



The Production of Modernization: Daniel Lerner, Mass Media, and the Passing of Traditional Society. By Hemant Shah. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2011. 226 pp. ISBN: 9781439906158.

During the Cold War era, the Middle East was a battleground for a fierce ideological contest between the United States and the USSR. The two nations struggled to win the hearts and minds of the “new nations” of the postcolonial world by providing them with modernization projects. It was a war to entice the emerging nations into two differing versions of modernity. Part of the war was fought through the provision of development aid, but the main rivalry was pursued over the air waves, via mass media: specifically, in the competition between Radio Moscow and Voice of America (VOA).

In 1949, VOA, funded by the State Department, commissioned the Bureau of Applied Social Research (BASR) at Columbia University to conduct a survey on the radio-listening habits of people in the six Middle Eastern countries of Turkey, Lebanon, Egypt, Syria, Jordan, and Iran. The purpose of the study was to help VOA beat its Soviet competitor in influencing public opinion in the Middle East. Daniel Lerner (1917–1980), an experienced propagandist, was one of the main figures who led the survey. He wrote several reports on the project and produced a book on the theory of modernization and mass media. The book, *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East*, was a breakthrough in the field of communication studies. It argued that exposure to media messages would facilitate the transition of Muslim societies from tradition to modernity. More than 50 years after its publication, Lerner’s monograph remains a seminal text in what, in the field of communication studies, is known as development communication. Hemant Shah’s new book, *The Production of Modernization: Daniel Lerner, Mass Media, and the Passing of Traditional Society*, is an engaging account of Lerner’s career trajectory and the theoretical influences behind the production of *The Passing*.

Shah argues that, despite the popularity of Lerner’s modernization theory, its genesis has not yet been thoroughly explored by media scholars. Shah situates *The Passing* and its author in the three interlinked contexts: cold war geopolitics, the emergence of behavioral sciences, and post-war racial liberalism. The book draws extensively on archival records, Lerner’s other publications, official documents, and interviews with some of Lerner’s colleagues. Organizing the volume in six chapters, Shah structures his study around Lerner’s institutional locations. The first chapter provides a general background on the topic; the second chapter explores Lerner’s career as a military propaganda analyst during the Second World War. It was during his time working in the Psychological Warfare Division, an institution staffed with social scientists, that he learned the effectiveness of mass media in prompting social change. The third chapter is about Lerner at Stanford and his engagement with a large research project at the Hoover Institute. The fourth chapter provides a detailed account of the VOA project at Columbia University, during which Lerner formulated his modernization theory. The fifth chapter examines Lerner’s work at MIT and the key elements of

his modernization theory in *The Passing*. The final chapter sums up an overview of Lerner's theoretical legacy.

Lerner categorized people in the Middle East into three groups: traditional, transitional, and modern. He argued that media messages would enable audiences to identify with people and ideas that are different and distant from them, an effect he called "empathy," that is, "the capacity to see oneself in the other fellow's situation" (quoted in Shah, 2011, p. 49). Empathy, then, would lead the person to desire the lifestyles and values exercised in those far-away lands. Based on his VOA data, he described a "modern" Middle Eastern person as someone who has opinions, has empathy, and is happier than a "traditional" person. After its publication, Lerner's theory was criticized for its simplistic approach and flawed methodology. Later, Lerner revised part of his modernization theory, but remained a firm believer in the role of mass media in bringing about societal transformations.

The question of race is inherent in development discourse. After World War II and the revelation of Hitler's race-based atrocities in Europe, the Americans reconsidered the race question at home. Racial liberalism, Shah argues, was one of the main ideas behind Lerner's theory of modernization. Lerner refused the biological argument for Western "superiority" and argued that West is only culturally superior to the rest, and that underdeveloped nations could become modern if they took the right steps toward modernization.

In addition to offering an enlightening background to Lerner's modernization theory, Shah also provides an account of the struggles that a group of social scientists in the mid-20th century faced to legitimize social research as a valid scientific enterprise in American academe. After the war, Shah argues, American social scientists were in the midst of an identity crisis and had to address skepticism from natural scientists, who doubted the scientific validity of the social and behavioural sciences. Efforts, such as Lerner's, to conduct quantitative research and empirical surveys were meant to prove to funding agencies that "in the post war era, the most important problems were not in the realm of understanding and controlling nature but in the realm of social stability and social order" (p. 16). Despite these efforts, both the National Academy of Sciences and later the National Science Foundation rejected requests to include social science disciplines in their funding programs.

Lerner's legacy in modernization and communication studies is still relevant. In the period between 1997 and 2006, about 14 percent of the studies conducted on media and development used Lerner's model. While acknowledging Lerner's contribution to communication studies and modernization theory, Shah rigorously critiques Lerner's theory and the political influences that shaped it. Throughout the book, Shah remains an impartial narrator of events and ideas that formed the production of *The Passing*. In the last chapter, however, he lets go of this restraint by criticizing Lerner from various postcolonial perspectives. Shah argues that Lerner's ideas promoted American exceptionalism, that Western modernizationists are secular equivalents of Christian missionaries, and that there is an inherently racist component to modernization theory. In conclusion, I believe *The Production of Modernization* makes an insightful contribution to modernization theory and development communication. It

provides a rich account of the life and ideas of a man whose by-product of services in America's Cold War crusade against Communism contributed greatly to the advancement of media studies scholarship.

Reference

Lerner, Daniel. (1958). *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East*. Glencoe, IL: The Free Press.

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