

Н.В. Захаров

**МОДЕРНИЗАЦИЯ КАК СОЦИАЛЬНАЯ РЕПРЕЗЕНТАЦИЯ:
СЛУЧАЙ РОССИИ***

N.V. Zakharov

**MODERNIZATION AS SOCIAL REPRESENTATION:
THE RUSSIA CASE**

В статье аргументируется необходимость более пристального анализа дискурса модернизационного развития в современной России. Предлагаются объяснения популярности основных положений теории модернизации, а также анализируются ее слабые и сильные стороны. В работе продемонстрировано присутствие в российском научном и общественно-политическом дискурсе сочетания элементов теории модернизации и цивилизационного подхода. Каждый из них нормативно и идеологически нагружен, тесно связан с оценкой прошлого и используется в «борьбе за идентичность». Модернизацию в России предлагается рассматривать прежде всего как социальную репрезентацию, а не как объективный процесс исторического развития. Вместе с тем выделяются содержательные элементы теории модернизации, которые могут быть положены в основу нового теоретического подхода, призванного способствовать лучшему пониманию объективных процессов социального развития.

This article argues the need for a closer analysis of the discourse of modernization in contemporary Russia. It offers explanations for the popularity of modernization theory postulates in Russia and examines their strengths and weaknesses. As I have shown, there prevails in Russian scholarly discourse an inventive combination of the main theses of the theory of modernization with an idea of Russia as a local civilization. Each of these two elements is normatively and ideologically loaded and closely connected with how the past is evaluated. They are both used in the ongoing 'battle for identity'. It is suggested that

* This article was written during a half-year fellowship at the sociological department of St. Petersburg State University generously financed by STINT (The Swedish Foundation for International Cooperation in Research and Higher Education).

modernization in Russia should be seen primarily as social representation, and not as an objective process of historical development. At the same time, the article identifies substantive elements of modernization theory which can serve as the foundations for a new theoretical approach. Such an approach will assist in a better understanding of objective social development processes.

Ключевые слова: социальная теория, модернизация, Россия, современность.

Keywords: social theory, modernization, Russia, modernity.

The discussion of the modernization program proposed by President Medvedev is an encouragement for us to look more closely at the discourse that has arisen around the concept of ‘modernization’ itself and to look at how modernization is interpreted by Russian society. This essay has a twofold aim. It aims to demonstrate and explain the prominence in Russian society of the concept of modernization, as well as of certain postulates which are pivotal to modernization theory. I will argue that “modernization” in Russia is a normative task. It is the signifier, a dominant imaginary that should be studied as a process of social representation. The structure of modernization discourse, shaped through intellectual and political debates, has a grave impact on policy-making in contemporary Russia. The challenge for the sociologist is to explore the key elements of the modernization discourse which crystallizes these debates and to come up with possible explanations of why it has become so powerful in Russian society.

My second aim is to isolate those substantive elements of modernization theory which may be helpful in interpreting the discourses of social change in Russia. One reason why scholarly works elaborating various versions of modernization theory are so popular in Russia is that such works propose a plausible model for the explanation of the collapse of state socialism and the problems posed by post-Soviet changes. The use of the conventional conceptual apparatus makes it possible to evaluate various processes in contemporary Russia, and therefore to contribute to important public debates. In drawing distinctions between societies, we can analyze the differences between them through their own interpretative self-understanding (Wagner 1994).

Problems with modernization theories

We must remember that, to a great extent, it is precisely within the framework of modernization theory that a discursive form was developed and spread which poses the question about modernity (Gaunkar 2001: 14-15). While I do not consider that the theory of modernization is an all-embracing theory of modernity I will try to use insights of modernization theory in a sensitive manner, while also showing possible ways of overcoming its fallacies and limitations.

The main criticism of modernization theory that I develop in this essay is the absence within it of criteria which can be used for a normative evaluation of social development. Such criteria are essential, considering that, “the notion of progress toward an optimal form of social organization as the goal of all social systems” was a central assumption of modernization theories (Outhwaite, Ray 2005:94).

The reasons why modernization theory, and the use of the term “modernization” itself, has lost much of its credibility fall into two groups. The first set of reasons involve changes to eschatological perceptions of social change and changes to ideological intentions external to modernization as a conceptual standard against which empirical evidence can be theorized. The second set of reasons consists of reasons embedded in modernization theory itself. These have come to light as a result of the internal debates within modernization theory. The first set of reasons is beyond the scope of this paper (see Alexander 1995: 6–64; Beck et. al. 2003; Joas 1999: 459; Lyotard 1984). An outline of the latter set of reasons is provided below.

Firstly, the concept of “modernization” may be felt to be too broad. More generally, any attempt to theorize social change at the level of a grand theory runs into the problem of balancing generalized abstraction and historical concreteness (Outhwaite and Ray 2005: 89). According to Sztompka (Sztompka 1993: 129), one may speak of the idea of modernization either (a) as progressive social change, (b) as the process of attaining modernity and finally (c) as Westernization of the globe. Firstly, such diffusion within the concept erases the already fine distinction between modernization as an analytical tool and modernization as an informative (substantive) theory.

Secondly, studies which use this category have touched on a plethora of phenomena in very diverse areas of human activity, that are often tenuously connected. A grand theory such as this is also vulnerable because it has turned out to be unable to integrate these elements in any plausible fashion while at the same time ensuring that the external context for each of these elements could be taken into account. Like monolinear evolutionism, modernization theory tends to see several parameters of increasing societal differentiation, between which there is only a weak correlation, as a single variable.

Thirdly, using the structuralist conception that elements of the social system are to be analyzed through contrasting them in binary oppositions, modernization theory has chosen one specific historical setting as a starting point, contrasting it with all the many and varied societies that are classified as pre-modern. This has inevitably had the effect that, in the words of Alexander (1995: 13), “it functioned as a metalanguage that instructed people how to live”. It also laid stress on the inevitable and predestined nature of this linear homogenizing process, a process extraordinarily similar to what several decades later came to be called globalization.

This drawback and the disadvantage of the three-way diffusion in the concept explained above were both revealed when the hypothesis that modernization in one sphere under particular historical circumstances would produce “eurhythmic” changes in other spheres did not prove true. The transition theory, which was also popular at one time among scholars of social change in Eastern Europe also turned out to be indefensible. This theory “uncritically endorsed a revived modernization paradigm which both normatively (“the end of history”) and empirically (“designer capitalism”) promised a rapid and relatively unproblematic convergence of East with West.” (Blokker 2005: 504).

Despite the obvious limitations of, and a certain ideological bias inherent in modernization theory, it would be a grave mistake to reduce its substantial propositions to the social sources of those propositions. Modernization is not just a label, but a panoply of

influential discourses which are intimately embedded in our everyday practices through their provision of interpretative frameworks. Interpretations of Russian history, including the Soviet past, which use elements of modernization theory lay the groundwork and provide a rational justification for decisions in contemporary Russia.

Uses of modernization theory in Russia

Modernization discourse over the past twenty years has dominated the thinking of Russian sociologists about social change, and has taken the place of historical materialism as the dominant discourse. According to Stzompka, the same is true for the whole of the “second world”: “Acute awareness of the side-effects and unintended ‘boomerang effects’ of modernity produces disenchantment, disillusionment and outright rejection. At the theoretical level, post-modernism became the fashion of the day. It seems as if Western societies were ready to jump off the train of modernity, bored with the journey, just at the moment when the post-communist East is frantically trying to get on board” (Stzompka 1993, 140).

Russian scholars of social change have noted with satisfaction the common Hegelian and evolutionist roots of historical materialism and modernization theory. The adoption of modernization theory has also been aided by a closer acquaintance with its main propositions. The criticism leveled at it during the Soviet period has only helped to promote its popularity in the Post-Soviet times. As a non-Marxist macro-sociological theory aimed at countering the attractions of communist ideology Knöbl (Knöbl 2003: 97), the modernization thesis could not fail to be attractive to post-Soviet intellectual elites.

Medvedev’s statement that Russia is only twenty years old signified the acceptance of the “end of the history”. Medvedev puts forward for discussion a modernization program in his manifesto, entitled “Forward Russia”. Leading intellectuals, meanwhile, argue about the path of Russia’s historical development using key postulates of modernization theory. Opposition activists also reproduce this discourse through endless debates on the direction in which Russia is developing, all the while using hegemonic vocabulary. Even leading cultural figures contribute to this with attempts to theorize civilizational dynamics in Russia by using the concept of modernization (Konchalovsky 2010). The fetishism of modernities, which is characteristic of modern social theory finds its correlate in the Russian fetishism of modernization.

Within the intellectual sphere in Russia, the concept of Russia within the framework of multiple modernities and the search for Russia’s “cultural program” perform, in Eisenstadt’s terminology (Eisenstadt 2001: 31) the normative function of reproducing the mythology of distinctiveness (Zapadniki 2003; Gudkov 2004: 447–495; Shnirelman 2011). According to Western-oriented liberal scholars, multiple modernities and the civilizational approach becomes a rhetorical cover-up of failures in development. In the semantics of “distinctiveness”, as is often evidenced in the rhetoric of power and in public opinion, a heightened significance is ascribed to certain exceptional historical events, such as the Russian Revolution, the First and Second World Wars, to Russia as an “exception” to the main laws of the organization of the world and to the mysterious character of its “distinctiveness” as such (e.g. the idea that the social order in Russia is a puzzle beyond human understanding).

While agreeing with this assessment, I argue that one and the same theoretical position can be the bearer of varying evaluative and ideological significance, including significance of both a positive and a negative nature. Discourses around such concepts as “lagging behind” and “progress”, embedded in modernization theory and its offspring, are always normative. “Theories of modernization are a direct successor of the Enlightenment idea of progress, which served to promote the future that Enlightenment philosophers thought was best for the society” (Alasuutari 2004: 154).

The normative layer of modernization theory is clearly expressed in the elements of Medvedev’s program. President Medvedev has rhetorically cast aside the Soviet modernization project and pointed out that Russia is only twenty years old. He has defined five main directions in which “catch-up” development should take place. Modernization in this context means the efforts through which developing countries try to narrow the distance between their own competitive strength and social well-being and that of the most developed countries. In this way, after Putin announced that he aimed to double GDP, Portugal, as the poorest country in Europe was used by him as the country which Russia could “catch up” with (cf Khrushchev’s vow to “catch up with and overtake America”).

Russia’s state of ‘lagging behind’ is seen by some of the elites as a threat to the integrity and independence of the country. It also fosters a socially traumatic feeling of inadequacy. These ideas are to a large extent founded on a false identification of modernization with a state of flourishing.

Observers generally concur in the view that there is a consensus in the Russian society and in the power elites on what is considered progressive economic development. This is GDP growth and the prosperity of the citizens. The direction of political development, traditionally defined in modernization theories as a movement towards democracy and a civil society, is more controversial. This is partly due to the weak empirical foundations of modernization theories. The infinite variety of historical models of development has shown that democracy and economic prosperity do not always go hand-in-hand, and that a mutual causal link between them is even less common. This limitation of classical modernization theories has been partially resolved through an abandonment of determinism and the introduction of the concept of multiple modernities. At the level of public discourse in Russia, this has found expression as a set of ideologemes concerning “Russia’s special/distinctive path”, which has become firmly rooted in that discourse. The interaction of a globalized environment, with its economic, technological and ideological challenges, with Russia’s social order, based on the social significance of the group and of tradition, has led to a number of internal contradictions and external conflicts. Russian society affirms the aims of economic modernization, and puts up for discussion ideological programs of political modernization. However, it scrupulously avoids any mention of social modernization. Only two specifically social aspects of modernization have been discussed by Russian scholars: values and concrete actors which will trigger the change of deep-seated attitudes. This analysis is carried out in accordance with earlier versions of modernization theory, which tried to find causal mechanisms which would allow social change towards modernity (Kn bl 2003: 103). Scholars have regularly documented the extraordinary depths of social solidarity, mutual help, familial and

communitarian ties in societies suffering substantial economic deprivation and political repression (Shipman 2009). The problem of the social parameters of successful development (whether we call such development modernization or not) is extremely important. First of all, it allows us to evaluate development, allowing us to compare the “success” of various societies. Secondly, it allows us to identify the conditions which allow economic and political changes to take place.

The social differentiation of roles and institutions — a key aspect of social differentiation — cannot be controlled by the move towards centralization and hierarchy in social control systems which has taken place within the last decade. A high birth rate is associated with a traditional society. In Russia, however, it is usually represented as progressive development. It may be that this is not a distinctive method of modernization, i.e. by using cultural distinctiveness, like Japan, in order to accelerate entry into modernity. It may be rather that it modernity under the conditions of the USSR is brought to a stage of reflexive denial and a dialectical transition to its opposite. This is not a Giddensian reflexive society of radical modernity, which insists on a choice between traditions, and not a divergence of ways of development of modernity, but rather the fragmentation of the totality of the Soviet project.

Modernization versus retraditionalization

All Russia experts have remarked on the processes of “retraditionalisation” which were triggered after 1991 and which have intensified during the last ten years. These processes need to be explained within the framework of the discourse we are examining here. Changes in the patterns of division of labor between the sexes, the renaissance of religion, the difficulty of obtaining a good education, institutional limitations on the movement of labor, the fall in literacy levels, the archaization of everyday life and the revitalization of social institutions that had supposedly “died off”, including slave ownership, polygamy and blood vendettas — these are the manifestations of this process (i.e. traditionalization).

Vladimir Mezhuev’s words (Mezhuev 2003: 145–146) give us an idea of the interpretative angle: “When we think of Russia’s destiny, we are in fact trying to solve the same problems that the West has faced: how do you reconcile modernization (rationalization) of society with traditional religion, morality and culture, with the distinctive characteristics of national life? How do you combine economic growth and the changes it brings with spiritual values? What do you do with your past during the process of modernization? Do you forget it, or do you try to find some sort of thread which connects the past and the present.”

It is clear that we are concerned here with a battle for identity and distinctiveness in the face of unfolding universalizing processes and ongoing compressions of spatial and temporal scales. At the level of political debates, the battle of tradition and innovation can be expressed by the striking phrase “Medvedev’s twenty-year-old Russia versus Putin’s thousand-year-old Russia, weighed down by blood and glory”. While Medvedev talks of a full-scale modernization program, Putin prefers to talk of innovations.

The battle for identity is characterized by the fact that while the West tries to resolve the antinomies of modernity, which is itself its own product, Russia must face the challenge of interaction between its own cultural program on one hand and moder-

nizing imperatives on the other hand, while all the time having before it the idea of the West as a frame of reference.

As seen from the texts quoted above, there prevails in Russian scholarly discourse an inventive combination of the postulates of the theory of modernization with an idea of Russia as a local civilization. What is a rational and instrumental action in the “original civilization” acquires a higher meaning in the “receiving culture”. The concept of the West as an ideal is widespread in the social psyche. The new Russia has inherited a long tradition of disputes on the nature and merits of the West (Greenfeld 1992: 223–235; Bonnet 2002; Neumann 1996). With the coming of Putin, the idea of alternative modernity has also been galvanized. In the discourse on foreign policy, the concept of a multipolar world is much favoured. This time, Russia is represented as the true Europe, irreconcilably opposed to the “false” Europe of American-ruled “Atlantists” (Morozov 2009). In his comments on the reception of modernization theories in the Caribbean and Latin America, Stuart Hall (Hall 2002: 41) says: “The theory of modernization was for long the economic cutting-edge of alliance-for-progress strategies on the continent. Versions of the “dependency” school have been harnessed, under different conditions, to the promotion of anti-imperialist, national-capitalist development of a radical type.” We cannot ignore the significant similarity with the pattern of development in Russia in the last ten years. The post-Perestroika period, with its belief in the swift and successful “acceptance into the family of civilized nations” has given way to Putinist aims of a “sovereign democracy” and national capitalism.

What becomes key, therefore, is the question of how the country’s past is to be interpreted. One of the main elements of this problem is the theoretization of the Soviet past and the Communist project. The coinage of “Stalinism” as the name of a civilization by a number of Western thinkers (Kotkin 1995, Hedin 2004) has given a new impulse to debates on whether the USSR was a modern society. As pointed out by Johann Arnason (Arnason 2002: 61), “the refusal to grasp the Communist experience as an offshoot of a global modernizing process may be an obstacle to further exploration of the new horizons opened up by its unexpected finale.”

What is important is that the Communist project, even though it was supported by the historical assumptions peculiar to Russia, was a typical product of modernity, and not a continuation of tradition into the present age. The process of social change in Russia cannot be seen as the assimilation of Russian histories into the dominant Western context. Russia has provided an example of an alternative way of attaining modernity. Whereas, for Bauman (Bauman 1991), the present state of affairs is modernity (or postmodernity) which accepts the inevitability of antinomies and decides to come to terms with them by liberating society from the modernist pursuit of total control and rational order, the Soviet project was clearly something quite different and opposed to this. It was an attempt to formulate and put into effect the “right” version of the Enlightenment project. Blurring the difference between human desire and reason, the individual and society, morality and self-interest, Soviet modernity stood as one of the three historical alternatives of the 20th Century which took their roots and inspiration from the Enlightenment project. Later, Bauman (Bauman 2000) formulates a distinction between “heavy” and “liquid” modernities, describing the

history of post-Soviet change in Russia as a “transition”, and describing Communism as the epitome of modernity.

Many suppose that modernization theory provides an explanation of the collapse of the civilization of state socialism. Doubtless, the Soviet system had an inherent range of traditionalist features, such as a patrimonial bureaucracy, clientelism and ascribed ethnic identities. During the Soviet period, mobilization and association from below were replaced by those from above (Wagner 1994: 102). Nevertheless, Eisenstadt (Eisenstadt 1992) and Arnason (Arnason 1993), remarking on the distinguishing features of Communist modernity, suggest that the Soviet Union was a modernized society. And, in fact, under the Communist rule Russia was transformed into an educated, urban, industrialized society. In the program of molding of the Soviet man, in the “code of the Communism-builder” we can see important parallels with puritanism. The Soviet society cultivated “soznatel’nost” (approximately, “conscientiousness”). It preached that life should be lived so that “there should be no torturing shame for years lived in vain”. The socialist revolution in many respects recalls the religious revolution of early modernity. It is remarkable that both the puritanical and the bolshevist projects have a clear anti-consumerist and ascetic coloring. This similarity is especially striking, when we consider that there was no direct borrowing here. The protestant experience, unlike the ideas of the Enlightenment, was very little thought through in Russia.

It is clear that Russia showed great inventiveness in its attempts to resolve the tension between the emphasis on human autonomy and “civilizing”, restrictive control. Some other ways of resolving the tension between reason and faith and the institutionalization of transcendental visions demonstrate a very distinctive “Russian way”.

Can modernization theory be salvaged?

The advantage of modernization theory is the clear indication of the direction of influence and the borrowing of models. Societies which are more economically and technologically developed set the standard, being at once role-models and forces which impose their modernity schemata in the process of interaction. Indigenous themes change under the influence of adopted systems of knowledge. The notion of multiple modernities is in no way incompatible with this direction: it only reflects its historicity and proposes an alternative ideological eschatology. Also, this sort of model is not inflexibly linear and determinist, both because of the relativism of the systems of moral values, and considering the socially ascribed role of the acting human in different societies.

However, the theory of multiple modernities does not adequately take into account the factor of cultural hegemony. The reverse effect is traditionally exaggerated — neither the Buddhism of Hollywood stars, nor oriental influences in Western fashion are comparable to the influence of modern Western societies and world-wide capitalism on lifestyle around the globe. Of course, non-Western societies can only play the role of constitutive others, “uncivilized pre-modern societies”. However, only societies which have at least a comparable economic and technological potential, and which have adopted the dominant discourse and critically developed it can really challenge the ruling discourses. Only they can promise answers to the questions posed by modernity, and only they can do so in a language that can be understood, or that can at least be translated into the system of symbols and meanings of other modernities.

The second advantage of modernization theory is the stress laid on process-like quality and development. Even where the scholar who is trying to upgrade modernization theory sees this as its *disadvantage*, no plausible new design has been proposed which does not make use of concepts such as “advanced”, “complex”, “differentiated” and “developed”. The possibility of consensual use of the criteria of progress was demonstrated by Sanderson (Sanderson 1995: 336–357). Compared to this, a key assumption of the multiple modernities theory is that the differences between civilizations must be greater than those between different historical epochs in world history seems to be hardly plausible.

I now intend to address several points outlined above, which provide some theoretical intuitions which I will use to make my case and which also set its limits.

First, modernization should be understood as the process of attaining modernity, the process of becoming modern through increasing differentiation. The definition of modernization as any progressive social change is too broad in its antihistorical character. Identification of modernization with Westernization, on the other hand, provincializes it, taking away the possibility that modernization processes are continuing in the West and presenting modernity as a closed rather than an open-ended project, excluding the possibility of multilinear paths of modernization. This identification has meant that classical modernization theory has had to be revised, and new concepts, “remodernization”, “radicalized modernization” and “first and second modernity” have had to be introduced (Beck et. al. 1994; 2003: 3–15).

I take the propositions of the theory of “multiple modernities”, which sees North-Western Europe as the site for the production of modernity (Eisenstadt 2001: 31), as the starting point for my study. At the same time, we must not underestimate the importance of global dependences and power structures in the processes of ongoing modernization (Therborne 2003). As was argued by Wallerstein, the world system generates advanced and underdeveloped sectors. I make this allowance, because I see modernization as the process of implementing Enlightenment values. By their imposition on other societies it has started to entail a particularization of the universal.

Secondly, the need for less complex approaches means focusing on only particular aspects of modernity. This will allow us to analyze a sizable portion of empirical evidence within its chronological and geographical context — an approach which I consider more productive in terms of historical sensitivity than broader and more abstract applications of modernization theory model. The processes of societal differentiation which resulted in “the first modernity” can hardly be examined at the empirical level in their “grand-theory-style” unity in the age of “reflexive modernization” (Beck et. al. 1994). At the same time, the theory of modernization gives us an important hint when it talks of the modernization of the economy, the legal and political systems, culture and, in the end, of man.

Thirdly, the empirical unit of reference is no longer modern Western societies and the pre-modern societies who are trying to catch up with them, as is usual in studies of modernization processes — it is the projects of alternative modernity. The creative character of adopting (making one’s own) ideological discourses and social practices with their subsequent retranslation, allows us to talk of reciprocity and the dialectical character of their development. This will allow us to shed light on the processes of

social change, while avoiding the essentializing extremes of those studies which are constructed around the strict opposition of tradition and modernity.

Conclusion

The accumulation of capital and the institutional strengthening of social positions have led to a new social divide. Meanwhile, the crisis in the fundamental mechanisms of social integration and the revolution in expectations have added to the severity of the conflicts within Russian society. Economic roles have changed, but many of the old social stimuli and values have been retained. These are not only routinely reproduced, but actively encouraged by the adepts of modernization from above. This contradiction has meant that modernization processes which are interested in integration have a very distinctive trajectory. Russia faces the task of solving problems of cultural identity in circumstances where lifestyles have become divergent from each other, and where new lifestyles have appeared, where institutions and systems of reproduction of values have become differentiated, where participation in politics is characterized by extremely low indicators of the trust of citizens in institutions, where civil self-consciousness is underdeveloped, where there is economic inequality within the country due to the fact that the Russian economy has become linked to that of the rest of the world, but is dependent upon it.

Advocates of modernization programs gloss over the negative consequences, while, at the same time, demanding the traditionalization of social relations and institutions. Values-oriented and conservative opinions and withdrawal into private life are understood both as a step forward compared to the totalitarian nature of Soviet modernity and as a step sideways, away from the highway of Western modernization. Social problems caused by the changes lead to a defensive reaction. This reaction, however, is characterized not by a rational protection of one's own economic interests and political rights, but by the activation of entrenched ideas of a "golden age". "Catching up" with the West always presupposed defensive reactions. These defensive reactions may come from a grass-roots level, or may be imposed by elites who try to increase the cultural distance between themselves and the masses, while hiding behind slogans about the protection of habits and traditions. Exclusion is one of the base social mechanisms which may use different signifiers, characteristic of the specific historically-determined discourse. Social representations of backwardness or wealth can nowadays more and more be described as intersections of race, class and gender. In the words of Stuart Hall (Hall 1980), we can conclude that discussions around modernization and innovation in Russia are attempts at ideological construction of conditions, contradictions and problems in such a way that we may be able to solve and, at the same time, to avoid them. The sudden expansion of the social space within which citizens are permitted individually to solve systemic contradictions, together with a simultaneous restriction in their ability to participate in social movements is a way of stabilizing the existing order in Russia (Zakharov 2012).

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