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Modernization Theory, Internal War, and the Legitimization of U.S. Capitalism

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Abstract

This article examines key contributions from the 1961 Princeton Symposium on Internal War within the broader debate on modernization theory as an ideological tool legitimizing U.S. capitalism during the 1960s. Through close readings of works by Parsons, Lipset, Pye, and Rostow, the study elucidates how American social sciences framed development as a linear trajectory culminating in the U.S. model. These discourses contributed to the normalization of American socio-economic structures as universal norms. By underscoring the epistemic underpinnings of modernization theory, the article unveils its function in promoting the global ideological affirmation of U.S.-style capitalism.

Keywords: Modernization Theory; Internal War; U.S. Capitalism; Democracy; Cold War; Development.

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1 Introduction: Modernization Theory, Internal War, and U.S. Capitalism

In recent decades, historiography has renewed its interest in modernization theory, particularly in relation to U.S. foreign policy during the 1960s. A substantial corpus of studies has investigated the ways in which this theory, initially conceived as an analytical key to understanding processes of social evolution, was gradually transformed into a comprehensive ideology in service of U.S. strategy. The analyses produced by universities, think tanks, and research centers were not impartial. Conversely, they proactively contributed to the formation of a global perspective in which the American model was regarded as a universal benchmark for "developing" countries.[1]

The prevailing academic literature on the subject has effectively demonstrated how modernization theory has functioned as a legitimizing device for U.S. intervention in postcolonial contexts, frequently obscuring geopolitical interests behind neutral categories such as development or progress.

What has received comparatively less attention, however, is the intersection between modernization theory and the language of security—particularly the ways in which internal violence, insurgency, and political instability were reframed as developmental problems. This nexus between modernization and security is crucial because it reveals how the containment of disorder was theorized not simply as a strategic necessity but as an intrinsic component of modernity itself.

From this perspective, the 1961 Princeton Symposium on Internal War offers a unique opportunity to examine how modernization theory intersected with the discourse of security. The Symposium provides a rare instance where the social sciences explicitly addressed the management of internal conflict as a condition for development. Furthermore, the discourse on "internal war" provides an entry point for understanding how American social science in the 1960s contributed to legitimizing a specific vision of capitalism, i.e., one that equated economic modernization with social stability and political order with moral progress.

The objective of this essay is to make an original contribution through the use of documents that are often overlooked in current literature, shedding light on how the language of modernization revealed deeper contradictions within the ideological representation of American capitalism as both a moral and developmental order. The Symposium, organized under the auspices of the Center for International Studies and funded by the Carnegie Corporation, convened a group of prominent American social scientists of the time, including Talcott Parsons, Seymour M. Lipset, and Lucian Pye. Three years later, the results of this meeting were published in a volume edited by Harry Eckstein,[2] a political science professor at Princeton who was later a participant in the United States Army's controversial Project Camelot.[3]

By focusing on this underexplored corpus, the article not only reconstructs a neglected episode in the history of American social science but also demonstrates how modernization translated, to a significant extent, the language of capitalism into that of stability and control.

Against this background, the Princeton Symposium provides a distinctive framework for comprehending two fundamental concepts. Firstly, it offers insight into how the concept of "social order" was understood in relation to internal conflicts in developing countries. Secondly, it clarifies the role of the "modernity" model in shaping this order. The hypothesis of this study is that, in addition to the thematic specialization of the Symposium—which focuses on civil wars and revolutions—a shared vision of a stylized American capitalism emerges. This vision is characterized by the perception of capitalism as a social structure that is superior to others, capable of guaranteeing, at the same time, political stability, democratic pluralism, and development.

1. See Michael E. Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and "Nation Building" in the Kennedy Era* (University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); Daniel Ekbladh, *The Great American Mission: Modernization and the Construction of an American World Order* (Princeton University Press, 2010); Nicholas B. Dirks and Nils Gilman, "American Knowledge of the World," in *The Cambridge History of America and the World, Volume IV: 1945 to the Present*, ed. David C. Engerman, Max Paul Friedman, and Melani McAlister (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 102–4.

2. Harry Eckstein, ed., *Internal War. Problems and Approaches* (Free Press of Glencoe, 1964).

3. See Ellen Herman, *The Romance of American Psychology. Political Culture in the Age of Experts* (University of California press, 1995).

The Princeton Symposium was not the sole occasion on which modernization theorists tackled the topic of "internal war." In March of 1962, the Special Operations Research Office of American University convened a symposium in Washington entitled "The U.S. Army's Limited-War Mission and Social Science Research." The event centered on the subjects of insurgency and counterinsurgency. Although the majority of the participants were affiliated with the armed forces, noteworthy intellectual contributions were made. Alongside Eckstein and Pye, who had already distinguished themselves at Princeton, we find members of the prominent MIT Center for International Studies (CENIS), including Daniel Lerner and Ithiel de Sola Pool.[4]

As demonstrated by historical research, the CENIS was the driving force behind modernizing theories, particularly through the liaison work with policymakers in Washington by Max Millikan and, above all, Walt W. Rostow. Rostow himself was not immune to the discourse surrounding the "internal war" and authored a speech delivered to students at the "Counter Guerrilla Course" at Fort Bragg military base in 1961. The text was eventually published in 1962 under the title "Countering Guerrilla Attack," within the volume *Modern Guerrilla Warfare*.[5]

Given Rostow's pivotal role in formulating and propagating modernization theory, his contribution is essential for a comprehensive understanding of the discourse that emerged from the Princeton symposium. Indeed, the sociological and political contributions can be complemented by the economic one, and the interpretive lens of the "internal war" can be used more comprehensively to capture the topical aspects of the U.S. modernization proposal in relation to the legitimization of American capitalism as a universal model.

In this respect, the present analysis positions itself in a critical dialogue with the New History of American Capitalism. While that historiographical current has sought to denaturalize capitalism by uncovering its material foundations, the present essay turns instead to the intellectual tradition that had naturalized it—the liberal modernization paradigm—to reveal the contradictions already inscribed within that mid-century vision of order and progress. The New History of Capitalism has often portrayed American capitalism as "a history of its order of power—proprietary, mercantile and monetary, economic and financial, legal and institutional,"[6] thereby shifting attention away from the social and intellectual conflicts that once animated its historical understanding. By revisiting modernization theory from within its own liberal premises, this study seeks to expose those internal tensions between security, legitimacy, and freedom that the postwar social sciences had temporarily resolved through the idealization of American capitalism as a universal norm.[7]

The authors involved in the Symposium, together with Rostow's contribution, each from their own disciplinary perspective, offer a coherent picture of modernization: a process of transition from the traditional, backward world to modernity—one that coincides with the historical experience of the United States in the post–World War II era. As posited by Edward Shils, "Modern means becoming Western […]. It is the model of the West somewhat detached from its geographical origins and place."[8]

The modernization theory was not merely descriptive. It also prescribed a linear sequence for the changes taking place in the underdeveloped world. Consequently, it not only interpreted but also justified the primacy of the United States on the scale of development. This phenomenon can be understood as a cultural and scientific legitimization of a stylized version of American capitalism, portraying it as the optimal framework for stability, efficiency, and legitimacy.

A retrospective reading of the Symposium and Rostow's essay reveals how modernization theory functioned as an epistemic framework for exporting and justifying the U.S. capitalist model—as an

4. See William A. Lybran, ed., *Symposium Proceedings: The U.S. Army's Limited-War Mission and Social Science Research*, 26-28 March 1962 (Special Operations Research Office, 1962).

5. Franklin M. Osanka, ed., *Modern Guerrilla Warfare: Fighting Communist Guerrilla Movements, 1941–1961* (Free Press, 1962).

6. Matteo Battistini, "Un progetto in movimento: Il capitale in azione nella nuova storia (politica) del capitalismo americano," *Ricerche di storia politica* 25, no. 3 (December 2022): 282.

7. On NHAC see Sven Beckert and Christine Desan, eds., *American Capitalism: New Histories* (Columbia University Press, 2018); Jonathan Levy, *Ages of American Capitalism: A History of the United States* (Random House, 2021); Howard Brick, *Transcending Capitalism: Visions of a New Society in Modern American Thought* (Cornell University Press, 2006); Matteo Battistini, *Middle Class: An Intellectual History Through Social Sciences* (Meltemi, 2022).

8. Edward A. Shils, "Political Development of the New States," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 2, no. 3 (1960): 265.

ideology that sought to prevent internal conflict through the promise of development, yet ultimately legitimized coercion when that promise failed.

2 Talcott Parsons: Functionalism, Rationality, and the Legitimation of Force

Talcott Parsons, a pivotal figure in twentieth-century American sociology, was among the main protagonists of the 1961 Symposium on Internal War.[9] In his essay, "The Place of Force in the Social Process," Parsons addressed a central theoretical issue for understanding internal wars: the role of force in modern societies.

Parsons's reflections were fundamentally rooted in his own theory of social action, as elucidated in *The Structure of Social Action* (1937), a seminal work in which he advanced the so-called "structural functionalist" approach to the study of human societies. According to this perspective, "all societies, simple and complex, performed certain fundamental functions, without which none of them, large or small, would have been able to survive."[10] Parsons's theory posited that the social system ought to be regarded as a living entity, characterized by its organic relationship between its various functions and its impulse to perpetuate itself through the activity of its structures. This dynamic system was characterized by its perpetual motion, necessitating the identification of factors that could ensure order and avert potential conflicts. In this theoretical framework, the utilization of force did not represent an aberration; rather, it was a regulated mechanism that could, within prescribed limits, contribute to the maintenance of order. Yet this conception also reveals a deeper tension within Parsons's functionalism. By framing force as a regulated and legitimate instrument of order, Parsons effectively turned coercion into an institutionalized and even necessary component of social stability. In this sense, his functionalism anticipated one of the central paradoxes of modernization theory: the idea that the pacifying promise of modernization—and, by extension, of American capitalism—rested on the possibility of rationalized coercion.

Parsons employed an analytical distinction between force and power. Power, in its fundamental nature, could be defined as a generalized resource of social control, exercised through institutions, symbols, and norms. Conversely, force represented a distinct modality of exercising power, predicated on physical compulsion or the imminent threat of its utilization. Therefore, force was not the antithesis of power; rather, it was a potential expression of power that was only valid when situated within a recognized normative framework. According to Parsons, "power we conceive to be a generalized medium for controlling action [...] of which control of force is only one, although a strategic one in certain contexts."[11]

The issue with unstable or "traditional" societies was that they lacked sufficiently evolved normative systems, hindering their ability to integrate force in a legitimate manner. The application of violence, whether perpetrated by the state or by revolutionary forces, was consequently regarded as arbitrary and destabilizing. Conversely, in contemporary societies characterized by functional differentiation, such as the American case, the application of force is predominantly directed through designated institutions that adhere to objective, legal, and foreseeable standards. This rationalization was regarded by Parsons as one of the most significant achievements of modernity. He argued that "the use of power is not to be equated with punishment [...] The use of power is the control of alter's action through the invoking of binding obligations."[12]

9. On Talcott Parsons's thought, see Jeffrey C. Alexander, *Theoretical Logic in Sociology*, vol. 4: *The Modern Reconstruction of Classical Thought: Talcott Parsons* (University of California Press, 1983); Uta Gerhardt, *Concepts of Modernity: Theories of Modernization in the Work of Talcott Parsons* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Bryan S. Turner and Roland Robertson, eds., *Talcott Parsons: Theorist of Modernity* (Sage Publications, 1991).

10. Giovanni Borgognone, *Tecnocrati del progresso: Il pensiero americano del Novecento tra capitalismo, liberalismo e democrazia* (UTET, 2015), 271. Translation mine.

11. Talcott Parsons, "The Place of Force in the Social Process," in *Internal War: Problems and Approaches*, ed. Harry Eckstein (Free Press, 1964), 41.

12. Ibid., 52.

These theses were accompanied, in *Economy and Society* (1956), by a confidence in the American economic system, which represented the most advanced level of a general trend toward development and functional differentiation.[13] In fact, according to Parsons, the advent of money and the free market in the history of social evolution represented a prerequisite for the progressive rationalization of state structures, particularly in the strengthening of the bureaucracy.

The necessity for bureaucratic organization, which was partly a consequence of the mobility of resources accessible through the market, was a direct result of the need to control these resources. The process of institutionalization, both of money and of the market, also entailed the establishment of fundamental contractual norms, thereby conferring legal subjectivity on the individual. In the absence of these norms, the individual was "severely embroiled in widespread relations of dependence that usually correspond to a 'lack of freedom'."[14] This theoretical framework led Parsons to theorize that a social system grounded in the free market of goods and services exhibited a fundamental capacity for functional adaptation.

In Parsons's perspective, the feasibility of incorporating force as a form of coercion without devolving into despotism relied on the presence of an evolved social structure adept at preserving the equilibrium between normative integration and functional differentiation. American capitalism, with its competitive yet regulated, pluralistic yet integrated nature, offered a conducive environment for achieving this balance.

In essence, capitalism functioned not only as an effective resource allocation mechanism, but also as a social structure capable of preventing disintegration through the co-option of tensions. The phenomenon of economic inequalities was counterbalanced by social mobility. Competition was governed by institutional regulations. Conflict was mitigated through the use of normative mediation. According to Parsons, "the essential point is that money is the most general medium for the control of fluid resources [...] Power then is the mechanism for their mobilization in the interest of effective collective action, which is what we mean by the process or organization of power."[15] What emerges from this reasoning is not a depiction of actually existing capitalism, but rather a stylized and normative construction of the American system, in which economic efficiency and political stability appear harmoniously aligned. This conceptual translation of the U.S. economic experience, in particular that of the 1950s, into a universal model of order and legitimacy would become one of the cornerstones of modernization theory, where the capitalist order was presented as the natural framework of modernity.

From this standpoint, internal wars can be attributed to incomplete modernization and institutions' inability to effectively manage conflict. Consequently, the solution had to be evolutionary, not revolutionary. The American model was not a specific case but rather a universal reference. Successful societies were those that exhibited characteristics analogous to those of the United States. According to this perspective, American capitalism was not merely a choice, it was an ideal to be emulated by all societies.

These considerations led Parsons to a sociological diagnosis of the structural limits of communist regimes. In "Communism and the West" (1964), he envisioned an evolutionary process in which communist systems would "evolve in the direction of the restoration—or where it has not yet existed, the institution—of political democracy."[16] In retrospect, this perspective further illustrates Parsons's confidence in the American liberal democratic order, conceived as the normative culmination of modernity.

13. Talcott Parsons and Neil J. Smelser, *Economy and Society: A Study in the Integration of Economic and Social Theory* (Free Press, 1956), 255ff.

14. Talcott Parsons, *Sociological Theory and Modern Society* (Free Press, 1967), 509.

15. Talcott Parsons, "The Place of Force," 51.

16. Talcott Parsons, "Communism and the West: The Sociology of the Conflict," in *Social Change: Sources, Patterns, and Consequences*, ed. Amitai Etzioni and Eva Etzioni (Basic Books, 1964), 396–97.

3 Seymour M. Lipset: Economic Development, Democracy, and Political Stability

Among modernization theorists, Lipset was a prominent proponent of the notion that economic development and political stability exhibit a virtuous causal relationship. In this sense, his essay "Democracy and the Social System," presented at the Symposium, provides an elaboration on the interconnection between growth, democratic legitimacy, and the regulation of internal violence. Lipset advanced the argument that American capitalism fostered both democracy and the survival of political pluralism. In Lipset's account, capitalism appeared not merely as an economic system but as a moral and institutional order—a stylized image of postwar American society in which affluence, mobility, and stability were taken as interdependent conditions of democratic equilibrium. He advanced the hypothesis that the instability of non-Western countries stemmed from a lack of these foundational elements. This shift in perspective resulted in the transition of American capitalism from being a mere object of analysis to a pivotal measure for evaluating modernity, thereby contributing to the construction of a stylized global image of U.S. capitalism as both an economic and political ideal.[17]

Lipset's theories concerning the correlation between economic development and democracy were articulated in *Political Man: The Social Basis of Politics* (1960). He contended that defining the boundaries of a democratic system was less important than understanding the conditions that ensured its stability.

Drawing on the philosophical tradition rooted in Aristotle, and also on the definitions of Weber and Schumpeter, Lipset described democracy as "a system that offers normal constitutional means for the replacement of those in power, and a social mechanism that allows the largest possible number of citizens to exert influence over the most important decisions."[18] In the contemporary world, characterized by profound social, political, and economic transformations, it became imperative to fortify this assertion with assumptions that would guarantee its stability.

The author thus introduced two new elements: economic development, a phenomenon characteristic of industrialized societies, and the legitimacy of the system. However, in modern times, the latter has been confronted with complex dynamics. In essence, the Aristotelian conception of democracy had to be expanded according to the characteristics of modern society that was marked by economic mobility, urbanization, and mass culture.

As articulated by Lipset in his 1959 essay, "Some Social Requisites of Democracy," modernity was propelled by four distinct components: a substantial level of education, a sizable middle class, pervasive urban development, and a culture oriented towards efficiency.[19] Cross-referencing the data from these indices revealed that a higher degree of development in all four areas was characteristic of democratic regimes. The hypothesis that the stability of democracy was proportional to the degree of prosperity achieved, the increase in the urban population, and the progressive literacy of citizens was subsequently confirmed. Indeed, economic growth resulted in an increase in income, owing to the fact that it "allowed those in the lower strata to develop longer time perspectives and more complex and gradualist views of politics."[20]

In his essay "Democracy and the Social System," presented at the Princeton symposium, Lipset sought to highlight a distinctive feature of American society: its emphasis on success, egalitarianism, and universalism. This was a value-based aspect, not directly connected to economic dynamics but to social ones. This combination "appears to be highly functional for a stable democracy [...] since all individuals and groups are expected to strive to enhance their position."[21] In the context of internal

17. See Seymour M. Lipset, *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics* (Doubleday, 1960); idem, *The First New Nation: The United States in Historical and Comparative Perspective* (Basic Books, 1963). See also Dick Houtman, "Lipset and 'Working-Class' Authoritarianism," *The American Sociologist* 34, no. 1–2 (2003): 85–103; Matteo Battistini, "Middle-Class Revolution: La classe media americana come categoria ideologica della teoria della modernizzazione," *Ricerche di Storia Politica*, no. 1 (2021): 7–16.

18. Lipset, *Political Man*, 43.

19. Lipset, *Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy*, *American Political Science Review* 53, no. 1 (1959): 69–105.

20. Lipset, *Political Man*, 61.

21. Seymour M. Lipset, "Democracy and the Social System", in *Internal War*, 271–272.

wars, Lipset observed how developing societies were more vulnerable to the radicalization of political conflict, precisely because of the absence of material and cultural foundations capable of mediating tensions.

Within this framework, Lipset proposed a representation of capitalism as a mechanism for neutralizing social tensions. This functional reading of capitalism mirrored the broader modernization discourse: social mobility replaced class conflict, and political consensus substituted for revolutionary transformation—an ideological reconfiguration that projected the American experience as the universal logic of modernity. In Lipset's framework, democracy and capitalism converged in a single moral narrative of development, where stability depended on the controlled distribution of opportunity rather than on structural equality.

In contrast to the Marxist perspective, which viewed capitalism as the origin of social disparity and contention, Lipset's approach presented a contrasting viewpoint. He contended that the market economy and its regulatory framework functioned as a conduit, effectively transforming social discord into non-destructive forms. According to Lipset, "the normative system allows or encourages the upper classes to accept improvements in the status and power of the lower strata without feeling morally offended. [...] Lower-class individuals [...] need not to be revolutionary."[22]

In accordance with Lipset's theory, internal wars emerged as a consequence of the obstruction of legitimate channels of expression and social mobility. In the absence of competitive elections, a robust educational system, and a dynamic labor market, protests evolved into insurrections. Lipset's theoretical framework featured a universalistic approach, postulating that the principles that applied to the United States were applicable to all societies. The process of economic development was found to be instrumental in the establishment of stable institutions, which in turn served to guarantee legitimacy.

However, Lipset's narrative did not exclusively focus on contemporary developments in American history; it also encompassed the country's origins as a nation. In his 1963 book *The First New Nation*, he drew parallels between the challenges confronting nascent postcolonial nations and the analogous difficulties experienced by the United States in the aftermath of independence. Analogous to the new states that emerged in the 20th century, the primary challenges pertained to the establishment of a national identity, the construction of an effective government, and the legitimization of the political system. The American nation-building process was achieved "under the aegis, at first, of an authoritative charismatic figure, and later under the leadership of a dominant 'left-wing' or revolutionary party, led successively by three founding fathers."[23]

In essence, Lipset's model of convergence appeared to bring together the two extremes of American history: the wealthy, capitalist America of the 1950s and the period of independence, when revolutionary ideals, autonomy from foreign ideologies, and a certain degree of isolation had made it possible to build a new, prosperous, and democratic society. Read in the broader context of modernization theory, this synthesis served as an implicit template for the export of the American model: a vision in which economic growth, democratic pluralism, and social discipline were presented as universally replicable. In this sense, Lipset's sociology transformed the experience of postwar American capitalism into a normative horizon for global political development.

4 Lucian W. Pye: Nation-Building, Political Culture, and Postcolonial Fragility

In the Symposium on Internal War, Lucian Pye's paper "Rebellions and Political Development" is noteworthy for its effort to establish a connection between political unrest in postcolonial nations and the ongoing development of modern states. Although less concerned with economic questions than with the political and cultural dimensions of modernization, Pye's contribution is crucial for understanding the coercive logic embedded in the modernizing project. His work reveals that, when transposed to postcolonial contexts, modernization often required not the expansion of markets but

22. Ibid., 272.

23. Lipset, *The First New Nation*, 90.

the consolidation of authority—sometimes through authoritarian means. Pye's theory is consistent with the modernization perspective, positing that internal conflict is not the result of ideological or class differences, but rather is the consequence of a breakdown in the processes of establishing and legitimizing political authority. This breakdown led to civil wars, insurrections, and guerrilla movements, reflecting a community's inability to form a modern and recognized government.[24]

A fundamental concept in Pye's political science was that of "political development," which centered on dynamics such as nation-state formation, bureaucracy, social participation, power, and modernization. With regard to the first aspect, Pye noted that, historically, every community had established a form of political association. However, it was only with the advent of the modern nation-state that a specific set of requirements came to the fore, primarily the ability to maintain public order.[25]

The establishment of a modern state necessitated the delineation of the contours of a national community and the establishment of institutions capable of interpreting the will of the state. Consequently, the state was obligated to establish a robust bureaucratic apparatus. Pye's perspective, while broadly consistent with Parsons's vision, underscored the pivotal role of bureaucracy and legal order in political development. These elements were not merely peripheral to the West's global influence but rather were among its central tenets. Indeed, Europeans had recognized that "it was essential, in building political communities, to have, first, a legal order and then an administrative order" in their colonial policies.[26] In this sense, Pye's conception of political development can be read as the political counterpart to Parsons's functionalism: both conceived order as the ultimate measure of social evolution. Yet while Parsons located stability in the institutional equilibrium of advanced capitalism, Pye traced it to the capacity of political systems to discipline participation and contain disorder. The legitimacy of authority, therefore, rested less on representation than on control—a formulation that resonated deeply with modernization theory's emphasis on order as the precondition of progress.

Pye's reflections offered a nuanced perspective on the interplay between political and economic development. The author posited that the dynamics of politics and economics had attained distinct levels of sophistication. For instance, certain characteristics of industrialized societies, such as universal suffrage and citizenship, were becoming international standards, even for less developed societies. Moreover, the implementation of market reforms exerted no influence on the democratic development of several nations.[27]

In his essay presented at Princeton, Pye emphasized how in complex, highly industrialized societies such as the United States, "it is almost impossible for political controversies to develop to the point of sustained and organized violence."[28] Pye underscored the notion that the frequency of conflict among diverse groups or between an elite and the masses in an industrial society was sufficiently low to impede the emergence of insurrections and revolutions. The author advanced the hypothesis that the existence of profound social divisions, originating from ethnic, religious, or class disparities, frequently functions as a catalyst for internal war. The absence of a competent authority capable of ensuring political and administrative cohesion within the affected territory was also a contributing factor. Pye concluded that such characteristics "are most likely to arise in essentially agrarian societies or in countries where there are extreme differences between the pattern of life of the industrialized segment of the population and that of the rural elements."[29]

Pye emphasized the particular relevance of the issue of internal wars to postcolonial societies. In these cases, these phenomena expressed a crisis in the legitimacy of political power caused by a lack of solid institutional structures. Moreover, the acceleration of economic development and the impact of external factors contributed to the exacerbation of profound social divisions, particularly

24. See Lucian W. Pye, *Politics, Personality, and Nation Building* (Yale University Press, 1962); Lucian W. Pye, *Aspects of Political Development* (Little, Brown, 1966). See also Bruce J. Dickson, "Lucian W. Pye: Politics, Culture, and Modernization," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 42, no. 4 (2009): 743–46; Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future*, Ch. 4;

25. Pye, *Aspects of Political Development*, 37.

26. Ibid., 38.

27. Ibid., 35–36.

28. Lucian Pye, "The Roots of Insurgency and the Commencement of Rebellions", in *Internal War*, 163.

29. Ibid.

in contexts marked by ethnic and religious tensions. In such contexts, "quasi-states and communities readily begin to arise within the state,"[30] thereby undermining the foundations of weak bureaucratic structures and giving rise to organized forms of insurrection.

Precisely because of these conditions, Pye came to argue that democracy could not precede the establishment of political order. In several of his writings from the 1960s, he maintained that transitional regime—often military or technocratic in character—might provide the necessary discipline for modernization. Political development, in this sense, entailed the rationalization of authority even at the expense of democratic participation—a view that transformed modernization into a process of disciplined adaptation rather than one of emancipation. Far from advocating Western liberalism as a ready-made model, Pye identified controlled modernization as the only viable path for newly independent states to avoid collapse.[31]

While the reference to highly industrialized societies may be interpreted as referring to the United States, Pye's arguments are presented in a non-evaluative manner. Indeed, from Pye's perspective, the issue of American exceptionalism and the risk of ethnocentrism was analyzed and problematized. For instance, the author placed particular emphasis on the necessity of distinguishing between the concepts of development and democracy. The establishment of an intrinsic link between the two categories would have entailed the risk of ethnocentrism, based essentially on the claim to impose the Western model on the rest of the underdeveloped countries. Pye posited that the utilization of democratic development as the key to political development could thus be seen as "an effort to push upon others American, or at least Western, values."[32]

Far from celebrating the American path, Pye thus exposed one of the central paradoxes of modernization theory: the belief that order required control, and democracy discipline. His reflections reveal the political logic underlying modernization discourse—the belief that capitalist modernity, while formally committed to liberty, depended in practice on the containment of conflict and the legitimation of coercive authority.

5 Walt W. Rostow: Economic Modernization and Counterinsurgency as U.S. Strategy

Although absent from the Princeton symposium, Rostow's ideas profoundly shaped the contemporary discourse on internal wars. His essay "Countering Guerrilla Attack," originally written as a lecture for U.S. and allied military personnel attending a counterinsurgency course, and later included in the volume *Modern Guerrilla Warfare*, represents a paradigmatic synthesis of the economist's thinking.

Rostow's contribution focused on the revolutionary phenomena that were characteristic of certain decolonization processes, particularly in Southeast Asia. Guerrilla warfare, understood as a contemporary manifestation of internal war, transcended the domain of mere military conflict, representing instead a pathological response to development. The appropriate reaction could not be confined to armed repression; rather, it necessitated an integrated development strategy that would accompany the nation towards the "final stage" of modernity, which was implicitly identified with Western democratic capitalism. According to Rostow, "these societies will choose their own version of what we would recognize as a democratic, open society."[33]

The fundamental premise of this thesis was the well-known theory of the five stages of economic development, as delineated in *The Stages of Economic Growth* (1960). The model described by Rostow was not merely descriptive but normative, prescribing a teleological path of development that mirrored the American experience. It was theorized that all countries, if provided with adequate guidance, could progress through these stages in succession. Alternative formulas, such as that offered by communist ideology, represented a pathological deviation, particularly in those societies "where

30. Ibid., 164.

31. See Lucian W. Pye, "Armies in the Process of Political Modernization," *European Journal of Sociology* 2, no. 1 (1961): 82–92.

32. Pye, *Aspects of Political Development*, 41.

33. Walt W. Rostow, "Countering Guerrilla Attack", in *Modern Guerrilla Warfare*, 466.

the preconditions period did not yield a substantial and enterprising commercial middle class and an adequate political consensus among the leaders of society."[34]

Delivering his address to the military personnel convened at Fort Bragg, Rostow reiterated the metaphor of pathology—an image that transformed underdevelopment into a condition warranting intervention. He expressed profound admiration for those "among you whose duty it is—along with others—to prevent that disease, if possible, and to eliminate it where it is imposed."[35]

According to Rostow, the communist bloc employed guerrilla tactics to exploit the inherent instability of the underdeveloped world, where "individual men are torn between the commitment to the old and familiar way of life and the attractions of a modern way of life."[36]

This "transitional phase" described by Rostow corresponded to what modernization theorists identified as the unstable threshold between tradition and modernity—precisely the terrain where the ideological battle of the Cold War was to be fought. Concurrently, these individuals expressed a desire for a more ideal world. The author posited that the communists had demonstrated a particular aptitude for associating "the resentments built up in many of these areas against colonial rule,"[37] advocating for the cause of nationalism, and proposing their own ideological model of development.

Rostow's perspective identified the acceleration of development as the sole means of counteracting insurgency, fusing economic modernization with a doctrine of preventive intervention. He reasoned that the guerrillas were aware that "as momentum takes hold in an underdeveloped area—and the fundamental social problems inherited from traditional society are solved—their chances of seizing power decline."[38] He advanced the argument that the promotion of modernization in emerging nations was not merely a contingent strategy, but rather, it was consistent with the American national interest.

Consequently, modernization was not merely an option among competing alternatives, it was a historical imperative. Countries that did not develop along these lines risked falling into a state of permanent conflict, such as civil wars or insurrections. In this sense, Rostow's thinking combined economic teleology and geopolitical strategy: guiding a country toward development meant, at the same time, preventing revolution and legitimizing American intervention.

In Rostow's analysis, economic development was heavily influenced by value judgments, placing the American nation at the forefront. The process of modernization was driven by a variety of external factors, including advancements in technology, changes in production models, and financial support from external sources. The correlation between economic development and democracy was also highlighted, with the assertion that only a society founded on individualism and freedom could effectively stimulate investment and innovation.

The legitimacy of the American socio-economic system coincided with the necessity to disseminate it—a rationale he codified in his 1960 *Non-Communist Manifesto*— thereby invigorating the missionary spirit that had characterized American society in its nascent decades. In *The United States in the World Arena* (1960), Rostow made a compelling argument for a return to the origins and a search for the moral foundations for the difficult tasks confronting American politics. These were found in the religious concepts that originated in England and in the French Enlightenment. These concepts produced an original version of Western culture on the "rich soil of the American continent."[39] This culture was based on optimism, confidence in material progress, universal equality, and individual responsibility in pursuing individual and collective good.

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34. Walt W. Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (Cambridge University Press, 1960), 164. See also idem, *The United States in the World Arena: An Essay in Recent History* (Harper and Row, 1960). On Rostow's thought see: Kimber Pearce, *Rostow, Kennedy, and the Rhetoric of Foreign Aid* (Michigan State University Press, 2001); Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future*, Ch. 5; Latham, *Modernization as Ideology*, Ch. 2; David Milne, *America's Rasputin: Walt Rostow and the Vietnam War* (Hill and Wang, 2009).

35. Rostow, "Countering Guerrilla Attack", 471.

36. Ibid., 465.

37. Ibid., 466.

38. Ibid., 465.

39. Rostow, *The United States in the World Arena*, 483.

The objective of this initiative was to reaffirm the characteristics of American individualism and democracy, transforming them into a global mission. Years later, Rostow himself came to describe this mission as a "crusade"—one that justified intervention not merely as defense but as the moral extension of capitalist modernity. Yet even as he cautioned that "the American ideological crusade had to be tolerant, long-term, and directed where the margins of influence could be most significant," his language revealed the persistent conflation of economic development with moral obligation.[40]

6 Convergence and Critique: Parsons, Lipset, Pye, and Rostow in Perspective

An examination of these essays reveals a shared normative idealization of American society as a model of order and progress. This perspective synthesized concepts that converged from diverse disciplines, including sociology, political science, and economics. In this regard, it was influenced by the methodological innovations introduced by the Department of Social Relations at Harvard, founded by Parsons in 1946.

From the Department's perspective, the study of society was not confined to the narrow boundaries of sociology, but rather it entailed the establishment of a unified "synoptic framework within which the distinct concerns of other social science disciplines could be placed,"[41] within which the social system—conceived as an integrated totality of functions—emerged as the predominant unit of analysis. The Department's stated objective was to "unify the innovations in economics, sociology, psychology, and anthropology."[42]

In the context of modernization theory, this convergence transitioned to the normative and symbolic level. Political and economic systems were regarded as stable and functional only if they exhibited characteristics analogous to the American model. According to the theory, the progression of societies was characterized by a decrease in the disparities among cultures and institutional frameworks and the American model came to represent the foundational paradigm of modernity.

Modernization did not merely observe the world—it prescribed it, guided by the ideal of normalizing American capitalism. Any society aspiring to modernity was expected to emulate this paradigm. This idealization drew its empirical substance from the post–New Deal order—a form of regulated, Keynesian capitalism that reconciled state intervention with market efficiency and social stability. It was this historically specific configuration, rather than capitalism in the abstract, that modernization theorists universalized as a model of orderly progress. In essence, they "assumed that history was ultimately on their side, and that the world was [...] moving steadily toward a clearly defined end point, most evident in their interpretations of American society itself."[43]

The assertion that modernization theorists had abstracted the historical trajectory of the United States in order to transform it into a universal paradigm had already been accentuated in American discourse at the end of the 1960s. For instance, in his 1969 book *Social Change and History*, sociologist Robert Nisbet advanced the hypothesis that modernization theory had endeavored to present concepts of change as analytical instruments within finite contexts. As Nisbet contended, these concepts emerged as "the products of developmental ways of thinking that were meticulously defined by their principal makers and users as non-finite, non-concrete, and, above all, non-historical."[44] This critique anticipated the growing disillusionment with the teleological optimism of modernization, a sentiment that would find fuller expression in the works of scholars such as Samuel P. Huntington.

Indeed, Huntington observed that the process of modernization, contrary to the expected evolution of political systems toward democracy, had resulted in substantial social instability and, in many cases, the rise of authoritarian regimes. He argued that rapid economic change, when unsupported

40. Walt W. Rostow, *The Diffusion of Power: An Essay in Recent History* (Macmillan, 1972), 608.

41. Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future*, 74.

42. Ibid., 77.

43. Latham, *The Right Kind of Revolution*, 61.

44. Robert A. Nisbet, *Social Change and History: Aspects of the Western Theory of Development* (Oxford University Press, 1969), 262.

by the parallel development of political institutions, produced not modernization but decay.[45] Huntington's analysis of contemporary Bolivia, for instance, offered a striking illustration. Despite being one of the main beneficiaries of U.S. aid through the Alliance for Progress, Bolivia experienced a military coup in 1964—an event that, he suggested, revealed how American assistance, by simultaneously financing social reform and military modernization, had strengthened the same forces that would eventually overthrow the civilian government. As he observed, "those programs may have contributed significantly to social welfare and economic development, but their political effects were destabilizing."[46] In this light, modernization appeared to culminate not in liberal democracy but in the consolidation of military regimes as the only actors seemingly capable of enforcing order and pursuing development. According to Huntington, the United States could no longer assume that its liberal model would naturally prevail. Instead, it would have to adapt to a world in which disorder and coercion were intrinsic to modernization itself.[47] Far from being an endorsement of militarization, this statement captured the deep ambivalence of the late modernization paradigm: recognition that the global spread of capitalism had unleashed forces that could no longer be contained by the very ideals it professed to advance.

These reflections elucidate the limitations of modernization theory—not only in its analytical framework, but also in its ambition to impose a singular historical trajectory. The discourse on internal wars contributed to this construction, projecting the U.S. experience as a universal paradigm. The coeval critiques examined exposed the fragility of this model, calling into question its claims to neutrality. Yet these critiques also revealed its unresolved paradox. From Parsons's functional abstraction to Rostow's strategic intervention, modernization evolved from a sociological model of order into an instrument of policy, one in which the language of stability increasingly merged with that of security. In this sense, the quest to universalize the American capitalist experience ultimately depended on the legitimation of coercion in the name of order, revealing the contradictions of liberal modernity.

45. See Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (Yale University Press, 1968), 42.

46. Huntington, *Political Order*, 344.

47. Samuel P. Huntington, "Guerrilla Warfare in Theory and Policy," in *Modern Guerrilla Warfare*, xxii.