

MORE MODERN, MORE HAPPY

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Society has changed radically since the dawn of mankind, and today it is changing faster than ever. This raises the question as to whether modern society is still compatible with human nature. Has modernization gone too far? Many think so. Not only is the change from traditional to modern societies beset with social problem, but studies in modern nations show rising discontent with the development of society, e.g. widespread belief that society has become harder, less caring and less safe and things will even get worse in the future. Such cultural criticism encompasses a range of different views.

There is a long history of people who reject modern society as such and want to return to 'the good old days' that existed before the industrial revolution took place. Although this radical rejection of modern society is currently still found in some religious groups, there is little real support for the view that the clock of social development should be turned back. A much more common view is that the process of modernization has gone too far in some respects, and that we therefore need to stop moving forward and perhaps even take a step backwards in some areas. For instance, there is a great deal of support for the view that international capitalism needs to be curbed and that national identities need to be protected in the face of increasing globalization. Likewise, there are misgivings about trends in education, and many want to see a return to smaller schools with stricter teachers. There are also concerns about the demise of the church, civil-society organizations and the family, and complaints about rising materialism, antisocial behavior and crime.

The notion that modernization has gone too far has been expressed by leading sociologists. Criticism is not limited to academic circles, and also has political consequences. In this context, governments in rich countries such as Japan, Saudi Arabia and Singapore are attempting, through legislation, educational policy and campaigns, to maintain traditional structures. In West-European countries a variety of political parties are arguing for greater social cohesion and stronger collective identities.

These cultural critics are opposed by people who emphasize the benefits of modernization, such as increased affluence, greater legal certainty, democracy and freedom of choice. The optimistic view held in this camp is less prominent in the intellectual discourse, but it does dominate in many areas of policy, such as 'development assistance', which is aimed to help countries that 'lag behind' to modernize more quickly. This view is also represented within sociology. Some of the discipline's founding fathers, including Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer, supported the process of modernization that occurred during their lifetimes. Optimistic views on progress are not so widely held among present-day sociologists, although some argue that social progress is being achieved, e.g. Patrick Nolan and Gerhard Lenski (2008), who expressed such views in their influential book on macro sociology.

There is something to be said for both views, since it is obvious that there are benefits and drawbacks to modernization. The question is to what extent the benefits outweigh the drawbacks.

This question can be approached from a number of perspectives. In a study with Maarten Berg (2013), we investigated the extent to which a country's level of modernity is associated with greater happiness for a greater number of citizens. We investigated how happy people are in modern society and considered not only whether there is a positive correlation, but also whether that correlation is linear or not. If modernization has gone too far, a concave pattern should appear with no greater happiness among the most modern nations or possibly even less.

We compared 141 present-day countries. Eight aspects of modernity were considered: industrialization, size of the service sector, economic freedom, real income per capita, globalization, level of education, political democracy and urbanization. Happiness in the different countries was measured as the average response to survey questions on life satisfaction, affect and contentment.

Analyses show that people living in most modern countries are substantially happier than people in the less modern countries. This pattern appears in all aspects of modernization and is not just a matter of wealth. The same pattern appears when happiness is measured using the Cantril ladder, which invites to a more cognitive appraisal of one's life between the 'best and worst possible' and with a measure of daily mood. So we repeated this analysis in a subset of Western nations. Though the correlations tend to be smaller, they are still positive. Although the advantages of societal modernization may be finite, modernization has not yet undermined human happiness. More modernity still goes with greater happiness.

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