

Paradoxes

*of a modernization theory in the U.S.
policy: petrifying authoritarianism and
building client states in the third world
during the Cold War*

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The questions of development and global inequality appear to be the crucial problems of modern world. These questions played significant role in the post-war world after 1945. One of the phenomena of the Cold War period was a decolonization in the then emerging Third World. After 1945 the world had entered into the phase of radical changes because of the fall of existing European powers' position. The colonial empires like Great Britain, France, the Netherlands, Belgium were unable to control their colonies anymore, however they made attempts to do it. The political elites of those colonial European countries were unable to accept the fact that the nations of Asia (later Africa) expected independence and the right to self-government.

The Colonial powers couldn't restrain the will of the peoples to gain control over the main assets of colonies and dependent territories. The process of decolonization was in fact inevitable as the position of the colonial states, especially France and the United Kingdom, became considerably undermined as a consequence of the Second World War. The international community led by the United States, the main founder of the United Nations, rejected the idea of maintaining colonial ties. This new approach, declared primarily by the Allies in the Atlantic Charter (however the British Prime Minister later distanced himself from the anticolonial meaning of this proclamation of war aims), found full expression in the UN Charter. Both documents expressed the anticolonial sentiment which started to prevail in the postwar world.¹

However the European states were unable to keep the colonies and territories under their sovereign power, they were able to secure their control over main economic assets of former colonies. In the next years and decades many nations of Asia and Africa gained independence. All them, with older Latin American nations, were depicted as Third World countries. All of them were extremely vulnerable for radical ideologies: communism and nationalism.²

The Third World played particularly important role in the Cold War era; it was in the center of US and Soviet policy. Both superpowers aimed to attract developing countries because the potential of Asian and African nations couldn't be neglected in the global rivalry of East and West. Latin America was a somewhat different case since historically it has always been in the US sphere of influence. However, this region became also vulnerable for the influence of communist ideology after the Second World War. The rise of communist sentiment in Latin America, as well as in Asia and Africa, should be ascribed to tremendous social inequality and tensions. The colonial rela-

¹ Latham 2011: 25-26; Judt 2008: 330-333.

² Hahn, Heiss 2001; See also: Kula 1991: 54-82.

tions were based on an idea of natural resources exploitation by European powers. That kind of development characterized also Latin America. Thus, the economic and social situation of developing countries was the infamous heritage of their colonial past and/or dependency. This has clear consequences for the political attitude of both nations and elites in developing countries (Third World). Since they rejected the idea of cooperation with former metropolises and looked for the ideological expression of their national and economic aspirations, the Soviet Union appeared “natural” ally of developing countries.

The USSR was determined to use the ideological “appeal” of international communism to spread Soviet influence over the Third World. In the 1960s Soviet determination to support revolutionary movements even grew. Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev proclaimed aid for “wars of national liberation” and the USSR transferred ideas, money and advisors to Asian and Latin American states which were “infected” by a revolution.³ But it would be a mistake to attribute the development of revolutionary movements to the Soviet interference only. It was a mistake made by many leaders of the Western World, especially Americans, who falsely assumed that revolution is “exported” by their communist rival.⁴ It is true that Soviet leaders generously helped Castro’s Cuba, indirectly exporting revolution to other Latin American countries due to its alliance with Cuba (it is doubtful that the idea of a continental revolution could have been promoted by Castro without Soviet aid for his country). But in many areas of the world, revolution was a consequence of the local situation.

The United States have never been a colonial superpower. For that reason American political leaders believed that their country was not discredited in the emerging Third World and could attract new and old nations of Asia and Latin America. To some extent such views were justified. On the other hand, the United States were and still remain the leader of the West.

³ Zubok, Pleszakow 1999: 309-312.

⁴ US secretary of State John Foster Dulles is good example of such a false logic that Latin American revolution was “imported” from the Communist powers. See: Rabe 1988: 31.

In the perception of developing countries, this superpower was naturally inclined to economically and politically dominate the “peripheries.” The United States, as a homeland of modern capitalism was perceived as a power interested in expanding the export markets for American products and securing the access to natural resources. Thus, the elites of “emerging” nations were afraid that close relations with the USA would have petrified their underdevelopment. Anti-Western resentment was an additional factor, which discouraged the Third World from searching closer relations with the United States. In this situation, they were interested in an alliance with the Soviet Union – the anti-Western force which evoked the idea of racial equality and self-determination of oppressed peoples.

The United States’ post-war administrations intended to present an ideology alternative for the Soviet communism. American values and its model of development should attract emerging developing countries. The US concept was embodied in modernization theory, which was developed particularly in the 1950s and 1960s. This theory played a significant role in formulating US policy toward developing countries especially in that period, but also later. It is important to realize that the United States had always been prone to influence the world and aim to change it positively. Americans were (and still are) convinced about their exceptionalism and the superiority of their political system and economic model from the very beginning of their history as a nation. The opposition between “freedom” and “oppression” which was emphasized by the Founding Fathers and ideologists of American Revolution was also exploited by American anticommunism. The Americans envisioned themselves as the leader of the free world in the 20th century as they did in the past. Thus, the “Manifest Destiny” shouldn’t be treated only as a historical document. The idea, which was the fundament of the Manifest Destiny, dictated that the United States had an exceptional political system, distinct from any other in the world, influenced by the strong American conviction that the US was entitled to spread its values as morally superior. Moreover, this constantly influences US foreign policy.

It is a matter of dispute whether the Manifest Destiny was replaced by US imperialism or, rather the former influenced the latter.⁵

The United States as a growing power in the turn of nineteenth and twentieth century, began to exceed its influence over the foreign territories and nations, like the Philippines and Cuba. The motives which pushed the United States towards expansion were mainly economic and political, and imperialistic. The United States aimed to expand its markets and gain access to new sources. But in the same time US politicians coined the idea of civilizing the underdeveloped nations, they intended to bear a kind of American “white man’s burden.”⁶

The concept that the United States could be a civilizing force developed together with the position of states in the international system of the twentieth century. According to scholars on that subject, the myth of the chosen nation was reflected in the history of American foreign relations after the Second World War in the context of global revolution. The revolutionary nations expected to achieve the same material level and values that Americans had reached.⁷ US leaders sought for ways to allow them to achieve this aim without a Marxist revolution. The US political elite did this not only for idealistic reasons (described above) but also because of national security demands.

In this text the author tries to answer the question what was the nature of American involvement in the developing countries after the Second World War? How did the US administrations envisioned the process of progress in the countries that emerged or regained independence in the Third World? What elements constituted mutual relations between the American superpower and developing countries in the Cold War period?

The engagement of the United States in foreign countries in the 20th century, especially after the Second World War

5 Coles 2002: 403-404.

6 Latham 2011: 12-14.

7 Coles 2002: 406.

can be considered a fulfillment of the US mission in the world, a mission proclaimed as a consequence of their Manifest Destiny. It is a “mission by intervention,” justified by the nature of the goals, which the USA wants to realize. The belief that developing countries required American tutelage in the process of social and political modernization determined US policy from the beginning to expand it beyond the borders of the continent.

The position of the developing countries and their attitude towards the USA contributed to dependency theory, developed in the postwar economic sciences, particularly in the countries of the so-called global South.⁸ In the perspective of dependency theory, underdevelopment was not a stage of growth, nor a phase of development. It was a social and economic stagnation petrified both by developed countries and local elites, not interested in changing a situation, which was profitable for them. According to one of the most prominent postwar Latin American economists, Raul Prebisch, the inequality was frozen by the deteriorating terms of trade in the world. Developing countries had to export more products just to receive the assets for more expensive products imported from developed countries. The inequality of prices between mainly agricultural products of mono-export developing countries and advanced industrial products of developed ones created permanent trade deficit. The desperate need of capital in underdeveloped countries made them to take out loans in countries like the United States. It deepened the dependency of the South.⁹

The economists from the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America (structuralists) looked for a solution to that Gordian knot. They believed that the developing countries should focus on building their own industry. The process of industrialization required the protection of developing economies by applying high tariffs and, at least in the beginning of this process – the growth of foreign debt. The dependency theorists and structuralists influenced a brand new

8 In opposition to the wealthy North, the underdeveloped, poor South seems to be the most popular depiction in modern development studies recently.

9 Franko 2003: 52-54.

economic policy in Latin America: import substitution and industrialization.¹⁰

This policy was not successful and contributed to the further decline of Latin American economies. The other path of development was worked out by American economists who perceived the deteriorating economic situation in the Third World as a main factor, which fueled revolutionary movements.

We can analyze the tools of US foreign policy in the dimension of economic aid on the basis of programs addressed to developing nations. Let's consider Alliance for Progress as an example of US economic but strictly politically motivated program. Alliance is one of the best examples of modernization theory which have played significant role in US foreign policy after the Second World War. The basic reason why the United States was interested in implementation of such a program was the Cuban revolution effect. Alliance for Progress was not the first, neither the biggest aid program offered by the United States after the Second World War. One should remember that the fear of Communism motivated also the European Recovery Plan, called the Marshall Plan. The United States was afraid that if living conditions in Europe were deteriorating, Communist parties in Western Europe would seize power in democratic elections. This scenario was not unrealistic since Communists received growing electoral support in leading western countries like France and Italy.¹¹ The economic motives of the Marshall Plan should not be neglected. The US economy, which productivity grew tremendously during the Second World War (effectively making an end to the Great Depression), needed the European market for its export. With an European economy in stagnation, the US economy would have faced recession.

The two factors of equal importance drove the United States to offer generous aid programs to European countries. Political developments in the next years confirmed the dia-

¹⁰ Franko 2003: 55-56.

¹¹ Krasuski 1988: 18-52; Janus 2001: 38-39.

gnosis of American policymakers that economic aid was the proper answer to the challenge of Marxist radicalism in Western Europe. Moreover, the Marshall Plan implementation made it possible to put nation-building ideas into operation in Germany. In fact, Germany and Japan are the only examples of successful nation-building in the post-war world.¹² Western Europe avoided the threat of spreading communist influence.

The same motives were behind the decision on delivering aid to developing countries during the Cold War. Primarily, the United States offered rather limited economic aid, focusing on military support. It was characteristic for the 1940s and 1950s. Moreover, in those decades, the United States policymakers rejected the repeating requests of Latin American countries which expected a kind of Marshall Plan for Latin America.¹³ However it was probably the first time when Latin America was ready to accept a dominating role of the USA in the hemisphere, Washington focused on other regions of the world.¹⁴ US administrations believed in the "depend on trade not aid" theory. It meant that growing trade relations should have been the best way to fuel economic development of Latin American countries.¹⁵

The situation changed radically after the Cuban revolution. Even before the Castro revolution a group of American politicians emphasized that focusing on military aid for developing countries was an insufficient tool. Without economic help the United States was unable to stop the growth of revolutionary sentiments in the Third World. Senator John F. Kennedy was among those politicians. The future US President believed that the United States had to diversify its political instruments toward developing countries. The successful containment of Communism required more sophisticated tools than just military aid and repression. Kennedy correctly assumed that deep social inequalities and poverty made the developing countries ripe for revolutions. The United States had to act to improve

¹² Dobbins et al. 2003: 3-51.

¹³ Smith 1994: 62-63.

¹⁴ Kissinger 2002: 487-510.

¹⁵ Schoultz 2003: 332-333. See also: Gildherus 2006: 8-9.

living conditions in Latin America and democracy promotion.¹⁶ The Cuban victory and the threat of a Castro-promoted revolution in the whole region made Latin America “the most dangerous area in the world” as Kennedy said. The postulate of democracy promotion came from a strong conviction that maintaining dictatorships with US support increased the danger of Marxist revolution.¹⁷ The US administrations’ attitude towards dictatorships in the beginning of the 1960s. was influenced not as much by moral outrage but by fear that if the dictatorships were not ousted under pressure of USA, they would have been destroyed by revolution. As Kennedy said “those who make peaceful revolution impossible, will make violent revolution inevitable.” But the idea of a peaceful revolution for Kennedy and his team meant an evolution leading to democracy and free market as the only option.

Cuba was not the only subject of concern for the US administrations in the 1960s. American policymakers were also afraid of the developments in Indochina, where the French retreat created a kind of political vacuum. Both regions – Latin America and Indochina – became the areas of strong US involvement during the Cold War. The American intervention in Vietnam, which was disastrous for US foreign policy, ended in the 1970s but it was an equally important example of modernization attempts like US policy toward Latin America.¹⁸

Kennedy’s administration’s attitude and policy reflected the views of an influential group of American intellectuals. They were convinced that there was a way of development alternative for the Marxist ideology of revolution. The academics who studied development questions of underdeveloped countries intended to create a coherent concept, which could be offered

¹⁶ Kennedy 1957; Kennedy 1960: 132-133; Knothe 1976: 63-64.

¹⁷ This conviction led to the position that the Kennedy administration took vis-à-vis Rafael Leonidas Trujillo’s regime in the Dominican Republic in 1961. US policymakers were afraid that a continuation of the Trujillo regime would provoke a Castro-like revolution. For that reason the USA supported the assassination of this Dominican dictator. (Fatafski 2013: 7-18)

¹⁸ Latham 2006: 27-41.

to the nations of Latin America, Asia and – later – Africa. They coined or rather developed the modernization theory, which became the main inspiration for the new aid policy of the John F. Kennedy administration. The implementation of this modernization theory was not limited to Latin America in the 1960s, but US policy in this part of the world is a very illustrative example of that stream of American political thought and practice. It is also justified to assess that it was the first attempt of the USA to implement such a solution in order to make the world better.

The architects of this new approach to foreign aid were called the Charles River group. The leading modernization theorists, economists Walt Rostow and Max Millikan, worked at the Massachusetts Institute of technology. Their studies on modernization began in the beginning of the 1950s. The economists examined the role that foreign aid might play in US foreign policy. The main question they tried to answer was whether and in what circumstances US economic aid could stimulate and maintain economic growth in developing countries. The idea that the United States administrations were able to change the world through foreign aid was expressed in the study “A Proposal: Key to Effective Foreign Policy.” Rostow developed the concept of modernization in his later work “The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto.” The basic assumption of that new philosophy was that the United States should help the underdeveloped countries to make economic and social progress and promote democracy.¹⁹ Among the academics who contributed considerably to development of the modernization theory Lucian Pye, Daniel Lerner, Gabriel Almond and James Coleman should also be mentioned.²⁰

Modernization theory was crucial for Millikan and Rostow’s concepts. This theory tries to answer the question how mechanisms of development work. In other words, what factors decided that some nations took a leading position in social and economic progress and whether the same factors could be adapted to other, underdeveloped countries. To express it

¹⁹ Taffet 2007: 20-21.

²⁰ Latham 2000: 3.

briefly, what is the mechanism which turns the traditional societies into modern ones.²¹ The title of Rostow's work "A Non-Communist Manifesto" was an expression of his presumption that modernization theory was an alternative to the ideology of communist revolution, which had started to spread in the developing countries of the Third World. Rostow defined several steps of the developmental evolution, from a traditional society to a society of mass consumption. The United States should help the nations in the phase preceding "take off" to development because the USA was able to help them to accelerate the process of moving to a more advanced phase.²²

Commonly accepted opinion indicates that foreign investment plays a significant role in economic development of a country. The process of modernization of underdeveloped economy is impossible without significant foreign investments since developing countries always suffer from lack of capital. An inflow of foreign capital is necessary to change the production structure of a developing country and stimulate its productivity. Otherwise it would be impossible to take the challenge of rivalry with developed economies.

One of the most prominent dependency theorists Andre Gunder Frank analyzed the flow of capital in and from Brazil on the basis of official data. The analyses were made in the 1960s. Frank questioned the popular conviction that the flow of investments and aid to developing countries was greater than the flow of capital from them. He stated that in fact, underdeveloped countries pay more to the rich ones than they receive from them. Frank quoted the data of the US Department of Commerce on US – Latin American economic relations to prove the statement. The data proved that in the period 1956-61 the ratio of inflow to the United States to outflow from the US was 147 percent for Latin America. The ratio for underdeveloped world as a whole was 164 percent and for the Western Europe 43 percent. In his opinion the quoted data proved that, at least in the analyzed period, the developing world re-

ceived less from the United States than the USA received from those countries. It is particularly visible when one compares the flows between the USA with developing countries and the USA with Western Europe.²³

Even though the US administrations stated that the capital flows from developing countries were profits earned from US capital invested there, the example of Brazil in the 1960s questioned such an opinion. The US corporations owned Brazilian corporations, but they were based on capital of Brazilian origin.²⁴ In other words, the US corporations used Brazilian capital to increase its profit. Other factors which boosted such an effect were government loans for US-Brazilian economic enterprises. This process can be exemplified by loans, which were given to two US cotton merchants by the Brazilian central bank. They received 47 percent of that bank's total loan portfolio for agriculture and industry. The companies re-loaned the money that they received at higher interest rates, bought up harvest stocks, kept them in silos provided by government and speculated the stocks later. This way the companies sized control over the Brazilian domestic cotton market and the export of that product. The profit was transferred to the United States of course.²⁵ The same process could be observed when we consider the public utility sector in Brazil. American and Canadian companies, which operated in that sector were based on governmental concessions and privileges provided by public authorities. In other words, they also used Brazilian capital and received profit this way.

The problem of creating new forms of dependency was not the only failure of the very promising modernization theory practiced by Kennedy and Johnson administration. Democratization, which was the second crucial aim of US administrations and the theorists was even more difficult than economic progress. The US policymakers declared the support for democratic process but quickly appeared that it was not unconditional.

21 Taffet 2007: 21.

22 Taffet 2007: 21.

23 Frank 1969: 163-164.

24 Frank 1969: 164.

25 Frank 1969: 164-165.

American leaders were afraid that suppressing Latin American right-wing dictatorships might open the way for the election of radical and Marxist leftists. Washington initially tried to support the reformist left but the growing electoral support for movements and politicians, usually incorrectly defined as “Communists,” made the US administrations to limit the promotion of democratic process. Moreover, the United States was involved in coup d'états which led to the overthrow of legal leaders (like in South Vietnam and the Dominican Republic).²⁶

The idea of civilizing the underdeveloped nations by Western powers embraced the use of force and maintenance of dictatorial, violent regimes. This presupposition was part of the very nature of imperialism, which also influenced US foreign policy mechanisms at the turn of the 19th and 20th century.²⁷

US leaders were determined to implement the modernization mechanisms in developing countries to avoid the risk of them falling in the communist trap. This determination caused that – however liberal the modernization theory was – the tools of US policy in many Third World Countries were far from liberal. The United States supported coercive, undemocratic regimes and believed that political stability was a *conditio sine qua non* to introduce all other necessary reforms. This approach towards Latin America was particularly evident when the L.B. Johnson administration adopted a policy which was called the Mann Doctrine (after Thomas C. Mann, Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs). It guaranteed the acceptance of undemocratic regimes by the United States if they controlled the territory and were staunchly pro-American and anticommunist. The Doctrine assumed that the USA should focus on economic development of Latin American countries and protect US business there. Political stability should create conditions for development and allow local governments to achieve social progress.²⁸

26 Taffet 2007: 47-65; Klare, Arnson 1981: 138-168.

27 Latham 2011: 14.

28 Taffet 2007: 60-61.

There are more examples of such an approach adopted by US policymakers during the Cold War. Next to Latin American cases (like Guatemala after the overthrow of Jacobo Arbenz Guzman) and Chile (the Augusto Pinochet dictatorship), South Vietnam and Iran (Shah Reza Pahlavi) can be mentioned.

South Vietnam is one of the examples of nation-building policy. This ambitious US plan was based on the assumption that modernization would diminish the devastating consequences of colonial past and would make Vietnam less vulnerable to the communist ideology from the north. US policymakers believed in a new Vietnamese nationalism, which was to be one of the consequences of the modernization process. Vietnam was one of the biggest recipients of US aid until 1961, and after J. F. Kennedy became the president, political and military engagement even grew. The growing number of failures in the process of modernization in Vietnam led the United States to blame the Vietnamese authorities. Americans sought a way to create a more legitimate government in South Vietnam, which would be able to carry out its transformation to modern state under the US aegis.²⁹ As we know, the US policy of intervention in Vietnam failed. The USA was unable to create a Vietnamese government with actual popular support or the ability to perform necessary reforms.

The practices which are analyzed in this article are not historical. The context has changed after the Cold War, but the United States still try to implement economic solutions, which are considered the only way to achieve economic and social progress in developing countries. The Washington Consensus has been one of the most illustrious examples of that concept. American policymakers still face the same dilemma related to the limits of democracy promotion. Limits which are determined by the present definition of US national security.

Another weakness of the modernization theory has been theorists' belief that the rejection of traditions and culture of the underdeveloped country is natural and have to take place

29 Latham 2006: 33-38.

in countries in order to develop. American modernizers, both theorists and policymakers considered local political culture, traditions and economies as ineffective and doomed to disappear. The modern political and economic solutions, implemented by the United States (or by local governments with US support) should destroy old forms of governance and production, which blocked the development of Third World countries. Especially capitalism was considered the main modernizing force.³⁰

The source of the paradox of modernization promoted by the United States in the developing countries should be sought in the American attempt to tie together mechanisms that are in fact incompatible. The United States attempted to promote development and good governance and – at the same time – accepted dictatorial, repressive regimes. The idea that implementing solutions, worked out and promoted by US theorists, would inevitably bring social progress, failed. Moreover, the United States built new forms of dependency.

³⁰ Latham 2011: 16-17.

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