The Political Socialization of Marginal Groups*

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The proliferation of new words and terms in American social science, particularly in relation to developments in the third world, has burgeoned almost faster than the new states they are concerned with. Recently the term modernization has become very popular, assuming the importance in the 1960's that development occupied in the 1950's. The distinction between the two varies according to individual social scientists, ranging from Apter who sees modernization as a special case of development to Smelser who sees modernization as more comprehensive in scope than development.¹ However, as Myron Weiner notes in the Preface to a recent book on Modernization "Today the term 'modernization' is often used simply as another word for economic growth or as a more palatable synonym for still another elusive concept, 'westernization'.”² Despite the apparent value-free nature of the concept of modernization, as Weiner implies there often lurks a "western" bias in its use. Implicit in many of the discussions of modernization is the assumption that there is an ideal type of modernization process. More specifically, there is the assumption that if and when a society adopts the institutions of Anglo-Saxon democracies they hasten their chances for modernization more than societies that adopt other, i.e. authoritarian, models. For example, recently a very distinguished sociologist has concluded from his study of six nations that men in modern societies share certain attitudes regardless of cultural differences. The characteristics that Inkeles lists as modern attitudes³ are strikingly reminiscent of his own society, which seem to bear out

* This paper contains some of the materials that were collected in conjunction with a larger study entitled “Race and Politics: A Comparative View,” Allen and Unwin (forthcoming). Field work was undertaken in Detroit between 1956–60; in Ceylon in 1963; in British Guiana in 1964; and in Birmingham, England between 1963–65.


² Ibid., p. v.

³ In the introduction to Modernization Weiner summarizes Inkele, modern attitudes as "a disposition to accept new ideas and try new methods; a readiness to express opinions; a time sense that makes men more interested in the present and future than in the past; a better sense of punctuality; a greater concern for planning, organization and efficiency; a tendency to see the world as calculable; a faith in science and technology; and finally, a belief in distributive justice." p. 4.
his statement at the beginning of his article that "the qualities that make a man modern often do not appear to be neutral characteristics that any man might have, but instead represent the distinctive traits of the European, the American or the Westerner that he is bent on imposing on other people so as to make them over in his own image."1

One of the notable exceptions to this trend is Apter, who finds that what he calls Western-type liberal democracies have proved least successful in the task of modernizing, but have rather proved most suitable after modernization has been achieved and nations have begun to industrialize:

"Democratic representative government is clearly an appropriate means by which highly complex and advanced industrial societies have solved serious and perplexing social and moral problems. It has been a dramatic achievement in the West to devise suitable mechanisms for resolving the twin problems that all governments encounter: orderly change and peaceful succession in office."2

The question of modernization is raised because one of the fundamental assumptions of a modern society is its capacity to integrate new groups into the political system. For purposes of comparison we will first discuss briefly the failure of "modern" political systems imposed in two former colonies in which the author has carried out research with regard to the political socialization of marginal groups. We then go on to raise some questions as to how successful the political system in two "modern" societies, the United States and the United Kingdom, has in fact been in politically integrating all its groups, particularly the Negro. This comparison leads to the hypothesis that in many ways it is more fruitful to consider the case of the American Negro in terms of cultural pluralism rather than as just another group to be integrated in the political system as were the immigrant groups earlier.

The literature of social science is replete with distinctions between modern and traditional societies, one of the more important of which concerns the functions and roles of different groups in the society. The United States, for example, is often characterised as a socially plural society, where various groups co-exist, but where they also share certain common values with regard to the polity. Talcott Parsons, one of the leading exponents of this view states that "Full inclusion and multiple role participation are compatible with the maintenance of distinctive ethnic and/or religious identity."3 His views on the pluralistic nature of American society and its ever continued broadening of the base for inclusion into the society leads Parsons to an optimistic view of the possibility of the inclusion of the Negro into the society. The emphasis on universalistic values in modern societies ideally implies political integration of all groups in the society. We shall return to this method of dealing with the political socialization of the Negro later in the paper and assess how realistic it is for the purpose of describing the present condition of the Negro and of forecasting the future.

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1 Inkeles, op. cit., p. 139.
2 Apter, op. cit., p. 2.
3 Talcott Parsons, "Full Citizenship for the Negro American?", Daedalus, Fall, 1965.