Roots of the Modernization Experience in Japan

PETER MITCHELL

York University, Toronto, Canada

It is almost universally acknowledged that modernization with its peculiar characteristic of continuous social change is productive of distinctive types of stress both in collective and individual contexts. Whether it equally provides new and better means of resolving the resultant tensions is a more contentious matter worthy of serious analysis by social scientists; it is certainly very much in the forefront of contemporary political and social debate. A paper providing historical background for a collection of studies on "modernization and stress" could fulfill several tasks. Those attempted here are very modest. Comprehensive coverage is not possible, but hopefully it can provide, particularly for non-specialists, an introductory background to the following studies.

This apparently simple task is confounded by the lack of any conceptual unification around the widely utilized term "modernization". There are approximately as many working definitions as there are intellectual disciplines, multiplied by general disagreements between determinists and particularists, and between single or multi-causation theorists. All agree basically that it involves, to use Marion J. Levy's terms, "the uses of inanimate sources of power and the use of tools to multiply the effect of effort," and most would agree with the corollary that this represents a continuum common to all societies (1966: 11). Thus one talks in terms of "relatively modernized" as against "relatively unmodernized" societies, the distinction lying at some imprecise point on that continuum where return to animate power and more primitive tools would wreak catastrophic strain on the new social structures generated by the advances already achieved. Beyond that basic agreement, one encounters a far higher degree of disagreement. In fact, in the richness of recent studies on the topic, some social scientists have questioned even the usefulness of the term as a conceptual tool. Still, as even they acknowledge, no alternative term encompasses the multi-disciplinary implications of this "process" increasingly affecting all human societies. Industrialization, mass identification and mobilization, centralized and articulate bureaucratization, functionally specific relationship patterns, mass communications networks, secularization and scientific outlooks, evolution of an intrinsic work ethic – these and many other features have been pointed out as key attributes of the process. It seems incumbent, therefore, to give some brief indication of whatever loose working definition the writer ascribes to a word so frequently used in the following paper.
As an historian interested in social change, it is necessary to combine the perspectives of the various social science disciplines. Change and continuity were never absent from any period in Japanese history, and formed a characteristic symbiosis even in the periodic outbursts of intensive creativity marking several key transitions in traditional times. The changes of the “modern” type, however, bear qualitative distinctions beyond purely temporal proximity to our contemporary viewpoint. Without elaborate justification, the approach used here accepts Joseph Needham’s assertion that the key division between “modern” and “premodern” lies with the so-called scientific revolution, arising from the marriage of the traditional mode of non-agrarian production or craftsmanship with the new “oecumenical sciences” asserting the possibility of expressing all phenomena in mathematical terms (1954-1956: Vol. 3, 157-159). The resultant set of basic assumptions regarding the nature of man and his relationship to his physical and human environment posited distinct “modern” values. As expressed by C. E. Black (1966: 7):

“Modernization”... refers to the dynamic form that the age-old process of innovation has assumed as a result of the explosive proliferation of knowledge in recent centuries. It owes its special significance both to its dynamic character and to the universality of its impact on human affairs. It stems initially from an attitude, a belief that society can and should be transformed, that change is desirable.

The fundamental impulse to “modernize” then arose from just such an attitude toward knowledge accumulation and potential utilization. So also is born much of the stress associated with the process, as “to know” was equally subject to the dictates of perpetual change.

This approach does not deny the “contextual” aspects of the modernization experience, but stresses the attitudinal, psychological or intellectual aspect as the key to understanding. In terms of the fruitful stimulation of the Hakone Conference on Modern Japan, for example, the stress here is on the corollaries regarding the duality of the “modern” viewpoint: namely that “modernization involved the systematic, sustained and purposeful application of human energies to the “rational” control of man’s physical and social environment for various human purposes” attendant upon acceptance of the progressive nature of human knowledge acquisition enabling such rational control (Hall 1965: 19–24). Such an approach also is favoured for its disposal of the traditional bug-bear of “westernization” as a synonym for “modernization”. Finally, a working definition of modernization has been given by the editor of the present volume as “those institutional processes of responding and adapting to new societal conditions with simultaneous changes in the psychological, characterological make-up of the people as well as an increase in man’s control of his external environment.” Thus while accepting the universalistic aspect of the shared “process,” this analysis will view its historical experience as a dynamic process within the Japanese cultural context.

In the past, both western and Japanese historians tended to overlook the pre-1860 period as part of Japan’s historical experience with modernization.