

## Failures of Modernization Theories

By Asad Zaman

Pride resulting from global dominance and spectacular scientific and technological developments led Europeans to believe that the West was the most advanced and developed of all societies. Other societies were primitive and under-developed. As these other societies matured and grew, they would follow the same stages that were followed by the West, and eventually become like modern Western societies. Early thinkers like Comte described the stages in growth from primitive society to modern ones in a 'logical' sequence. The enterprise of colonizing the non-European world was painted in bright terms as being part of the "White Man's burden" of bringing enlightenment, good government, science, technology and other benefits of Western civilization to the rest of the world. Until the 60's modernization theorists, like Parsons and Rostow echoed these sentiments, regarding Westernization as a desirable and inevitable process for the rest of the world. The goal of this article is to discuss some of the difficulties which led to substantial reconsideration of these naïve views. Current views (for example, *Development as Freedom* by Amartya Sen) are much more complex and diverse, and generally more respectful of other ancient civilizations in the world.

The first problem with the modernization theories is the deeply racist world-view embedded in them. The Dred-Scott decision in the USA declared that blacks were "beings of an inferior order, and altogether unfit to associate with the white race, either in social or political relations, and so far inferior that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect." Australian aborigines were hunted like animals by the British. Lord Cecil Rhodes declared that "I contend that we are the finest race in the world and that the more of the world we inhabit the better it is for the human race. Just fancy those parts that are at present inhabited by the most despicable specimens of human beings; what an alteration there would be if they were brought under Anglo-Saxon influence ... " He became the richest man in the world at the time by fully exploiting those 'despicable specimens of human beings' in the British colonies. While explicit and open racism has largely been abandoned in modern times, remnants of these racist views still persist. There is debate at the highest levels in the USA as to whether or not Muslims can self-govern! See "Bush

Cites Racism in Remarks On Iraq” in *Washington Post*, Saturday, May 1, 2004. Nobel Prize winner Watson has suggested that differences in development levels may be explained by genetic endowments. Harvard professor Bell maintains that blacks have lower IQ than whites.

A second problem with modernization theories is that it has become abundantly clear that high sounding moral ideas have served as a cover for very low and despicable purposes. In *King Leopold's Ghost*, Adam Hochschild documents the extremely cruel, oppressive and exploitative treatment meted out to Africans which resulted in the death of 4 to 8 million in the Belgian Congo alone. In the name of bringing them the benefits of European civilization, King Leopold's officials used extremely harsh methods to force the locals to collect rubber. To teach the locals Western work ethics, the Belgians took wives and children hostage and kept them in subhuman conditions until their African husbands fulfilled their quotas. Soldiers would torture, chop off hands, or kill the inhabitants if they faltered in their work. All of these policies were promoted and advertised as Christian charity for the benefit of the natives. Similar policies are also currently in operation. According to testimony of high-placed officials like Paul O'Neill, Alan Greenspan, and Henry Kissinger, the Iraq war was planned for the control of the vast oil resources of Iraq. However, the White House vehemently denies this view, and alleges high motives like the desire to bring democracy to Iraq. While every US soldier killed is counted, no one counts the millions of inferior lives destroyed by the Iraq war. The vast amount of torture, arbitrary killings of civilians, destruction of Iraqi infrastructure and entire cities, and the resulting miseries of the populace, has surfaced in alternative media, but only occasionally breaks through to the mainstream media in USA.

A third problem with modernization theories is that they have failed to deliver results. All across the world, “structural adjustment programs” (SAPs) were designed and implemented by expert economists to help improve economic performance. Even proponents from IMF and World Bank now widely acknowledge that these policies have been failures. Critics, including Nobel Laureate Stiglitz, claim that these SAP's are a major cause of poverty all over the world. Under General Pinochet, the Chilean economy was turned into a laboratory experiment in free market economics by the “Chicago boys.” Advice from Nobel prize winning economist Milton Friedman followed strictly for several years resulted only in lackluster growth and continued high unemployment. Faith in the miracles of the free market led only to disappointment and failure when “shock treatment” was applied to the Russian economy. Pressure by US economists for financial liberalization led directly to the East Asian crisis. Throughout the world, numerous vigorously pursued programs for modernization and development along Western models have only led to chaos, cultural conflicts, and confusion.

The idea that Western models are perfect in all areas, including social, cultural and economic, leads to the dominant role of foreign expert advisors in development. These experts need to know nothing about local conditions, customs, traditions, because all of these are just obstacles in the path to progress. They come to a country knowing the solutions in advance, and give advice on how to move from existing patterns to Western ones in the shortest possible time. The havoc wrecked by this disregard and ignorance of local issues has been very well documented by Mitchell in *The Rule of Experts*. Studies of successful models for development (post-war Germany, Japan, communist Russia, East Asian Tigers) show that the strategies used there were often in opposition to those recommended by conventional economics. World Bank economists writing about *The East Asian Miracle* admit that in most of these economies, the government intervened systematically, through multiple channels, to foster development. Despite these systematic violations of neoclassical prescriptions for development, these countries achieved the highest rates of productivity growth and fastest development seen at that time in the historical record.

Lessons from studies of successful development strategies are abundantly clear. Each such country has developed by disregarding foreign advice, and developing their own strategies. Self-reliance, self confidence, trust, cooperation and methods adapted to local conditions and culture have been crucial to success. Slavish imitation of Western models and an inferiority complex are the biggest obstacles to progress. Cultural conflicts due to modernization, created by one segment of society opting for Western ways and another holding to traditions, have prevented the social harmony and unity necessary for progress.