

The publication of this book was supported by CAPES
(Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível
Superior), Brazil.

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Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche
Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the
Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

ISBN: 3-86618-088-8

ISBN: 978-3-86618-088-8

Peripherie und Zentrum: ISSN 1614-6360
1. Auflage, 2006

Rainer Hampp Verlag München, Mering
Meringzeller Str. 10 D – 86415 Mering
www.Hampp-Verlag.de

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Introduction – How plural is Modernity?

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Strongly influenced by the theory of modernization, the social sciences acquired their present institutional and intellectual format in the period following the Second World War. Within this context, the parameters and categories used to measure the degree of modernization in all other societies were borrowed from the modernization experiences of the so-called North Atlantic societies (Therborn 2000). Thus, the more the institutions, values and patterns of sociability of these societies approached those that were already established in the societies that had pioneered industrialization, the more modern they were considered to be (Hall 1996, Tucker 1999). This was especially and nowhere clearer than in the version of “modernization theory” applied to Latin America (see Lipset and Solari, 1967).

This theoretical position contained an undoubted normative appeal, to the extent that it indicated a clear direction and horizon for the modernization efforts of the so-called peripheral societies. What was needed was to reform these societies in such a way as to enable them to find the only possible path to development – the “western way” – which would lead them to the material well-being and “cultural rationality” that was attributed to the societies of the North Atlantic.

In the light of its scant empirical plausibility and the political errors which it induced, by the 60s the modernization theory was showing clear signs of exhaustion and obsolescence, and in the 70s it appeared to present an interest that was merely historical and no longer analytical, such was the incisiveness of the criticisms directed at it (Knöbl 2001).

Nevertheless, since the mid-1980s, and more noticeably after the fall of “soviet type socialism”, the basic axioms of the theory of modernization have been re-opened, revised and given a new look within the scope of those theories that Alexander (1995) called neo-modern. In fact, even though the new contributions have replaced the interest in the processes of modernization of specific national societies for the study of “global transformations”, core elements of modernization theory have been preserved. Fundamentally, concepts such as the world citizens’ society (Habermas 1998, 2004), the world risk society and cosmopolitanization (Beck 2000, 2004) or world functional differentiation (Luhmann 1997; for a critique, Wagner 1999) express the assumption that the social processes observed in North Atlantic societies are lucky and of necessity extended throughout the world within the context of globalization (Osterlekhoff, 2006).

A series of new studies tries to oppose the idea that globalization represents the worldwide expansion of a monocentric modernity with a single form, for example, by referring programmatically to multiple modernities (Eisenstadt 2000a, 2000b) or to entangled modernities (Conrad & Randeria 2002, Randeria 2005, Therborn 2003), or even turning the argument around, since modernity started elsewhere (in