

Modernization and/or Westernization in Romania during the Late 19th Century and the Early 20th Century

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In the case of the first decades following the establishment of the modern nation-state we can talk about a dominant process of Westernization, rapidly followed, in a second stage, by the process of modernization.

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A MANIFESTLY theoretical discussion seeking to define and relate two fundamental concepts of the past one and a half century, namely, modernization and Westernization, might be seen as a mere game or as a trivial rhetorical pursuit to those less familiar with the topic, or to the staunch supporters of factual history. Therefore, we shall begin by pointing out that without a precise understanding of the paradigm underlying our modernity, the explanations provided by a *histoire historisante* lack all perspective. In more concrete terms, in the absence of a suitable perspective on modernization and Westernization we find it difficult to understand Maiorescu's idea (theory) of the forms without substance shaped in the environment of the Junimea cultural association, and also the unique relationship between "sectarian liberalism" and society, Moldavian and Wallachian socialism, democratic or progressive

conservatism, etc.—to mention only these major ideological, doctrinarian and political trends of the second half of the 19th century and of the early 20th century. Furthermore, the main aspects pertaining to social-economic development, the thorny “agrarian issue,” the institutionalization of political power in the new framework of the nation-state, the relations between Church and state, the judicial and legislative system—including the exceptional legislation regarding agricultural agreements—the trends of *sămănătorism* (“agriculturalism”) and *poporanism* (“nativism”), alongside other forms of cultural manifestation, can be understood only partially and incompletely unless related to the process of modernization and/or Westernization.

Since the middle of the previous century, historians and also other researchers in the fields of humanities and social sciences have shown a manifest interest in the issue of modernization. Part of the fertile tradition of social evolutionism—itsself rooted in the ideas of the Enlightenment and of European rationalism—and emerged in the aftermath of World War II as a theory meant to account for the gaps existing between various parts of the world, the theory of modernization gradually took the center stage with several categories of researchers interested in social, economic, political, and historical phenomena, reaching a peak at the time when the issues of de-colonization and development gained a prominent place on the international agenda. The most visible side of the theory of modernization was the one related to social and economic aspects, which came to overshadow its political and also its cultural-spiritual components. Of course, sporadic concerns in this respect did also exist before the moment in question, but they failed to reach and gain prominence in the public perception. The theory of modernization has usually been associated with the theory of development and deemed the precise opposite of the theory of dependence, at least in the manner in which it was devised by Immanuel Wallerstein.¹ What is, therefore, modernization? The question has not yet been given a generally accepted answer, but the majority of opinions indicate that modernization includes the comprehensive transformations suffered by European society and culture since the Renaissance and which continue even today on a planetary scale. The concept and the theory of modernization are in direct opposition to the theory of a cyclic history of mankind, they are positivist and see human history as a history of progress. Modernization involves an intellectual, technological, and social revolution, altering the fundamental relationship between the human individual and time, nature, and humankind. For instance, time is no longer seen as cyclic or repetitive, but rather as a process, as a matrix of coherent change. Modern man sees nature as intelligible and defined by an inherent order. Scientific research is meant to decipher this order, while technology is called upon to subdue nature. Science and technology are expected to provide human individuals with a new place in nature and society, by way of social engineering and of the division of

labor. Understood in this fashion, modernization appears to be an ethically neutral term. However, the interpretation of modernization, its dissemination and uniformity did raise a number of questions and led to clearly political disputes and arguments.

The theory of modernization had many sources and many interpretations, all deriving from the Eurocentric perspective whereby a process that began in Western Europe became the alternative and the model for the rest of the world. One of the “fathers” of this concept was the reputed sociologist Talcott Parsons² who, in keeping with social evolutionism and with functionalism, defined and elaborated upon the concept.

Among the theorists of modernization we find the so-called “evolutionists,” people like Walt W. Rostow,³ Alex Inkeles,⁴ Myron Weiner,⁵ etc., who claim that the Western experience must be imitated by developing countries. Another significant group of theorists includes those who claim that full imitation is not the way to modernization, because there are substitutes, “shortcuts,” alternatives, because there is a possibility to “condense” modernization or to “cut corners.” However, all theorists of modernization see industrialization as the central component of this process, sometimes completely disregarding other factors. Their reasoning is quite simple, determinist and linear in nature: technology began to have an increasingly sizable effect upon the food supply, the living conditions, and the life expectancy of all Westerners. It gained a central place, it became a commodity desired by everybody and appreciated both by the masses and by the elites. The countries that possessed this technology became “advanced,” “civilized,” while those that did not have it became “backward,” “primitive,” or “uncivilized.” This labeling stemmed from the search for a justifying principle, in light of which the beneficiaries of the new technological civilization equated their success with moral virtue and became ready to interpret the others’ failure to develop an industry and discard traditional economy as a sign of moral deficiency. In keeping with this reasoning, Western nations became the equivalent of the “ruling class,” especially since the obvious implications of capitalist industrialization persuaded those who had failed to achieve it to accept the theories born in that environment. Thus, inequality gained a more complex legitimacy, and became difficult to challenge. A typical example in this respect is that of David Apter,⁶ who, in the mid-1960s, investigated political systems and the history of democracy from the vantage point of the theory of modernization. He propounded a triptych which still lingers in the collective mentality: democracy – good governance – efficiency and modernity. David McClelland⁷ approached the issue of modernization from the vantage point of social psychology and of motivation theory. He bluntly stated that modernization can only occur if a society gives due recognition to innovation, individual success, and to entrepreneurial spirit. To draw a quick conclusion, despite the obvious risk of reductionism, we could

say that the policy of modernization was meant to ensure not only the adoption of technology and of the means of production, but also of the liberal discourse and of Western institutions.

The theories of economic development, and especially the theory of modernization in its original form, failed to achieve a satisfactory internal coherence, largely because of their Eurocentric perspective, namely, because of the fact that they were “infested” with the norms and the axiological criteria typical for Western Europe. Commenting upon this aspect, Immanuel Wallerstein, one of the fiercest critics of the theory of modernization, pointed out that the entire dispute around this issue had been a painful moment of the 1960s.⁸

Today, however, although the theory of modernization has become somewhat obsolete—amid the changes occurred after 1989 in Central and Eastern Europe, it came to be “covered” and sometimes subsumed to the theory of transition —, we find it necessary to approach the concept and the theory of modernization from the broader perspective provided by the recent developments in the field of socio-human sciences. Among those who continued to reflect upon the theories of modernization in the 21st century we shall mention here the Americans David C. Engerman⁹ and Nils Gilman,¹⁰ the German Peter Wagner,¹¹ or Waltraud Schelkle.¹² Generally speaking, the new supporters and theorists of modernization can be seen as belonging to two trends: some believe that the limits of technology shape human interactions, setting the pace and the intensity of the modernization process; others consider that modernization is merely the outcome of deliberate human planning.

Generally speaking, most historians took into account modernization in their interpretation of the great historical changes: the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, etc. Economists saw modernization as the transition from an autarchic to a market or competition-based economy, accompanied by the accumulation of capital and by large-scale industrial production. Legal experts took into account the moment when written contracts became the main expression of social liability, legal equality replaced statutory law, and consuetudinal law became less relevant in current practice. Historians of mentalities and of culture understood modernization as the separation from the sacred and the secularization of thought, as the transition from speculative metaphysics to empirical science. Sociologists and social anthropologists interpreted modernization as the transition from the extended to the nuclear family. Finally, political scientists saw modernization in the development of bureaucracies, in the political ascent of the masses, in the disappearance of empires and in the emergence of nation-states. However, in everyday life all of these aspects, pertaining to various field of socio-human research, are intertwined and interdependent. In one word, modernization includes all that which we call *industrialization*, *rationalization*, *secularization*, and *bureaucratization*. Alongside these processes we also witness a process

of *urban development*, *social assimilation* and leveling, the (sometimes illusory) simplification of social structures, and the transfer of individual rights and liberties from the field of law to the sphere of politics and ideology. The fundamental feature of modernity is its *reflexivity*, as argued by Anthony Giddens.¹³ It is not limited to an interpretation and clarification of traditions, constantly seeking to set up new institutions and social practices based on the new knowledge and information. In other words, modernity takes shape on the basis on rationally developed and assessed knowledge. Another dimension—significant for the modernization process in its entirety—involves the relationship between *modernization* and *democratization*, the fundamental element defining the democratic liberal organization of the state in the Western understanding of it.

Westernization is a concept that describes a mimetic model involving the adaptation of certain values, principles, and norms, which are transplanted with varying degrees of success to areas and societies where the process of historical development would not have normally allowed for their emergence within the same temporal sequence as in the Western ones. Probably to a larger extent than modernization, Westernization involves a phenomenon of rapid acculturation, including the adoption of habits related to the private sphere of the individual and of the community. Of course, this adoption is nearly always achieved in a *sui generis* manner, with varying results and initially affecting only certain “islands” in the host society. Westernization has complex implications, beginning, in almost all cases, with a “shock phase,” as argued by Philip Conrad or by J. M. Roberts. The concept of Westernization is closely related to that of Europeanization, and, more recently, of globalization. Quite obviously, just like modernization, Westernization carries an ethical and an axiological load. Westernization was usually associated with the nearly always violent colonialism and expansion of the Western world towards various regions of the planet. As opposed to Westernization, modernization is essentially non-ideological in nature. It essentially has to do with cultural and economic interdependence, rather than with cultural and economic domination, it involves diversification and synchronization rather than integration and unification.

The theoretical debates around these concepts, while no longer dominant in the discourse of social sciences, are still relevant and of current interest, especially for the historians seeking to provide factual data for the models likely to explain the present state of the world.

AS FAR as turn of the 20th century Romania is concerned, the whole modernization and/or Westernization debate is extremely important, starting precisely from the reality of the second and currently ongoing European “integration.” The manner in which modern Romania adopted European models in the century of nations, as well as the pace and the manner in which these

changes were effected, are very relevant examples for what is currently happening. It is enough to mention here well-known phrases such as “Romania—the Belgium of the East,” “Romania—a European Japan,” “Bucharest—the Little Paris,” frequent stereotypes highlighting the importance of such a discussion.

The modern framework of Romanian society and of the Romanian state, whose centrality has always been seen as a *sine qua non* prerequisite of development, emerged and gained contour in an environment and at a time when concepts such as “modern” and “civilized” had already gained strong axiological connotations. The frequent references to Europe in the parliamentary debates and in the press of that time indicate not only a manifest interest in the manner in which the continent and Romania were moving ahead, but also a certain concern of the Romanian elite about the manner in which the modernizing efforts were perceived beyond the borders of the country.

Romania’s modernization was not a steady process, reaching impressive heights but also experiencing unjustified delays, especially in the agricultural sector, which employed most of the active population of the country. The violent outbursts of 1888 and especially of 1907 revealed the presence of deep “fractures” within society. During the period in question, the “agrarian issue” would be part of any major political debate in Romania. As it was a structural problem of society, the situation in this field was the least affected by the process of Westernization and modernization and would remain a source of social tension. The structure and the distribution of agricultural lands represented the core of the matter, and the possible solutions envisaged (land tenure, rural credit, sales of public lands, the “newlyweds” law, the agricultural insurance law, peasant associations, etc.) failed to be efficient and to have lasting effects. The unfavorable weather conditions present in certain years and the crises experienced by European agriculture proved the weakness and the vulnerability to the hazards of nature and of the market that defined the fundamental and dominant sector of the Romanian economy of that time.

The increasingly rapid industrialization seen during the period in question must also be taken into account whenever we seek to quantitatively assess the process of Romanian modernization. Statistical data indicates that the true industrial revolution was only just beginning, alongside the more tentative integration of the social capital market. If the censuses and the records from the middle of the 19th century list about 100 professions which involved roughly 25,000 people from the two Principalities,¹⁴ right before the First World War the industry generated approximately 22% of the GDP and 14% of the national revenue,¹⁵ employing more than 200,000 people.¹⁶ Nevertheless, despite the rapid pace of industrial development, especially starting with the 1880s—when economic nationalism took the form of protectionism and of state involvement in

industrial development—most industrial ventures were merely craftsmen’s workshops. Romanian modernization and industrial development cannot be properly understood unless we take into account the fundamental role of the state, of its policies and institutions, in this sustained effort made by Romanian society. Below we include an eloquent statistical chart, illustrating the dynamics and the magnitude of the industrialization process, its rapid pace, and the role played by the state¹⁷:

We notice that industrial companies were established at an average rate of 8.2 a year between 1866 and 1887, 14 a year in 1887–1893, and 18 a year in 1893–1906. During the period in question, communications and infrastructure also began to quickly catch up with their Western counterparts.

The forms and the manner in which democratization accompanied the process of modernization and Westernization also require considerable attention from the part of today’s researchers. As much as it was indeed possible, the democratization of Romanian society was achieved exclusively within a top to bottom approach, having state authority as its main nucleus.

The legal field also saw a process of rapid Westernization, with the sometimes superficial implementation of Western norms and values. The Constitution of 1 July 1866, preceded by the civil and criminal codes and by the codes of criminal and civil procedure, as well as the Commercial Code of 1887, were Western in nature and aimed at Westernizing Romanian society along the European model.

In what concerns cultural life, Westernization is more obvious in the early years of the period under investigation. Later on, the pressure of tradition limited the excesses of exaggerated imitation. Mass media and the still fledgling public opinion began to resemble those of Western and of Central Europe.

IN OUR opinion, in the case of the first decades following the establishment of the modern nation-state we can talk about a dominant process of Westernization, rapidly followed, in a second stage, by the process of modernization. Obviously, in Romania the processes of Westernization and modernization operated in a rather specific manner, with a first stage dominated by Westernization and with a second one dominated by modernization. Chronologically speaking, the second stage could be said to begin in the early 1890s. In each stage of the aforementioned processes, we notice the presence of a

competent opposition, which challenged the official modernization policy embraced by the Romanian authorities. The adopted paradigms were closely related to external stimuli, creatively “digested” by the Romanian elites. A thorough analysis of the relationship between modernization and Westernization in the Romanian space might provide a better understanding of the manner in which our modernity emerged and gained contour, with all of its particular and distinct features.



Notes

1. See Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century*, 2 vols. (New York: Academic Press, 1974).
2. Talcott Parsons, *The Social System* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951).
3. Walt W. Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960).
4. Alex Inkeles, *Becoming Modern* (New York: Collier, 1974); id., “Making Man Modern,” *American Journal of Sociology* 75 (1969): 208–225 sqq.
5. Myron Weiner, ed., *Modernization: The Dynamic of Growth* (New York: Atherton Press, 1966).
6. David Apter, *The Politics of Modernization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965).
7. David McClelland, *The Achieving Society* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967).
8. Immanuel Wallerstein, statement made during the *Voices* feature of the BBC Channel 4, 25 April 1986, quoted in William Bloom, *Personal Identity, National Identity and International Relations* (Cambridge–New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 3.
9. David C. Engerman, *Staging Growth: Modernization, Development and the Global Cold War* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003).
10. Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).
11. Peter Wagner works at the European Institute in Florence and is the author of important books, such as: *A Sociology of Modernity* (1994) and *Theorizing Modernity: Inescapability and Attainability in Social Theory* (2001).
12. Waltraud Schelkle, Wolf-Hagan Krauth, Martin Kohli, and Georg Elwert, *Paradigms of Social Change: Modernization, Development, Transformation, Evolution* (Frankfurt: Campus, St. Martin’s Press, 2000).
13. Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

14. See, for instance, the Moldavian census of 1845, which recorded 8,530 craftsmen and apprentices in 101 professions.
15. N. P. Arcadian, *Industrializarea României: Studiu evolutiv istoric, economic și juridic*, 2nd ed. (Bucharest: Imprimeria Națională, 1936), 141.
16. V. Axenciuc and I. Tiberian, *Premise economice ale formării statului național unitar român* (Bucharest: Ed. Academiei RSR, 1979), 241.
17. *Ibid.*, 238.

Abstract

Modernization and/or Westernization in Romania during the Late 19th Century and the Early 20th Century

The paper highlights the importance of the concepts of modernization and Westernization for any investigation of the situation of Romania in the late 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century. After a detailed analysis of the concepts of modernization and Westernization, as they appear in the specialized literature, with the specific interpretations given to each and with the differences between them, the paper briefly surveys the fields in which these processes were manifest in Romania during the period in question, from industry to law and culture.

Keywords

Westernization, modernization, turn of the century Romania, industrialization