

Development And Underdevelopment, 1945-1975

421

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Decolonisation, Modernisation and Nation-Building: Political Development Theory and the Appeal of Communism in Southeast Asia, 1945–1975

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Modernisation theory and political development theory played a key role in the formalisation of the study of Southeast Asia, while the dramatic transitions from colonies to nation-states in the region and the deepening war in Vietnam were also pivotal to the rise and transformation of modernisation theory. This article provides a critical historical overview of the rise and elaboration of theories of political development and nation-building between 1945 and 1975.

Introduction: ideologies of Western dominance and ideologies of modernisation

Michael Adas, in his important study of 'ideologies of Western dominance', questions the idea that the influential theories of modernisation that emerged during the late colonial and early Cold War periods were 'primarily' new concepts created to 'counter the appeal of Communism' in the 'underdeveloped world'. In his view, although the theories of modernisation of the Cold War era were 'recast in development jargon', they were grounded in ideas which were 'deeply rooted' in the 'historical experience' of Western Europe and North America.¹ Michael E. Latham's innovative examination of 'ideologies of modernisation' parallels Adas and concludes that, contrary to the arguments of their advocates, those theories that emerged in the 1950s and early 1960s 'were neither decisive intellectual breakthroughs nor completely new political initiatives'. He argues that while the basic assumptions of these emergent theories of modernisation were clearly grounded in the culture of Cold War North America, modernisation theorists also 'reframed' earlier 'imperial ideals' in order to tell US citizens 'who they were' and to clarify what the projection of US 'power could achieve'. As with earlier 'imperial ideology', says Latham, modernisation theory distinguished between 'backward' and 'advanced' regions, at the same time as it represented the United States as the 'summit of modernity' with a 'mission to transform a world eager to learn the lessons only America could teach'.²

These are sophisticated and insightful analyses; however, both scholars – particularly Adas – place too much emphasis on the relative continuity between the post-1945

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¹ Michael Adas, *Machines as the measure of men: Science, technology, and ideologies of Western dominance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), pp. 403, 413.

² Michael E. Latham, *Modernization as ideology: American social science and 'nation building' in the Kennedy era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), pp. 14–15, 58–9, 68.

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