International Labor Organization (ILO), which made human rights a central element in promoting its integrated modernization concept and in fighting racism, had only limited influence on these modernization practices. In sum, the effort to modernize the Third World by democratic means often clashed with coercive measures employed by authoritarian regimes that used the rhetoric of modernization to bridge national divides and generate political legitimacy.

This sense of modernization gone awry leads to another point that emerged as a prominent theme at the workshop: when would a modernization program be judged a success or a failure? *Nick Cullather* (Indiana University) and *Arne Westad* (London School of Economics and Political Science) questioned whether final judgments were ever rendered on modernization programs. The language of experimentation made it hard to determine when and under what circumstances a project might end; these „experiments“ usually ended for external reasons – policy changes, funding cutoffs, or external pressures – rather than a final measure of success or failure. Most historians follow modernization programs' impresarios in deeming the projects failures, yet the failures rarely discouraged modernization efforts, at least until the very late 1960s; there were always groups and individuals that benefited from a given project by gaining access to resources or political control.

David Engerman (Brandeis University) underscored that the notion, widely held in the west, that the Third World was a laboratory for experiments on social and economic modernization, also encouraged the deferral of an ultimate reckoning about a given project; a failure could continue almost indefinitely. The notion of a laboratory for social change, often found in the development discourse, seemed to suggest a controlled

experiment. But this language worked against the claims by most experts that development was a complex and multifaceted set of changes – not the sort typically amenable to an experiment, especially one with only a handful of cases. As a result, most modernization programs privileged one variable – market production, standard of living, agricultural productivity – that would have unintended and often dangerous consequences on the so-called experimental subjects.

Modernization theorists and practitioners had an especially hard time reckoning with the role of religion. Western and Soviet programs alike considered religious belief an artifact of the „backwardness“ that they hoped to overcome. This attitude was prevalent in programs in Islamic countries; Islam, as some participants noted, could be a vehicle as well as an obstacle for modernization programs. Especially in the Middle East and North Africa, Islam had a crucial political role that modernization programs typically ignored or misunderstood. Indeed, a cluster of papers on the Islamic world – including *Jeffrey Byrne's* (London School of Economics and Political Science) on Algeria and *Massimiliano Trentin's* (University of Florence) on Syria – demonstrated the ways in which Western and Soviet encounters with Islam were fraught with misunderstanding well before the rise of militant Islam.

Conference participants generally agreed that future scholarship needed to take better account of the impacts of modernization politics on Third World societies, on everyday life, on family structures, gender roles, etc. How did individuals experience the introduction of infrastructure, technology, and industry into their daily lives? In which ways did economic modernization influence consumption patterns and consumer identities (as *James Woodard* [Montclair State University] discussed for Brazil)? How did different generations react to the social effects of modernization – the contestation of traditional gender roles (as *Young-sun Hong* [SUNY Stony Brook] and *Constantin Katsakioris* (École des hautes études en sciences sociales) discussed Soviet-bloc cultural and medical programs for the Third World), the propagation of urban lifestyles, semantic and linguistic changes? To answer those questions, the particularities of places of modernization, the physical sites where modernization was contested, and its material conditions will have to be considered more systematically. Similarly, it will be important to investigate the reactions of the modernizers at the sites of modernization. How did they react to the frustrations that often accompanied their projects? Did they learn from their experiences, and did they adapt their approaches and expectations?

At this point, it seems evident that the similarities between Eastern and Western models of modernization were much greater than their differences. In the end, the socialist version of Third World modernization failed when the USSR, its most influential proponent, crumbled. However, it seems advisable to analyze socialist models of modernization in the Third World in their own right instead of tying them too closely to Soviet politics – much as scholars are starting to do for western models. This would not do justice to the inherent dynamic of decolonization, to the decolonized countries' individual historical development, and to their initiative and agency in promoting indigenous, hybrid concepts of modernization. As a consequence of this reassessment of the Cold War's importance in the context of global modernization, historians will have to come up with a new periodization and a new geographic perspective that, instead of starting out from Moscow, Washington, London, and Paris, starts out from the alleged periphery, which turned out to be surprisingly central in the second half of the twentieth century.

David C. Engerman, Corinna R. Unger

Kontakt:

Dr. Corinna R. Unger
German Historical Institute
1607 New Hampshire Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20009
USA
E-Mail: unger@ghi-dc.org

Copyright

Arbeitsgemeinschaft historischer Forschungseinrichtungen in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland e.V., 2008.

Kein Teil dieser Publikation darf ohne ausdrückliche schriftliche Genehmigung der AHF in irgendeiner Form reproduziert oder unter Verwendung elektronischer Systeme verarbeitet, vervielfältigt oder verbreitet werden.

AHF, Schellingstraße 9, 80799 München
Telefon: 089/13 47 29, Fax: 089/13 47 39
E-Mail: info@ahf-muenchen.de, Website: <http://www.ahf-muenchen.de>

Empfohlene Zitierweise / recommended citation style:

AHF-Information. 2008, Nr.075
URL: <http://www.ahf-muenchen.de/Tagungsberichte/Berichte/pdf/2008/075-08.pdf>