

# Modernization and Dependency Theory

by Sophia Tutorial



## WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover the following sociological theories:

1. Modernization Theory
2. Dependency Theory

## 1. MODERNIZATION THEORY

Modernization theory was developed by Walt Whitman Rostow, or W.W. Rostow, who was named after Walt Whitman, the American poet. Rostow was a very influential political theorist and a foreign policy adviser for Lyndon B. Johnson and the Kennedy administration. He was a staunch defender of capitalism to free market politics, and modernization theory is essentially a defense of capitalism.

In the time of Rostow's writings, in the 1950s, structural thinking was all the rage, with its notion that society was one big, complex, interconnected machine, which could be bound by laws developed in society. Contextually, then, according to Rostow, if you applied these laws to society, society would take off and develop in the way you wanted it to--any nation could become as wealthy as the U.S. if they simply plugged in the plan and lay out the laws. Society would develop and stabilize, and achieve a harmonious equilibrium.



### HINT

This line of thinking goes all the way back to Durkheim and structural functionalism.

Rostow developed a five-stage model for economic development, using an airplane taking off as his metaphor to explain how an economy within a country could take off. Modernization theory is a technological and cultural explanation of development and global inequality, using technology and cultural differences--whether you have a traditional cultural ethos or a more modern, rational cultural ethos--to explain global inequality.

**Rostow's five stages of modernization** are as follows:

**1. Traditional Stage:** Modernization is antagonistic to tradition, therefore the traditional stage is what society wants to get out of, in order to progress through economic development in the fashion of Europe and, later, the United States. In the traditional stage, society is tied to the past, to time-honored ways of doing things, so not a lot of thought is given to alternative ways of organizing society. Tradition is viewed as an impediment to technological advancement because it prevents people from wanting to adopt new ways of doing things. Instead, they simply repeat the traditions, and there's not a lot of change in these societies--they're relatively

stable.

**2. Preconditions for Take-off:** Once a society gets rid of the traditional ethos, it begins to lay the preconditions for take-off, which is the second stage. When society finally begins to shake free of the stifling grip of tradition, people become more focused on economic growth and individualization--individual empowerment through participation in markets. Commodity markets emerge, such that people can now produce goods, and take them to market and sell them, rather than producing everything to consume directly themselves. In turn, they can earn money to engage in more markets, to buy things to consume. Economic activity becomes oriented towards markets.

When this happens, family and community ties begin to lose the strength that they had in traditional society, because people begin to engage with each other as atomized, individual, isolated producers and consumers. They treat each other as market participants, and the market mentality slowly comes to imbue society, representing a shift in ideas.

The preconditions for take-off are essentially a shift in ideas about the economy and the place of the economy within society. It represents a shift about thinking about the self acting in society and a shift in family and social relationships, as well as economic activity.

**3. Take-off:** Once the runway is laid and all the preconditions are set, the airplane of society begins to take off. In this take-off stage, the market mentality and its associated emphasis on the individual becomes widespread and the norm. Traditional society and most of its vestiges have long been erased, and the society becomes more rational and more organized towards efficient economic production. Manufacturing begins to take root, the division of labor spreads, and more goods and services are produced than ever before.

**4. Drive to Technological Maturity:** Once society has taken off, it has the forward drive to technological maturity, and a shift of production to goods for mass consumption. Production shifts from building factories and capital, and generating all the economic base that is needed, to producing more consumer goods. The industrial base further diversifies and becomes more rational in its operation. Society is fully grasping how the tenets of capitalism work. This is the drive to technological maturity. Industrialization further weakens broad social ties, as people are more focused on themselves and less focused on family and community. They're more focused on market transactions and increasing their material wealth, and the market mentality is firmly enthroned.

**5. High Mass Consumption:** Once the market mentality is firmly established, society can reach a stage of higher mass consumption, in which the economy becomes oriented toward the production of consumer goods and services. As consumers have enough disposable income to satisfy basic needs, they can consume other things such as luxuries, and it follows that things that once were considered luxuries are now considered needs in high mass consumption. All of the disposable income generated by the advanced industrial production can be spent on satisfying every whim of consumer fancy, which is the goal of modernization theory. You have now reached modernization, and everybody can do it--if they just apply the laws of modernization, they will take off in the economic society, and everything will improve.}}



#### TERM TO KNOW

### Modernization Theory

An explanation for global stratification that asserts that technological and cultural differences between nations serves as the basis of global stratification.

### Rostow's Stages of Modernization

A theory that holds that affluence can be attained by all nations if they move through the following stages: 1) Traditional Stage; 2) Preconditions for Take-off; 3) Take-Off; 4) Drive to Technological Maturity; 5) High Mass Consumption.

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## 2. DEPENDENCY THEORY

In contrast to modernization theory, **dependency theory** is developed around the same time, roughly 1960. Modernization theory doesn't address the fact that developed countries have systematically exploited less developed countries since colonialism, which helps to explain their superior economic situation--their take-off--instead of any inherent culture or superiority. In these colonial situations, there were no laws of development--the colonial powers had a head start and exploited everybody else and integrated them into a system of economic dependence.

Therefore, Andre Gunder Frank introduced dependency theory, arguing that at the same time that the process of development enriched richer nations, it also impoverished and underdeveloped poorer nations--these two scenarios represent two sides of the same coin.

### IN CONTEXT

Since colonialism, the situation of power and subjugation has existed. Dependency theory is essentially a recognition of a complex and interconnected global economy, such that some nations became rich only at the expense of, and because of, others becoming poor.

European colonialism formed the global economy some 500 years ago as Europeans started to expand and set up colonies. Colonies were set up to exploit the various natural resources that people found in these countries. In an exploitation of the natural resources and the labor within that country, the colonized people were often enslaved, with all of the profits being funneled back to the colonial powers. There are still vestiges of this system today.

Therefore, there is no way that every nation can develop along the modernizationist's lines, dependency theory maintains, because powerful nations have already established the rules of the playing field. They've already set up the inequality, and they're working to keep that as the status quo. Within this system and power structure, provided by colonialism, there is no way that these nations can develop simply by applying the laws of modernization.

Some societies are able to develop along the five stages of modernization theory, and therefore they basically retroactively look back on what they accomplished, and assume that everyone else will be able to follow the same path. However, dependency theory disputes this notion, holding that this is simply not possible, given the situation in some nations, and the inherent power asymmetry operating within the global economic system.



## BRAINSTORM

While both theories have merit, they also have their critics. How do either of them explain the existence of poverty and persistent economic inequality in countries across the world?



## TERM TO KNOW

### Dependency Theory

A theory that explains global inequalities with respect to historical oppression.



## SUMMARY

Today you learned about two theoretical explanations of global inequality, **modernization theory** and **dependency theory**. Modernization theory is a technological and cultural explanation of global inequality, while dependency theory explains global inequalities with respect to historical oppression.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Zach Lamb.



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