

## CHAPTER 1

# *Defining Modernization*

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### I

#### **Modern societies**

Modernization originally referred to the contrast and transition between a 'traditional' agrarian society and the kind of 'modern' society that is based on trade and industry. For example traditional and modern would describe the difference between medieval England and late-Victorian Britain.

A traditional society is 'vertically' organized by hierarchical division by class or caste — a specialization of prestige. But a modern society is 'horizontally' organized by function, such that the major functions are performed by modular social systems. These major social systems include the political system, the public administration (civil service), the armed forces, the legal system, the economy, religion, education, the health service and the mass media. So, while a traditional society is like a pyramid of top-down authority, a modern society is more like a mosaic held together by the cement of mutual inter-dependence.

A further contrast is that traditional societies consist of a single, unified system with a single centre of power; while a modern society is composed of a plurality of autonomous systems which interact with each other, influence each other, but do not absorb each other. Modern societies are fundamentally heterogeneous with multiple centres of power; and this is no accident

but intrinsic to their nature. Indeed, the continued process of modernization tends to break down any remaining vestiges of hierarchy and centralized domination of social functions.

Modern and traditional societies differ according to their complexity of organization and their rate of growth in complexity. Modern societies are much more complex than traditional societies and are growing ever-more complex. Traditional societies are simpler and have a static structure (or one that increases its complexity so slowly or erratically that they perceive themselves as static). Complexity is favoured by selection processes, which are more powerful in modernizing societies, because specialization of function enables greater efficiency (for instance when division of labour, or increased trade and communications enables greater efficiency). Increasing efficiency then frees resources and drives further growth.<sup>1</sup>

Modern societies are based upon growth and the expectation of growth. Indeed the cohesion of modernizing societies requires more or less continuous growth. This is why it is impossible to stop modernization at a particular favoured point – if growth stops then the nature of society reverts towards a traditional form. Growth in modern societies includes economic growth (increasing output and productivity), but also entails ‘cognitive growth’ – which means an increase in knowledge and capability across a wide range of activities such as science, technology and political administration.

Traditional societies exhibit division of labour and cognitive specialization, but their complexity is constrained by the hierarchical structure into three main categories of peasants, warriors and priests (Gellner’s ‘plough, sword and book’). Warriors and priests constitute the ruling class who are concerned mainly with maintaining social cohesion by means of physical coercion and ideological propaganda. Peasants – whose role is agricultural production – constitute the vast majority of the population of traditional societies. Beyond the division into warriors,

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[1] For discussion of the meaning of ‘complexity’ and ‘selection’, see Appendix.

priests and peasants there is only a small 'middle class' of technical specialists (for example the different types of craftsmen). But in modern societies the 'middle class' is dominant: the vast majority of the population is cognitively specialized, and there are many thousands of distinctively different occupations.

A deeper understanding of modernization reveals that one vital qualitative difference between traditional and modern is the difference between a unified social system in which all activity is (in principle) subordinated to politics ('politics' being variably combined from different proportions of military force and theological legitimation); and a modern society in which politics does not dominate all activities, but in which there is instead a fundamental and continually-increasing functional specialization such as ever more division of labour into more different types of job.

The categorization of societies into traditional and modern is crude, and of limited usefulness. At present almost all societies are at least partially modernized. On the other hand, no society is 'completely' modernized and the rate of modernization is variable between societies, and between systems in a society. Pre-modern forms are obvious in all societies. There has always (so far) been scope for further increase in adaptive complexity, in a positive feedback cycle where increased productivity fuels increased complexity, which in turn fuels increased productivity.

Since modernization is dynamic, it is more useful to consider modernization as a process than as a state. A 'modern' society based on the process of modernization: this is 'modernity'. Modernization can be seen as the general mechanism by which the social transformation from agricultural dominance to domination by trade and industry takes place, and the permanent continuation of this process. The difference between modernizing and traditional societies is profound — being the difference between simple static structure and complex dynamic process.

## II

### **Modernization and complexity**

Increasing adaptive complexity of societies enables the increased efficiency of information-processing, where information-processing has an abstract meaning. 'Information' includes all entities with meaning in systems (such as money, agricultural produce, industrial goods, human minds), while 'processing' includes any transforming social activities such as economic production in factories, trade, markets, formal education, the health services and the activities of the mass media. For example, increased economic productivity entails increased complexity of information-processing by increased division and specialization of labour, increased complexity of organization, and the use of complex machines and (more recently) computers.

This potential adaptive advantage for complex systems is the underlying reason why biological evolution has generated ever-more-complex organisms over the history of life on earth. The largest and most dominant organisms in the history of life on earth are late products of evolution and the most dominant animals in terms of biomass are humans in the temperate zones and ants in the tropics and equatorial regions – both complexly social.

Increased organizational complexity does not inevitably generate increased efficiency since complexity increases the need for communication and co-ordination. But in modernizing societies there is a selection pressure on each social system by other social systems, which means that there is an evolutionary tendency for more functionally efficient increases in complexity to survive while increases in useless or damaging complexity tend to be eliminated over time. Of course, selection is a 'trial and error' process, having the tendency to improve efficiency on average and over the long term. Selection does not generate perfectly efficient mechanisms or optimal solutions, and short-term changes may be less efficient. Nonetheless, the overall tendency is towards greater complexity and efficiency.

Modernizing societies are therefore already-complex societies that display the tendency to become more complex with time — this increasing complexity being kept under selective pressure for improved efficiency.

### **III Social cohesion**

Maintenance of stable social cohesion is the main problem for traditional rulers, and processes such as growth, or specialization of labour will be sacrificed to maintain the cohesion of a stable structure. Any significant social change is potentially a threat to structure, and new knowledge, institutions or technologies may be suppressed. Social cohesion is imposed vertically, from above, by hierarchical command. Hence, traditional socialization typically entails the inculcation of obedience to the prevailing order.

Modernizing society, by contrast, implicitly adopts the growth of adaptive complexity as its core value, and a modernizing system of education and socialization will (by comparison with traditional education/socialization systems) tend to inculcate the desirability of growth and functional specialization as core values. Existing social structures are often sacrificed when they conflict with these modernizing processes (for example the class system impairs flexible functional specialization and tends to be dismantled by modernization). Social cohesion naturally remains vital, since all social systems have self-reproduction as their primary function (if they did not, they would not exist), but social cohesion becomes an indirect by-product of the growth in adaptive complexity.

The increasing adaptive complexity continually generates greater efficiency and a surplus of product, and this surplus is potentially available to maintain cohesion. For example, a more complex and functionally specialized organization may lead to greater economic efficiency and generate more profits, and some of these extra profits can be used to solve problems caused by new forms of organization. For example, deterioration in work-

ing conditions caused by more complex forms of organization may be compensated by paying higher wages, employing extra personnel or eliminating menial jobs through new forms of technology.

A modernizing society implicitly operates on the basis of faith in the future — or more exactly a self-belief in generating a continually expanding capability as the best means of solving emergent problems. Just as a growing organization may expand without a comprehensive plan, but by expanding its capability faster than the problems it encounters; so a modernizing society does not know how it will be able to maintain growth and coherence in the unknown but more complex future, but implicitly has confidence that this can be achieved by growth in knowledge and resources. Social cohesion is therefore bound-up with deferred satisfactions. Present disaffection is ameliorated by the possibility of future improvement in modernizing societies. This is plausible when society as a whole is on an upward escalator of capability. Modernization therefore depends on the socialization of sufficient numbers of the population into a forward-looking and optimistic attitude.

A traditional society is held together mainly by force and propaganda which is imposed from above — warriors providing the force and priests the propaganda.<sup>2</sup> An example would be feudal medieval England, in which a tiny minority of Norman warriors (aristocrats) and the Roman Catholic priesthood ruled a mass of Anglo-Saxon peasants. Although modernizing societies continue to deploy top-down force and propaganda, the aim is not a static structural stability, nor are force and propaganda the main instruments of social cohesion.

In a modernizing society, social cohesion is a necessary consequence of the mutual inter-dependence of social systems — which means that the most important forces of cohesion are horizontal rather than top-down. Because of the specialization of social systems, each system depends upon other systems for its

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[2] i.e. a belief in the long-term stability of the social, political and economic organization, with the minimum likelihood of change.

ability to function. For example, the economic system requires freedom to trade (political system), an educated workforce (educational system), a healthy workforce (health services) etc. All of the major functions performed by social systems are necessary to the continued survival of the society. In a modern society, (almost) everyone depends on (almost) everyone else in a vast and intricate web of reciprocal influence.

Such interdependence generates the web of forces that tends to bind society. Such forces are both formal and informal, and cohesive mechanisms differ between societies due to their different histories. For example, many early-modernizing societies depended upon nationalistic loyalty to bind their populations, but nationalism has become weaker in most of the more complex modernizing societies. Formal forces of cohesion include the legal and regulatory framework — and this necessity is one reason why this framework tends to increase in complexity in modernizing societies. But one of the most important informal cohesive mechanisms in complex modernizing societies is the mass media.

The mass media serves to represent society to itself. The media samples information from the functional social systems and processes it into forms that are able to attract and hold attention, then these are communicated widely. The amount of information which circulates in the media, and in private life as a consequence of communications from the media, is a powerful force for cohesion (even when its contents are conflictual and sensational). The mass media not only provide horizontal links between the specialized social systems, so that a newspaper contains information relating to politics, law, education, health etc; but the media also links its own content temporally. In the mass media social memories are created, maintained and transformed. Each media 'story' is presented as growing from other stories, and leading onto yet more stories in an endless process: so that a new medical treatment for cancer may be presented in relation to knowledge about that type of cancer (perhaps linked to a celebrity sufferer), and future possible links are created —

maybe in relation to potential side effects (referring to memories of thalidomide, perhaps) or to the costs of the new treatment (linking to health service politics).

In such ways, the mass media's own requirements to have something to say on a daily basis and to attract people to attend to their communications leads to a vital social function of maintaining social cohesion by the circulation of communications potentially concerning all systems. The necessary basis of the mass media's own continued existence has therefore evolved to become a functional necessity for modernizing societies — which is presumably one reason why all modernizing societies include a very large mass media system which is continually growing in complexity and size to match the society in which it operates.

#### IV Economism

There are many fundamental misconceptions about modernization, the commonest of which is that modernization entails subordinating all of society to the goal of maximizing economic growth — a doctrine sometimes termed 'economism'. By this definition, modernizers are accused of advocating that economic imperatives such as profit and productivity ought to be regarded as the ultimate social good.

By this account, while traditional societies were characterized by domination of society by the political system, modern societies are dominated by the economic system. The debate about modernization is then defined as a choice between political or economic domination. This common error is exacerbated by the fact that modernizing societies are often termed 'capitalist'. While it is true that all advanced modernizing societies have capitalist-type economic systems, this nomenclature carries the mistaken implication that capitalism is not only necessary to such societies, but definitive. However, a capitalist economy is only one feature of modernization, and (for instance) democ-

racy, science and an independent legal system are equally definitive.

Economism is an inaccurate and incomplete description which misrepresents modern society by disregarding its fundamentally plural, modular, functional interdependence. Modularity implies that the economy is narrowly focused on economic imperatives, and that the other social systems have distinct and different imperatives. Continual economic growth (e.g. especially growth in productivity) is indeed vital for modernizing societies, and economic factors influence almost all social functions. But the true nature of the relationship between social systems is two-way, or reciprocal. This arises precisely because the economic system has a narrowly economic set of functional criteria. Because it depends on the other social systems to perform non-economic functions, economics cannot dominate other systems in a one-way power relationship. Economic growth requires growth in many other social systems, efficient growth in other systems requires their autonomy, and this need for autonomy in all functional social systems leads to a balance of power between systems – not to an hierarchical domination.

A growing economic system entails increasingly effective functioning in many other social systems. For instance, economic growth requires an evolving legal framework, the political arrangements to enforce that legal framework, an expanding and changing educational system to increase and modify the skills of the population, and an effective health service to maintain the functionality of economically-active people. Efficient functioning in these other social systems implies they become ever-more specialized and complex. Each social system becomes progressively optimized for its own functional purposes.

Economics is often criticized for the narrowness of its evaluations (e.g. its 'obsession' with profits and productivity and its neglect of culture and human fulfillment). But if economic evaluations were to broaden, this would tend towards de-differentiation and absorption of the horizontal modular systems of modernizing societies into the single hierarchical system of a tra-

ditional society. Many opponents of modernization who characterize modernization as economism are advocating a form of social organization in which the economy (along with the other social functions) is subordinated to specific political and cultural goals (and such dominating political goals might be either right- or left-wing in nature). The superficially humane appeal for a broader concept of economics therefore carries anti-democratic, anti-scientific and pro-hierarchical implications.

However, it is doubtful whether anyone truly advocates economism. It is an accusation levelled against those who are seen to be placing excessive emphasis on the need to maintain and enhance economic growth, or are apparently neglecting the importance of other systems such as education, health or the arts. When its opponents characterize modernity in terms of economic domination of society (as often happens in discussions of the phenomenon labelled 'globalization'), then there is little difficulty in demonstrating the absurdity, barbarity or unsustainability of modernizing societies. But economism is a 'straw man'.

## V

### **'Scissors, Rock, Paper' interdependency**

The stability of a modernizing society depends upon the interlocking of a mosaic of modular social systems — all of which are necessary, none of which is dominant. The outcome is a dynamically changing and growing network formed from relationships of mutual constraint and mutual benefit. Long-term stability comes from the fact that each system needs several other systems in order to function. Since system outputs are most efficiently provided by complex specialization, the tendency is for each system to evolve according to its own distinctive functional logic. For example, the legal system is organized around a distinction between legal and illegal, while economic logic is based around profitable/non-profitable.

A modernizing society is therefore essentially and necessarily pluralistic. Society is a system variably constituted of ever-more

numerous, ever-more specialized social systems held together by a web of cohesive forces that are themselves changing and evolving. Such pluralism is no accident, nor is it a temporary phase. Indeed, modernizing societies must be characterized by mechanisms to promote and maintain functional pluralism. Each system depends on the outputs of other systems. If system specialization is lost then efficiency is threatened, and reduced efficiency leads to reduced output – which weakens other systems and tends to reverse modernization and lead to social de-differentiation back towards the traditional form of static structure (as seems to have happened in the later phases of the Soviet empire due to increasing domination of all social functions by the political system).

The more specialized social systems become, the more each system needs the outputs of other systems. Social cohesion and continued growth of adaptive complexity is in the interests of each of the social systems. This mutual dependence between systems creates a situation in which selection forces act to favour the evolution of horizontal mechanisms of cohesion. Although short-term expediency may lead to 'parasitic' exploitation of one system by another, cohesion is the only viable long term strategy. The fact that social cohesion is a matter of enlightened self-interest for all systems is the key to understanding the observation that modernizing societies have less need for coercion and propaganda than traditional societies. Although increasing specialization of function tends to increase social fragmentation, specialization also simultaneously increases mutual dependence, thereby tending to maintain social cohesion. This probably explains why modernizing societies do not (despite predictions) simply disintegrate.

The strength of this form of cohesion has increased because complex social systems have developed self-representations in the form of management, and management has developed functions of prediction and strategic planning. This implies that, in principle, social systems can avoid policies that offer short-term gains at the cost of longer-term damage.

The inter-dependent nature of social systems in a modernizing society can be expressed by analogies drawn from children's games. A traditional society is like a game of 'king of the castle' in which competitors struggle to stand on top of a hill, and the one who succeeds has a height advantage which helps him to maintain his winning position. Being on top of the hill is the overall dominant position. But in a game of 'Scissors, Rock, Paper' there is no overall dominant position. Participants thrust out their right hand in the shape of either scissors, rock or a flat sheet of paper: scissors cut the paper, paper wraps the rock, rock blunts the scissors. Each strategy may be more powerful than, equal to, or weaker than another strategy; and the continuation of the game is defined by its circularity. If there was an overall dominant move, then the game would end in stalemate.

Similarly, modernization is defined by a circular Scissors-Rock-Paper interdependence of social systems, with some systems dominating others in particular situations, but no system being dominant overall.

## VI

### **The inevitability of modernization**

The 'inevitability' of modernization is based upon the idea that competition will tend strongly to select the most efficient societies, and these will also be the most adaptively complex societies. The selection pressure will therefore be for societies to become ever more adaptively complex, therefore more functionally specialized and differentiated. Strictly speaking, modernization is not so much inevitable as very highly probable, at least so long as there is competition between societies. It is not that the outcome of such encounters is pre-determined, more that the odds are stacked heavily on one side.

Because of this, the history of life on earth can be seen as one of cumulative and progressive increase in the adaptive complexity of social units, which shows itself as increases in the size and the functional differentiation of organisms. As Robert Wright has shown, this trend has been interrupted locally in the short term,

but has continued globally over the longer term. Greater size, co-operation and complexity do not inevitably generate increased greater efficiency because they also generate problems that need to be solved efficiently; problems such as coordinating large mobile animals (requiring the evolution of a brain and nervous system) or preventing excessive selfishness in social animals (e.g. by means of extended familial networks in social insects). Greater complexity creates greater need for internal communications. But when these problems can be overcome, then complexity seems to be the main pathway to greater competitive advantage.

The same trend towards increasing adaptive complexity can be seen in human society. For example, simple hunter-gatherer societies were once universal among humans, but were almost completely displaced by more complex agrarian societies (i.e. 'traditional' societies) whose greater economic efficiency (supported by a more complex division of labour and technology) enabled them to extract more resources per unit of environment and support a denser population. The only remaining hunter-gatherer societies inhabited agriculturally marginal or geographically remote areas. Although traditional societies were often static, or grew in complexity only very slowly over centuries, there was a slow and intermittent trend towards greater complexity throughout history – resulting in larger 'empires', incrementally improved technologies, the beginnings of formal education etc. But when 'modern' societies began to emerge, then modernization began to spread rapidly around the world by conquest, colonization, trade and emulation.

The world is now dominated by modernizing societies, and modernizing societies must continue to grow in adaptive complexity at least as fast as other competitor societies in order to survive. The rapid growth of modernizing societies has the consequence that the world is a smaller place with each passing year, while technological improvements mean that ever more of the world is suitable for modernization. There is now nowhere left for traditional societies to hide unmolested, and the con-

quest of modernization looks set to replace and even surpass the conquest of agriculture on a global scale.

In the sense that the replacement of hunter-gatherer societies by 'traditional' agricultural societies was 'inevitable', so the replacement of traditional societies by modernizing ones is inevitable. Even if anti-modernization parties are in power, their success in reversing modernization will not be permanent so long as other societies are modernizing. To the extent that it succeeds, anti-modernization damages the competitive strength of societies. Traditional society is at the mercy of modernizing societies, in terms of military, economic, political, technological and cognitive strength. Sooner or later, by revolution, war, bribery, persuasion or voluntary emulation, traditional societies will modernize themselves or else be taken over and modernized by someone else.

## VII

### **Politicians and modernization**

Modernization is a product of selection processes (see Appendix: Selection and functionality). This means that not all political initiatives that are self-described as a 'modernization' can be considered as genuine modernizations. Many such 'modernizing' reforms actually diminish the selection processes that tend to generate complex functionality. This mismatch between rhetoric and reality<sup>3</sup> arises from a terminological ambiguity by which modernization means different things in different contexts.

In this book we follow Luhmann in arguing that true modernization is the increase in functional specialization of societies, and that the functionality of a social system is defined by its having prevailed over other social system variants during a history of competition. In other words, functionality is relative; and the most functional systems are those that have displaced other sys-

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[3] Labels like 'conservative' and 'progressive' can be highly misleading from the Systems Theory perspective.

tem variants in a competitive situation. Selection processes are therefore intrinsic to modernization.

But another use of 'modernization' is as a synonym for 'rationalization'. Rationalization usually entails the reform of a social system by central government, along the lines of making it more of a 'rational bureaucracy' involving standardization of explicit procedures in a hierarchical command system. The confusion arises from the fact that (as Weber famously noted) the emergence of rational bureaucracies characterized many modern states, such as nineteenth-century Germany. Later, this ideal of rational bureaucracy as being the most 'efficient' mode of organization was to dominate the social system of the USSR and its satellites.

Rational bureaucracies may indeed be an instrument of modernization in the Luhmann sense, especially when (as in nineteenth-century Germany) 'meritocratic' formal bureaucracy replaced hereditary, arbitrary personal rule by an aristocracy. However, rational bureaucracy is not necessarily associated with modernization (as became obvious in the later decades of the Soviet Union), since politically-dominated bureaucracies that emerge without sufficient competition may tend to become less functionally efficient, in terms of producing less output per unit input. Rational bureaucracy is therefore merely a means to the end of increasing functional complexity. For example, in the economy a variety of organizational forms have prevailed in economic competition – such forms include rational bureaucracies, but are certainly not restricted to this model of organization. Furthermore, many of the most successful economic systems have been highly autonomous from control by central government.

The point is that modernization in the Luhmann sense is not synonymous with the imposition of rational bureaucracies. Rationalizing political modernization may indeed be anti-modernizing – especially when central government introduces reforms that lead to long-term political domination of other social systems. This constitutes a de-differentiation of society, a

reversion towards less specialized traditional social organization, and therefore tends to reduce efficiency in social systems. For example, if self-styled 'modernization' of the educational system tended to increase direct political control of education, then this mixing of political and educational functions would constitute a reduction in the functional specialization of the education system; and would lead to lower efficiency of the system in pursuing educational objectives.

Of course, true modernization might, in principle, legitimately involve a temporary phase of increased political control which led onto a more functionally-differentiated social system. For example, central government might impose re-structuring of a social system in order to encourage growth and competition (of the right sort); after which the government would withdraw its domination to allow the social system to increase in functional complexity in a selective environment that rewarded efficiency. In other words, short-term subordination of a social system might lead to greater autonomy of that system in the longer term. Examples might include economic 'de-regulation' by which a government intervenes to impose new rules and procedures on banking services or the stock exchange, but then stands back to allow the 're-structured' system to grow and differentiate in the new context of increased market competition. This is a classic example of effective modernization. But a rationalizing 'modernization' which did not introduce selection mechanisms would probably be counter-productive.

This leads on to a consideration of the extent to which the political system can 'sabotage' modernization by increasing the power of the political system (or individuals within this system) at the cost of reduced efficiency in other social systems. Clearly, it makes a difference whether politicians and political parties make the right decisions with respect to modernization. An effective modernizing government will increase the speed of modernization and/or diminish its disadvantages. An incompetent or anti-modernizing government can slow, stop or reverse modernization, at least temporarily. But given that we

live in a modernizing world, no individual or government can roll-back modernization in the long term. Modernization does not depend upon individual will.

Indeed, if modernization had depended upon the insight and motivation of politicians or parties it never would have happened in the first place. And certainly it would not have progressed so widely and with such rapidity over recent decades. It is the diversity of societies, and the competition between societies, which drives the process, and which enforces modernization in the long term. Governments that do the 'wrong thing', whether deliberately or accidentally, find their countries increasingly dominated by those countries which are making a better job of it. And this domination embraces all the social systems in which communications are international — such as economics, the armed forces, science, technology and the mass media. Since modernization is multi-system, dominance in one system tends to be associated with dominance in other systems. For example, the differential between the USA and Europe, hence the domination of the European social system by the US system, is probably growing in all the systems mentioned.

## VIII

### **The desirability of modernization**

While there are strong objective arguments for the inevitability (i.e. very high probability) of continued modernization, the case for the desirability of modernization has to be made. Naturally, arguments for the desirability of a social system are seldom clear cut, since they depend on individual judgements which are a matter of perspective as well as knowledge. The process of modernization inevitably creates losers as well as winners. Furthermore long-term gains may entail short-term costs. Nonetheless, if the contrast is drawn between traditional societies and modern societies then there would appear to be a very general consensus that life is better in modernizing societies — better for most people, most of the time.

Peasants make up the vast majority of the population in traditional societies, which are based on agriculture, and (as Gellner has shown) in traditional societies the peasants are half-starving all of the time and actually-starving for considerable periods. Subsistence agriculture leaves very little margin for bad (famine) years and much food is expropriated by the ruling class. Peasants are physically stunted and have their lives made short by malnutrition and the diseases of poor hygiene and overcrowding. It is difficult to lead a happy or fulfilled life when hungry and sick, and living among families and communities who are themselves diseased and dying. The mass of people in modernizing societies have much better basic provisions than peasants, live longer, are larger in stature, suffer less hunger and pain, suffer fewer deaths among family and friends, and have many other technological advantages. It seems reasonable to assume that the mass of people in modernizing societies are also 'happier' than peasants — as most anthropologists would confirm.

On the other hand, existence for the warriors and priests in traditional societies may be very good. While life is shorter and less healthy than in a modernizing society, the traditional ruling class have extremely high status and relatively high resources, and the social stability means that they have the ability to transmit these advantages to their children (this is entailed by an hierarchical class structure). The distinctively privileged position of the upper classes is reflected in the fact that the ruling groups (especially local landed aristocrats and the priesthood) are generally opposed to modernization, and the drive to modernization usually comes from the 'expert' middle classes such as merchants, industrialists, professionals, craftsmen and technicians supported by central governments keen on enhancing national power and prestige.

The comparison is complicated by the fact that modernizing societies are continually changing — and some of the changes have made things worse for most people for considerable periods of time. For instance, during the nineteenth century, Britain

was modernizing fast and for several decades this generated appalling conditions for the majority of workers, leading to the rise of socialism and especially Marxism. Marxism turned out to be the most influential of anti-modernization ideologies. Marxism is *anti*-modernization since (whatever the short-term effects of forced-industrialization etc.) it entails long-term domination of social systems by the political system, which imposes a limitation on differentiation and functional specialization.

By contrast, certain phases of 'modernization' have been regarded as 'golden ages' — for instance (according to taste) Classical Athens, the Renaissance Italian city states, Elizabethan England, the 18<sup>th</sup> century Scottish Enlightenment, and pre-civil war New England were attractive eras — on a cusp between hierarchical, rigid and authoritarian traditional societies and more modular, chaotic and vocationally-fragmented modernization. But these were all transitional stages, and society could not have been frozen or stabilized to preserve them. Modernization has its ups and downs, its economic and other social system cycles, its better and worse times — but in the long-term a modernizing society must keep growing in complexity.

The overall superiority of life in modernizing societies compared with traditional ones can be seen by the massive migration of able-bodied peasant populations away from the land and into the cities whenever this is possible and allowed (and despite what are often appalling conditions in the cities). Between societies, there is a migration towards the most modernized societies (except where traditional societies forbid their population to leave, or modernizing societies prevent them from entering). Modernizing societies are not only more prosperous, but usually more peaceful and less coercive than traditional societies dominated by soldiers and priests.

This phenomenon of peasants voting with their feet is not purely a matter of seeking the prospect of riches, since it contrasts with the relative reluctance of hunter-gatherers to abandon their way of life. In a nutshell, hunter-gatherers require coercion or persuasion to join the modern world, while peasants

typically require coercion to keep them as peasants. It is probable that hunting and gathering is more humanly satisfying than modern life, but since it is not a viable way of supporting the world's population, the superiority of modern societies over traditional societies seems to be decisive.

Given that the realistic choice lies between traditional and modernizing societies, modernization seems clearly the more desirable option.

## IX

### **The ethos of modernization**

Because modernization is inevitable and (on the whole) desirable, it would make sense that modernizing societies ought to have an explicit ethos of modernization — that modernization is morally the best available option. This does not mean that modernization is without significant disadvantages, but the disadvantages are less than those of traditional societies, and there are grounds for optimism that the problems can (mostly) be ameliorated by the modernization process itself. Modernizing societies are not only superior to traditional ones, but also more hopeful — because of their potential for self-correction and creative problem-solving.

A modernizing ethos would state (among other things) that growth is desirable, increased technical capability is desirable, increased cognitive capacity of social systems is desirable, specialization and complexity are desirable, competition and selection of systems is desirable, and democracy is desirable. For the individual this implies that more education is a good thing, social and geographic mobility are praiseworthy, and a flexible attitude towards life and work is beneficial. The modernizing ethos would be optimistic, would look forward to things improving, and would plan on that basis. In other words, the process of modernization is supported by what used to be called a 'belief in progress', a belief that things are getting better.

All this may sound naive and Pollyanna-ish, or even dangerously complacent, but it may more properly be regarded as

self-consistent, realistic and adaptive both for individuals and for social systems. After all, whatever their expressed views, most people in modernizing societies implicitly operate on an optimistic basis. Most people plan their lives on the basis that the economy will grow, that scientific understanding and technological capability will increase, and that long-term investments (in children, in education, in pensions etc) are worth making. No matter how much they disagree with the government, most people acknowledge through their actions the legitimacy of democratic elections. Indeed, those that live by a pessimistic ethos are regarded as eccentric or dangerous (e.g. people who do not have children because of social despair, people who keep their money hidden in a sock, or fundamentalists who inhabit bomb shelters stocked with food, water and guns).

A modernizing society is optimistic about the unknown. The idea is that although we don't already know how to solve the unknown problems that we will encounter in the future, we have 'faith' that (so long as we ensure that modernization continues) by the time the future arrives, we *will* know. The proviso that the necessary steps must be taken to ensure that modernization will continue, makes this an ethos of action and not one of complacency. Such optimism may be helped by a more accurate philosophical or scientific understanding of society, but also requires a mixture of such things as the historical experience of long-term progress, a commitment to inspiring stories about human triumphs over the unknown, and the personal experience of growth (e.g. continuing educational achievements, increasing wealth throughout life, the perception of improving medical capabilities etc.).

Another factor is the future-orientation of public discourse – especially in the mass media. In order to maintain attention over time, the media generates a state of continual anticipation in which satisfaction is always somewhat deferred and never wholly achieved. The media future is always painted as if it *ought* to be brighter than the past, as if this is what people have a right to expect – and if the future is not in every respect turn-

ing-out to be better, then somebody must be to blame. This kind of mind-set is often criticized as being insatiably acquisitive and restless, as ungrateful, and for its voracious seeking of satisfaction in concrete future attainments rather than present inner peace. But this perpetual renewal of motivation and striving is what modernization requires of most people most of the time — especially in their functional roles in the social systems.

The necessity for optimism explains why 'official' culture is almost always grounded in optimism in modernizing societies (e.g. the pronouncements by government, or by the leaders of any other modernizing social system). Long-term, overall optimism is necessary for people to tolerate the inevitable short-term and localized problems created by even the most beneficial change. By contrast, the counter-culture, and other advocates of traditional forms of social organization and status, are usually pessimistic — predicting continued decline and ultimate catastrophe unless society can be stabilized and simplified. Short-term and localized problems are presented as absolute, intolerable and unjustifiable.

If modernization is inevitable, then even if a society does not embrace an ethos of modernization it will still modernize in the end. But resisted modernization is likely to be traumatic if self-imposed following revolution; or experienced as an alien imposition if dictated by another culture following political or socio-economic conquest. Change that is embraced and self-directed in an optimistic spirit seems the least unpleasant option. We believe that a more general understanding of modernization makes more likely this preferred mode of voluntary self-modernization.