Ideas about Modernization

Tradition, Change, and Modernity. S. N. EISENSTADT. Wiley-Interscience, New York, 1973. xiv, 368 pp. $14.

This collection of essays by Israel's leading sociologist, a renowned authority on problems of modernization, is an important contribution not so much because of any specific findings as because it marks the end of an era in the study of the topic. The prevailing orthodoxy in the study of modernization in the postwar period as it was expounded, among many others, by such otherwise diverse thinkers as Clark Kerr, Walt Rostow, Daniel Lerner, and Talcott Parsons, conceived of modernization, or industrialization, as a relatively uniform, worldwide process. Whether based on a neo-evolutionary scheme stressing the ineluctability of the increasing differentiation of social forms and institutions on the road to more perfect modes of adaptation, as in the work of Parsons, or on more purely economic considerations as in Rostow's or Kerr's work, the common assumption among these scholars was that modernity would undermine tradition all over the world and that societies would become increasingly alike not only in their economies but also in their social institutions and cultural orientations. After "taking off" from the slough of tradition, all societies would progressively "converge" on a particular "modern" type which would best embody the logic of full development. Modernity, let it be noted in passing, was most commonly defined ethnocentrically as a state of affairs resembling that of the contemporary United States.

It is this paradigm or model of modernization which Eisenstadt, himself an earlier adherent to it, now considers to have broken down. He shows, for example, that the mere destruction of traditional forms does not necessarily assure the development of a viable modern society, but may simply result in anomic breakdown. Moreover, economic development, far from necessarily leading to increased political participation, may lay the groundwork for the emergence of new types of despotisms. Militaristic backwoodsmen may command their cowed countrymen from seats in the glittering skyscrapers of modernity.

It has turned out that societies, far from developing in a stately progression of orderly stages toward the promised land of modernity, exhibit startling incongruities and discontinuities in their actual course. The Indian caste order, far from being undermined, has proved amazingly resilient and has managed to deflect and modify the course of political development; the Japanese factory, though using the most modern Western technology, yet embodies in its social relations patterns sharply at variance with those in the West. Symbolic and institutional responses to the challenges of development have been most varied. The political and cultural systems of different societies have led to quite dissimilar responses to similar challenges. Symbolic, cultural, and political realms have exhibited much greater autonomy than was expected. Societies, it now becomes evident, are not usually organized in one unitary system but consist of often conflicting and antagonistic segments reacting in different ways to the challenge of the new. Different strata of the population develop different levels of organization and distinct patterns of symbolic orientation, which may clash or exist side by side.

The notion of structural differentiation, it turns out, is incapable of providing an adequate basis for distinguishing types of societies on an evolutionary scale. Levels of differentiation may indicate the nature of the new forces which are generated within a society, "but in such situations of change there develops not just one possibility of the restructuring of forces and activities . . . but rather a great variety of possibilities" (p. 360). Eisenstadt shows in instructive detail how the neat conceptual schemes of the postwar years have proved inadequate to encompass or explain the varieties of social and political development in the real world. Premature attempts to put the course of development into an evolutionary straitjacket have foundered on the shoals of historical specificity.

Thomas Huxley once remarked that, for Herbert Spencer, the definition of a tragedy was the spectacle of a deduction killed by a stubborn fact. What Eisenstadt records here is perhaps not a tragedy, but it is certainly the collapse of an overambitious effort to provide a grand theory of modernization. His work is of major importance just because it comes not from a disgruntled outsider but from the very core of the social science establishment. What is now needed, and Eisenstadt provides some valuable leads, is more modest, middle-range theories of development to shore up what remains valid from among these ruins.

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