



Two-minute review

Mandarins of the Future

Author: Nils Gilman

Why you should read the book

You want to understand why your American partners believe that they can teach the world a lesson.

You pitch yourself and your organization as modern, but never thought about modernity's origins or meaning.

You want to improve the world, but you also want to avoid the mistakes of your predecessors.

You are curious about how ideas about history shape high-level decision-making.

Why you should not read the book

Any book that extensively discusses something called 'technocosmopolitan modernization theory' is an immediate no-go.

You do not need 276 pages to convince yourself that well-meaning but insecure people can make big mistakes.

What you should learn from the book

The book shows that resorting to claims of modernity can be dangerously political in nature. Gilman illustrates how American society in the 1950's dealt with great internal and external anxiety by creating a myth of being superior to the rest of the world. This myth got enmeshed with modernization theory, a too-close-for-comfort collaboration between social theorists and policymakers attempting to make the world look more like the US – and less like the Soviet Union.

As Gilman remarks, this superiority thinking re-emerged immediately after the 9-11 attacks, as the modernity of the US was publicly contrasted with the backwardness of Al-Qaeda and the Taliban (you can add the Iraqi insurgents and ISIS in recent days). You could conclude that when people or societies feel the need to profess their own superiority (whether labelled as 'modernity', 'civilization', or any other term), they are actually hiding their own insecurities. In this sense, it is interesting to note that European conservatives are currently also stressing that Westerners should be proud of their 'enlightened modernity'.

Secondly, Gilman shows what happens when politically motivated theories about history start to influence your decisions. For one, the contrast between "modern" and "traditional" countries produced problematic generalizations, as Latin American, African, and Asian countries were all lumped together in one and the same category. For another, the accurate assessment of the past was replaced with history that supported a desired path towards the future, leading to the belief that tradition (and even history itself) should be regulated or replaced with all things modern.

In short, the absolute belief in modernization theory led its proponents to discard almost anything that they deemed to be old or traditional, completely sidestepping the existing structures of the societies they tried to modernize. As a result, the application of modernization theory led US policymakers to prefer "developmental dictatorships" over "vulnerable" democracies, whilst some modernization theorists believed that their ideas would certainly win the Vietnam War. Violence and destruction eventually became a side-effect of "forcing men to be free", as the historical goal of modernization legitimized many painful measures in faraway countries.

The best bit

The section where Gilman explains how historical studies about US exceptionalism led social theorists to believe that the US was a model for the rest of the world. American theorists argued that the US was unique and therefore *should* be copied. American historians argued that the US was unique and therefore *could not* be copied. The mistakes of the policymakers believing the social theorists eventually vindicated the historians.

The most remarkable quotes

"On the one hand, the language and practice of modernization expressed a confidence that the United States should be a universal model for the world and a sense that the United States had a duty to promote this model. On the other hand, "modernization" arose at a moment when Americans felt both unsure about how to define themselves, and challenged by geopolitical ideological competitors."

"To put the matter bluntly, to a peasant, the aims of postwar Communists and liberal capitalists seemed more similar than different: both wanted to build a centralizing, tax-collecting state charged with making its citizens legible and docile."

"The postcolonial world thus became a stage on which domestically frustrated liberals could act out their social reformist fantasies."

Mandarins of the future. Modernization theory in Cold War America by Nils Gilman, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003. Review by Dr. Bram De Ridder, KU Leuven.