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Author(s): Javadbay Khalilzada

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Modernization and Social Change in Azerbaijan: Assessing the Transformation of Azerbaijan through the Theories of Modernity

Javadbay Khalilzada*

Abstract

The socialist development model of the Soviet Union has attracted much scholarly attention over the years, but the modernization experiences of singular post-Soviet countries (e.g. Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Turkmenistan) are rarely discussed. This may be because these countries have only recently gained their independence in the early 1990s and that perhaps most observers are still unsure about their trajectories. This study aims to contribute to the literature by examining the case of Azerbaijan in light of various influential theories of modernity (i.e. the classical modernization theory, neo-modernization theory and multiple modernities paradigm). Azerbaijan's modernization process has been characterized by fluctuations, reversals and various external influences over the years. The country first emerged as an independent political entity in 1918 and attempted to follow a systematic cultural Westernization and secularization program. Yet it was occupied by the Bolshevik Red Army in 1920 and annexed into the newly formed Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) – being forced to conform to the top-down socialist development model directed by Moscow for many decades. Since gaining its independence once again after the disintegration of the USSR in 1991, Azerbaijan has operated as a secularist country, faltering to democratize and trying to integrate to the global economic system as an energy-producing (i.e. oil and natural gas) rentier economy. While Azerbaijan has sought to become part of the so-called “Western civilization” via building close ties with Turkey, US, Israel, NATO and the EU, the ruling elites in Baku have resisted any calls for democratic reform – not unlike the rentier economies of the Middle East such as Iran and Saudi Arabia. This article will argue that the complex development track of Azerbaijan provides an appropriate case to challenge the hypotheses of the classical modernization and neo-modernization theories, while supporting those of the multiple modernities paradigm.

Keywords: Azerbaijan; Modernization; Social Change; Secularism; Economic Development; Democratization

Introduction

Located at the crossroads of the so-called “West” and “East” in the South Caucasus, Azerbaijan is the first predominantly Muslim country that established a secular parliamentary democratic republic in the Islamic world. Prior to the 1920 invasion by the Bolshevik Red Army, the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR) (1918-1920) had designed and practised a democratic institutional and parliamentary system that lasted for about 23 months. Though

*Javadbay Khalilzada; Department of Political Science, Kent State University, Ohio, USA. Email: javadbaykhalilzada@gmail.com.

the vacuum of power that emerged after the collapse of the Russian Empire was the primary factor leading to independence, the Azerbaijani society itself – particularly the intellectuals and socio-economic elites – had played a significant role in developing a national consciousness and distinct identity. Starting from the 1870s, comprehensive social and economic reforms were implemented to modernize the Russian Empire via increasing industrial production and literacy. The Azerbaijani elites benefited from and used these policies to enlighten a predominantly agricultural society – seeking to transform it from a traditional Islamic society to a “modern” one inclined towards a western style of state system: namely urban, industrial, literate, democratic, and secular.

The first modernization stage of Azerbaijan can be said to have begun in the mid-1870s and lasted until the fall of the ADR in 1920. The Russian Empire applied imperialist policies over Azerbaijan and tried to find novel ways to more effectively exploit the natural resources of the country. Opposing Russian imperial rule, the nascent local bourgeoisie and intellectuals gradually developed a national identity and established new political movements for the purpose of resisting the discriminatory and exploitative policies of the Empire. There was clearly a dialectical relationship between the gradual emergence of Azerbaijan as a political entity and the Russian Empire’s quasi-colonial rule over the Caucasus and Central Asia. The Azerbaijani national identity – not unlike the cases of many other colonized peoples around the world – developed in parallel to the deepening of imperialist rule throughout the late 19th century, finally culminating with the foundation of the ADR at the first sign of a weakness in the imperial centre (i.e. Russia) towards the end of World War I.

Following the occupation of Azerbaijan by Bolshevik Russia, Azerbaijan came under the heavy influence of Soviet modernity. This second stage of Azerbaijan’s modernization experience continued until the collapse of the USSR in 1991. According to Johann Arnason (2000: 61), “the Soviet way of development was a failed revolt against [capitalist Western] modernity” and Moscow tried to reform the Soviet Union via integrating elements from the Western model of modernity such as free speech, the union collapsed entirely. Azerbaijan gained its independence and has sought to integrate to the Western world ever since. There are studies on the modernization of Azerbaijan written in Russian language from the official Soviet socialist perspective during the Soviet rule. However, there is a gap in the literature (especially in English) on how the modernization path of the country could be evaluated through the perspectives of contending theories of modernity (i.e. the classical modernization theory, neo-modernization theory and the multiple modernities paradigm) developed across the Western world. Remediating this gap is the main objective of this article.

As mentioned above, Azerbaijan’s historical development has evolved in three distinct stages over the years. Before the Soviet invasion, Azerbaijan was a quasi-colony of the Russian Empire and this period was followed by approximately two years of independence. It is necessary to examine this historical period in this study in order to effectively understand the beginning of the country’s transformation and highlights its differences from the Soviet model that dominated the trajectory of Azerbaijan for much of the 20th century. The final stage of Azerbaijan’s modernization trajectory begins after the collapse of the Soviet Union and continues at the present. Thus, we will seek to understand the continuities and breaks within the unique route of Azerbaijan’s modernization since the 1870s. We will also seek to explain the character of Azerbaijani modernity today, discussing its similarities with and

divergences from the Western modernity model and the models of other non-Western societies. The following section of the article introduces and comparatively analyses the arguments of the three theories of modernity utilized in this study. This will establish the conceptual framework of this study. Then, we will examine the modernization experience of Azerbaijan to reflect back on the hypotheses of these theories in light of empirical data obtained from the Azerbaijan case.

Debating Modernity: Contending Approaches to Modernization

With the decolonisation process gaining steam after World War II, modernization studies attracted the interest of social scientists from various academic disciplines such as sociology, economics, political science, and international relations. As a result of the earlier studies in the late 1940s and 1950s, a multi-disciplinary approach known as the “classic modernization theory” (CMT) emerged and dominated the academic discourse until the 1970s (So 1990; Göksel 2015a: 72-99). CMT was the first holistic approach that defined modernity and put forward indicators to differentiate the concepts of “modern” from and “non-modern”. Adopting a positivist/progressivist reading of human history, CMT argues that all the traditional characteristics of a society would gradually be replaced by modern ones (So 1990: 33-34; Erkilet 2007: 108-138; Göksel 2017: 147-148). Modernization is generally perceived to be a multifaceted process involving changes in all areas of human thought and activity (Huntington 1968: 32). This multifaceted process could be explained as an expansion of scientific and technological knowledge, industrialization, urbanization, a mass consumption society, secularization, institutional centralization, legalization and democratization (Lerner 1958; Levy 1968; Apter 1965; Huntington 1968; Rostow 1960).

Modernization refers to the transformation of a society from a “traditional” state of affairs to a supposedly “modern” one which is generally also assumed to be far superior to the former (Göksel 2018a). To illustrate the distinctions between the modern and the traditional, CMT scholars defined three inter-related processes of transformation: social development, economic development, and political development. These three were seen as the “holy trinity” of modernization (Huntington 1968: 33-34; So 1990: 33–34; Escobar 1995; Levy 1968; Zapf 2004:2). According to CMT, these features are the main characteristics of modernity, but they can be diversified. Development in social fields reflects the elimination of traditional practices and their replacement with supposedly more “rational” ones. The influence of mythical and religious beliefs decreases via secularization. Political development results in the formation of centralized state structures, the institutionalization of formal/legal decision-making mechanisms, and democratization. Parallel to these, economic development means the mechanization of manufacturing, industrialization, and urbanization. Overall, CMT defines a predominantly secularized, urbanized, industrialized, and liberal democratic society as an ideal “modern society” (Turner 1984: 3).

CMT scholars have consistently argued that there is a positive correlation between the aforementioned three development processes and that each one of these fortify the other two. The positive correlation between these characteristics enables the achievement of a modern society and this was defined as a “positive feedback loop” (Lerner 1958; Apter 1965; Zapf

2004: 2; Göksel 2018b, 2016). The so-called positive feedback loop has been defined by Dale F. Eickelman and James Piscatori (1996: 23) as follows:

Economic specialization, it was argued, leads to political institutionalization; and the displacement of traditional, usually landed, elites by urban middle classes leads to the emergence of centralized commercial, bureaucratic, and educational structures. According to this formulation of modernization theory, superstition wanes and religion recedes from a role in public life. The religious establishment comes to be seen as resistant to change. As the civic order becomes secularized, “rational” conduct becomes the norm, and this leads to greater political participation or, at the least, political stability.

CMT’s understanding of modernity has been mainly inferred through the examining the development paths of Western societies such as France, Britain and the US. Therefore, modernization was generally assumed as a Westernization process (So 1990). Whenever non-Western countries launched some reforms and modernization processes, like Turkey and Iran in the 19th century, they were expected to – and aimed to – resemble their Western counterparts. The more they resembled the West, more they would be classified as “modern” by observers (Göksel 2015a, 2016). On the whole, modernization seemed to CMT scholars as a direct rupture from tradition. Whenever a modernization process was initiated, it would be impossible to go back and to retain characteristics of traditional lifestyles. So regardless of variants within the broad school of thought classified as CMT, CMT scholars essentially emphasized the dichotomy of “tradition” and “modernity” (Apter 1965: 7, So 1990: 33-34; Berberoglu 1992: 8). It asserts that traditional and modern features of lifestyle are incompatible and cannot co-exist in the same realm/space.

Over the years, many critics have focused on the Eurocentric nature of the framework of the CMT based on understanding modernization as unidirectional, irreversible, linear, and sharp contrasting approaches towards “tradition” and “modernity”. In the 1970s and 1980s, some schools of thought such as dependency theory, world-system theory, and the neo-modernization theory (NMT) strongly questioned the validity of CMT. Since the arguments raised by the dependency theory and the world-system theory are more related to the international economic system as a whole – thus less related to this study’s objective – we shall focus more on NMT in detail in the following sections.

Developments in the Western world and notable non-Western countries throughout the 1970s and 1980s illustrated that the global modernization process was not occurring as CMT imagined. According to NMT scholars, a clear-cut transition from tradition to modernity does not represent reality, modernization is not linear, and cultural change does not move in a straight line (Bernstein 1971: 146; Inglehart and Welzel 2005: 33-35). In the context of East Asia, traditional and religious values have been argued to have strongly contributed to political and economic development; in fact people could not totally abandon their traditions and some elements of tradition co-exist with modernity (So 1990; Zapf 2004: 4, Wagner 2012). According to Banuazizi (1987), tradition can be as reflective, creative, and responsive to individual and collective needs as its modern counterpart. Tradition has immense potential for social mobilization and change. In contrast to the argument that tradition prevents development, it has been argued (Wong 1988; Davis 1987; Banuazizi 1987) that, in some contexts, traditional values actually contribute towards modern development. Wong (1988:

142) demonstrates that traditional Chinese family industry has no negative effects on economic development and vice versa. Kinship, in reality, supports economic development:

There exists a much stronger measure of trust among *jia* (family) members than among unrelated business partners; consensus is easier to attain; the need mutual accountability is reduced. These factors enable family firms to be more adaptable in their operations. They can make quick decisions during rapidly changing circumstances and maintain greater secrecy by committing less to written records. As a result, they are particularly well-suited to survive and flourish in situations where a high level of risk is involved.

The emerging influence of religious groups and conservative political movements around the world in the post-1980 period also demonstrated that the secularization process could not entirely eliminate religious beliefs and traditional values as predicted earlier by CMT. Besides the increasing involvement of religious groups among political movements in the Muslim-majority Middle East countries (e.g. Turkey, Egypt, Afghanistan and Iran), there was also a resurgence of religiosity in the US, a Western society, as Evangelical churches and communities have steadily increased their cultural and political influence since the early 1980s and also formed a key foothold within the Republican Party. It is clear that secularization not only fails to wipe out religious beliefs in the semi-modern/developing countries but also in the “most advanced” Western nations. Despite the firm suppression of religion in the officially atheist USSR, religion also survived across its vast territories. From the 1980s onwards, in fact, its position in the state and society strengthened (Shubin 2006).

Unsurprisingly, NMT scholars have built their arguments around a criticism of the irreversible secularization hypothesis of CMT. In an influential study, for instance, Davis (1987) illustrates how religion has contributed towards the modern development of Japan. In contrast to the CMT argument that religion prevents development at the same time as modernity, Davis discusses the functional or legitimating role of religion, and how religion itself has been transformed in order to accommodate its new role in an urban consumer society. However, despite their difference of opinion over the role of religion and tradition in a modern society, NMT also accepted some of the ideas raised by CMT. For instance, with the collapse of the USSR – the main rival of the West – NMT scholars once again popularized the tired CMT hypothesis that there cannot be any other modernity model beyond the liberal democratic and capitalist modernity of the West (Fukuyama 1992). NMT scholars such as Francis Fukuyama have in fact breathed new life into the convergence thesis of CMT which long assumed that the Western modernity is universal, thus equally applicable to all societies around the globe. Moreover, NMT also contends that social, political and economic developments occur concurrently and “feed on” one another (Inglehart and Welzel 2005; Göksel 2016).

Challenging the Eurocentric approaches and such exclusive models of modernization raised by CMT and NMT, the multiple modernities paradigm (MMP) is a relatively new approach that began to receive acclaim from the early 1990s onwards. MMP’s main argument is that “Westernization” cannot possibly be the only path to, and form of, modernity (Eisenstadt 2000; Wittrock 2000; Wagner 2000, 2008). MMP studies concentrate on how different states/nations understand modernity and how they practice it within radically different settings under divergent circumstances. In contrast to CMT and NMT, MMP

assumes that there is not one kind of modernity and that it is not a necessity for non-Western states to follow the Western path in order to be “modern” (Göksel 2016). In addition, it argues, in fact, that there was never one kind of modernity – even in Europe (Eisenstadt 2000, 2003, Silva and Mónica Brito Vieira 2009; İşıksal and Göksel 2018: 46-48). MMP scholars believe in the possibility of different paths to modernity beyond the singular perception of human evolution defined by CMT and NMT – both of which they accuse of being Eurocentric (Eisenstadt 1996; Wagner 2000; Wittrock 2002; Schmidt 2006; Fourie 2012). MMP re-conceptualizes modernity as a more comprehensive process with Western modernity being but one of the various possible ways (Lee 2006; Göksel 2016). The concept of modernization is defined by MMP as “a process of systemic changes” for which its “direction and results cannot be predicted” (Eisenstadt 2000: 3). As Kaya (2004: X) states:

The concept of later modernities suggests that there have been multiple ways to modernity and that those multiple ways give rise to multiple consequences. These consequences do not converge anywhere, neither under the label of liberal democracy nor under that of communist society.

According to MMP, characteristics which emerged in Western countries as features of modernity (industrialization, urbanization, democratic statehood institutions, secular society) that were used as the measurement for evaluating societies as “modern” and “unmodern” are no longer valid. At the present time, nearly all societies possess these features in different forms. Moreover, as Eisenstadt (2000: 2) argues, some states use the economic features in the same way as in the Western world; however, they do not construct liberal democratic political institutions. In this context, MMP argues that characteristics modern societies adopt can vastly differ according to the society and their cultural worldview (Schmidt 2006: 80).

When it comes to comparing various industrialized and democratic countries, significant differences emerge. For instance, liberal capitalism is peculiar to Anglo-American societies but Japan and Germany have a more statist/non-liberal type of capitalism. Differences are not only in economy and political life, but can also be seen in the fields of science, education, medicine and so on. Each country has its own track of modernization that developed as a result of particular historical, social, and regional factors. Even two neighbouring countries, such as Germany and France, have different practices and experiences of modernity. Until World War I, virtually no European country had the type of political order that classic modernist scholars defined as emblematic of modernity (Wittrock 2002: 35). According to Schmidt (2006), it is clear that there are varieties of modernity. Modernization continues to develop and changes its assumptions in course of time.

The post-1980 development trajectories of some non-Western countries such as China, Russia, and Turkey have strengthened MMP’s hypothesis (Kaya 2004; Göksel 2018b, 2019). MMP puts forward a distinct framework to define modernity: a modern society is one that has experienced a process of transformation in the fields of political, economic and social development (Wagner 2012: 10). However, in contrast to the claims of CMT and NMT, which are known as the “holy trinity” – i.e. the necessary positive correlation of social, economic, and political development – MMP illustrates a flexible correlation between these characteristics (see **Table 1**). Developments such as democratization, industrialization, gender equality, literacy, urbanization and secularization do not necessarily happen

concurrently, do not need to reinforce each other and that they follow a varied trajectory in different countries (Kaya 2004). Moreover, MMP assumes that modernization is an ongoing process and that this ongoing process does not mean that it will be better than the previous one. It is an ongoing process according to multiple modernities and it consists of unexpected upheavals (Eisenstadt 2000; Wagner 2000, 2012).

In the following section, the study will analyse the social, economic, and political development trajectories of Azerbaijan while reflecting on the aforementioned arguments of the three rival theories of modernity.

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of the Theories of Modernity

Concepts	Theories		
	<i>Classic Modernization</i>	<i>Neo-Modernization</i>	<i>Multiple Modernities</i>
Modernity	Economic, social, and political development: strong correlation.	Economic, social and political development: strong correlation.	Economic, social and political development, <i>without</i> a strong correlation between them.
Features of modern society	Capitalist, secular, liberal democracy (Modernity and is equated with “westernization”)	Capitalist liberal democracy (Modernity is equated with “westernization”)	Many possible modernities: (e.g. socialist, authoritarian etc.)
Idea of Progress	Unidirectional progress: (e.g. “irreversible secularization thesis”)	Development is not unidirectional, it could regress and collapse. Some traditional features support development.	Development is not unidirectional, it could regress and collapse. Some traditional features support development.
Development Processes	Positive feedback loop between democratization, social and economic development	Positive feedback loop between democratization, social and economic development	No feedback loop between development processes are possible
Religion	Complete secularization of society is necessary for modernity	A religious interpretation that positively portrays capitalism and democracy is sufficient (i.e. Protestant ethics, Islamic Calvinism)	Social development in terms of secularization or ideological moderation of religious groups is not an absolute requisite for modernity
Islam	Incompatible with modernity	Is compatible with democracy and capitalism depending on interpretation	As there are many “modernities”, there are also many “Islamism”, some of which are compatible with modernity

Source: Göksel (2016: 249).

The Energy-Driven Early Modernization of Azerbaijan: Economic and Political Changes

It is a fact that Azerbaijan possesses rich natural resources. At the present, oil and natural gas contribute towards nearly 75% of Azerbaijan’s state revenues and around 50% of the GDP (Göksel 2015b). As a site of one of the earliest known oilfields in the world, Baku has gained a notable reputation for oil production from the last quarter of the 19th century onwards. After the abolition of serfdom in Azerbaijan in 1870 and the replacement of the monopoly system

by the auction of oil-fields to private owners, from 1872 onwards, the oil industry started to rapidly develop. The discovery of new rich oil lands in the 1870-74 period popularized the Baku oil industry. Additionally, Russian and Western investors such as the Nobel Brothers and the Rothschild family invested in the oil industry of Azerbaijan.

Indicators show how fast the Baku oil industry developed in the last quarter of the 19th century: from the 1870s to the turn of the 20th century, the Baku oil industry grew in output (to its peak in 1901) and in the size of its labour force. Output rose from approximately 14,300 barrels (bbl) in 1872 to approximately 70,600,000 (almost 200,000 bbl/day) in the peak year 1901; more than the combined production of all the US fields for that year (Altstadt 1992). The industry also caused an increase in labour force. The number of oil workers increased from 1,254 in 1883 to 27,673 in 1901 (Altstadt 1992: 22).

Transportation, railroads, and shipping were developed alongside the oil industry. Baku's oldest rail line was built in 1880 to connect cities with the oil districts. In 1884, the Transcaucasian Railway was built to transport oil to the Black Sea. It ran from Baku to Batumi via Ganja and Tiflis and this railway also contributed to the economic life of passing districts. The number of ships on the Caspian Sea more than quadrupled between 1887 and 1899. The first Bank, the branch of state bank was opened in 1880 (Altstadt 1992; Suleymanov 2001). Baku was the fastest developing urban centre of the Caucasus and was rapidly transforming from a traditional town towards a multi-dimensional fully-industrialized city. According to Suleymanov (2001), as a result of Russian imperial industrialization, urbanization increased and 35% of the Azerbaijani population began to live in urban areas at the beginning of the 20th century on the eve of the 1917 Revolution.

Economic and social development created a pluralist society and government structure in Azerbaijan. The Russian imperial policy had banned Muslim members to become the majority in the City Council, with non-Christians being allowed only to constitute one-third of council members. However, the Azerbaijani intelligentsia strongly resisted this rule and began to participate in elections in 1908. Despite the repressive legal system and opposition from the Russian-appointed viceroy, the City Council gradually fell under the control of Azerbaijani Turks. They ignored demands for new elections and remained the majority until the end of the Russian Empire (Altstadt 1992; Seyidzada 1999; Ismayilov 2007; Zerdabli 2008). The emergent political institutionalization of the Azerbaijani nation was concluded with the establishment of the first secular state in the Muslim world, as the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR) declared its independence in 1918 after the collapse of the Russian Empire.

The ADR suffered from acute political instability and had five coalition governments within two years, but it successfully reached its objective of receiving formal recognition as a de facto sovereign nation-state by European powers in January 1920 at the Paris Peace Conference. The ADR was a turning point for the political modernization of Azerbaijan as its brief spell of independence later became a key reference point when the Soviet Union began to crumble in the late 1980s. The ADR's official statement of independence declared (Altstadt 1992: 89-90):

Sovereign rights belong to the Azerbaijani people. From this perspective, it is a democratic republic and it follows... Independent Azerbaijan is a democratic republic...

All citizens are guaranteed full civil and political rights regardless of their nationality, religion (the only mention of religion in this declaration), social position, or sex.

As such, the foundational document of the ADR granted all rights that citizens already possess in contemporary democratic states, and the political system of ADR was defined as a secular, multi-party parliamentary government. The ADR also provided universal suffrage to its population regardless of ethnic identity and gender. Thus, the ADR was the first state that recognized the suffrage of women in the Muslim world. The leading party of the state was the *Musavat* under the leadership of Mahammad Emin Rasalzade. Besides *Musavat*, there were four other parties, the *Hummet*, *Ittihad*, *Ahrar* and the *Socialist Blocks of Muslims*. The parliament was multi-ethnic and minorities had representatives, with division being as follows; 80 of 125 deputies were Azerbaijani, 21 Armenian, 10 Russian, 3 places for big companies which invested in Baku oil and 1 seat per minority groups, namely Polish, Georgians, and Jews (İsmayılov and Nigar Maksvel 2008: 284-285).

In the case of Azerbaijan, it can be clearly seen that oil-industry led economic development triggered or accelerated political development (in the form of nation-state formation) as CMT and NMT assume. The rich energy sources provided economic power to the emergent political entity in the country, and its potential as a global energy provider was also influential to ensure its diplomatic recognition by European powers. Economic development also led to social change. A philanthropic local bourgeoisie (e.g. Hagi Zeynalabdin Taghiyev, Murtuza Mukhtarov, Shamsi Asadullayev, and Yusif Aga Dadashov) channelled significant resources towards the institutionalization of the Azerbaijani state as well as social development in the form of establishing education institutions across the country. Numerous secular schools, newspapers and political parties were founded with the support of the Azerbaijani bourgeoisie in the years preceding the ADR's foundation as well as during its two year independent rule.

However, Azerbaijan's independent modernization experience was cut short with the Bolshevik invasion of 1920 – leading to an extremely traumatic totalitarian rule for seven decades and the implementation of the top-down socialist modernization project. Most of the Azerbaijani intellectuals and bourgeoisie were executed by Soviet authorities in the years following the 1920 invasion and as a result of mass collectivization (especially during the Stalinist period); all private possession was seized by the state. All economic and political governance were managed by Moscow and the member states' roles (e.g. Azerbaijan) were to meet the goals and whims of central planning. The political secretary of the Azerbaijani Communist Party was appointed by Moscow, and the secretaries had to meet the central planning and satisfy it. Since the socialist model of development of the Soviet Union has been studied exhaustively and due to lack of space in this work, we do not examine this period in detail beyond a brief look at its overall impact on Azerbaijan's trajectory. It is important to note that until the 1970s, Azerbaijan's natural resources were exploited in the name of the USSR's so-called "brotherhood economy". For instance, in the mid-1930s, the territory of Azerbaijan produced approximately 60 to 70% of the entire Soviet oil production and the Soviet Union became the second country in world in oil extraction. Towards the end of the 1930s, Azerbaijan began to produce more than 70% of oil extraction in the USSR (Suleymanov 2001). Moreover, Azerbaijan provided around 75% of all the USSR's and

around 85-90% of plane oil needs during the war years (Aras and Suleymanov 2010; Qaffarov 2008: 10-15). Thus, it should come as no surprise that Azerbaijan was one of the top targets that Nazi Germany aimed to – yet failed to – occupy during its invasion of Soviet Union in World War 2.

When Azerbaijan obtained its independence as a result of the collapse of the USSR in 1991, natural resources once again determined the destiny of the political and social life of Azerbaijan. According to Nuri Aras and Elchin Suleymanov (2011), Azerbaijan was one of the few states in the USSR that was economically ready for independence. However, unexpected factors negatively damaged Azerbaijani economic and political life in the 1990s: the war with Armenia over the Mountainous Karabakh, border troubles between former Soviet member states (e.g. Georgia, Russia and Ukraine) and a massive internal political instability within Azerbaijan. The war with Armenia took on a new form resembling an ongoing “cold war” after the ceasefire in 1994 and political stability was achieved in late 1995 (Cornell 2011). Early instability and war led to a massive economic failure in the early to mid-1990s.

From the late 1990s onwards, new lucrative contracts to export resources to the European market were signed and the establishment of political stability brought considerable economic development, however, the country has since faced significant problems. As **Table 2** shows, the country achieved a degree of welfare only after the opening of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline. The urbanization rate is still not very high in Azerbaijan, as 55% of the population live in cities, in comparison to modernized countries.¹ Azerbaijan could be seen as a developing country in terms of most of its economic indicators. Though the literacy rate is very high at 99%,² the country has problems in terms of transferring human capital to economic capital. Azerbaijan has concentrated on developing an independent economic policy and statehood which took a long time and this process still continues. Although the country achieved stability, the Azerbaijan economy is considered to be in transition and could not yet liberalize its economy and the country is not a member of the WTO (Suleymanov 2001; Ismayilov 2007; Aras and Suleymanov 2010).

The main problem of contemporary Azerbaijan in terms of economic development appears to be the lack of diversification. Industrialization is heavily concentrated in the oil and oil-related sectors of the country and other sectors are still under-developed. The Azerbaijani economy is entirely dependent on the global oil price. With the decline in oil prices beginning from 2014, the country has faced 100% devaluation on its currency in 2015. According to Transparency International, Azerbaijan is one of the most corrupt states with a rank of around 120 out of 168 countries examined in the study.³ The corrupt state bureaucracy does not let the private economy to develop. However, undoubtedly petrodollars have contributed to the development of economic and social life as **Table 2** shows. Nevertheless, the overall state of Azerbaijan’s economic life resembles that of potentially unsustainable *rentier* economies of the Middle East region (e.g. Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Libya, and Iraq).

Table 2: GDP Per Capita in Azerbaijan (in US\$)

Year	GDP (per capita)	Year	GDP (per capita)	Year	GDP (per capita)
1994	200	2001	790	2008	5410
1995	320	2002	830	2009	4880
1996	420	2003	880	2010	5800
1997	510	2004	1050	2011	7000
1998	540	2005	1580	2012	7490
1999	510	2006	2380	2013	7800
2000	620	2007	3480	2014	7800

Source: Azerbaijan State Statistic Institution (2014)

The post-independence economic development of the country since 1991 has not contributed to political development in the form of democratization as CMT and NMT assume. Although Abulfaz Elchibey's *Popular Front* was democratic and attempted to build a liberal democratic governance system, the Popular Front administration could not manage to stay in power for long. Due to ineffective bureaucratic control, it completely lost control over the economy and the security services, and a military coup caused a government change (Cornell 2001, 2011; Guliyev 2005; Ergun 2010). Following Elchibey's downfall, Heydar Aliyev – the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan (1969-1982) during the Soviet rule – rose to power and consolidated his rule until his death in 2002. His son, Ilham Aliyev, replaced him after winning the election in 2003. Heydar Aliyev had focused on building stability in the country and some scholars interpret that democratization was not his concern under the extra-ordinary circumstances following the disastrous war with Armenia (Rasizade 2003; Guliyev 2005; Cornell 2011). Heydar Aliyev himself explained his understanding of democracy as a “long-term process” as follows:

Some people think we should be able to establish democracy in a short time, but that is impossible. Azerbaijan is a young nation and democracy is new a concept. The United States has been advancing on the path of democracy for a long time – more than 200 years. You have achieved a lot, but you are still working on it. Democracy is not an apple you buy at the market and bring back home.⁴

Ilham Aliyev also followed his father's policies and the main goal of his government has been to achieve political stability and economic development. Aliyev stated that “all freedoms are protected in Azerbaijan. The freedom of speech and freedom of the press are fully provided. There is free internet in Azerbaijan. The freedom of assembly is fully guaranteed”.⁵ Indeed, according to Cornell, “President Ilham Aliyev was interested in economic development of Azerbaijan more than political development. Azerbaijan was a fast-growing country with the world's highest rate of GDP growth from 2006 to 2009”.⁶ Alongside accelerating the economic growth rates, Ilham Aliyev has also attempted to decrease the high corruption level and eliminate bureaucratic red tape in the country. For

instance, in 2012, the “Asan Xidmət” (Easy Service) was established to develop public services and eliminate corruption. He has repeatedly proclaimed that stability and gradual development, rather than sudden political changes, is the way forward for Azerbaijan’s salvation.⁷

In contrast to Aliyev’s perception of Azerbaijan as a democracy, the Freedom House Index and numerous scholars (Cornell 2011; Guliyev 2012; Bedford 2014) define the regime in Azerbaijan as authoritarian. In this context, the CMT and NMT’s shared hypothesis that notable economic development (i.e. industrialization and the emergence of highly educated urban middle class) leads to democratization is not valid in the Azerbaijani case. Azerbaijan has one of the highest literacy rates in the world, and – starting from the mid-2000s – the country achieved very high economic growth rates. However, this has not led to any form of notable public demand for democratization so far. In fact, not unlike in the Arab Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia, oil-driven economic development has consolidated authoritarianism. In this context, MMP’s hypothesis is more appropriate to the Azerbaijani case. MMP argues that authoritarian countries also could be economically modern and that economic development does not necessarily correlate with any form of democratization at the present or in the future. The case of Azerbaijan perfectly fits the hypothesis of MMP as such a type of “modernization without democratization” continues in the country.

The Social Transformation of Azerbaijan: State-Religion Relations

Beginning in the 1850s and the 1860s, a new secular education system appeared in predominantly Muslim Azerbaijan. Pioneers of this type of education were local intellectuals such as Abbaskulu Aga Bakukhanlı (1794-1846), Mirza Feth Ali Akhundzade (1812-1878), Seyyid Azim Shirvani (1835-1888), Hasan Melikzade Zerdabi (1837-1907), and Najafbay Vazirov (1854-1926). Most of them were educated in secular schools in Russia or cooperated with them. However, the local Muslim conservatives were not eager to enrol their children in secular schools and their scope remained restricted to small secularist circles with close cultural and economic ties to Russia and Europe.

The main turning point of the social transformation of the Azerbaijanis was the introduction of newspapers. The first newspaper published in the Azerbaijani Turkish language was “*Ekinçi*” (the Cultivator). “*Ekinçi*” made its first publication on 4 August 1875 and it was a pioneer in Azerbaijani intellectual and press history that contributed to the education and modernization of the country. Following *Ekinçi*, *Ziya* and *Ziya-i Caucasus* (1879-1884) and *Keshkul* (1883-1891) also devoted their writings to religious and education reforms and they promoted to society the importance of education and enlightenment (Swietochowski 1985; Altstadt 1992).

The bourgeoisie also supported the modernization and development process of Azerbaijan and its national identity. Philanthropic bourgeoisies such as Hacı Zeynalabdin Taghiyev, Murtuza Mukhtarov, Shamsi Asadullayev, and Yusif Aga Dadashov were sponsors of newspapers, journals, and schools. For instance, in the Muslim world, the first modern secular school for girls was opened in Baku in 1901 with the direct financial support of Taghiyev. These bourgeoisies also were the leading figures of national capital and industrialization. It is noteworthy to mention that both the intelligentsia and the bourgeoisie

class had experienced the discriminatory policy of the Russian Empire; hence, they consolidated their resistance against the Empire and their local collaborators by uniting their power.

On the verge of World War I, there were several newspapers and journals that played a significant role in Azerbaijani political and social life. Newspapers such as *Kaspi*, *Molla Nasreddin*, *Həyat*, *Teraqqi*, *Füyuzat*, *Shelale*, *Achig Söz* debated issues such as the Azerbaijani language, national identity formation, education programs, civil society, religion, and the need to obtain equal rights with Russians and Christians within the Empire. Ali Mardan Topchibashi, Mirza Alekper Sabir, Jalil Memedguluzade, Mahammad Emin Rasulzade, Nariman Narimanov, as well as other intellectuals, were active writers in the Azerbaijani press and resisted the Russian colonial policy and emphasized education and progress. For instance, the Molla Nasreddin journal, like its namesake, whose feigned foolishness masked wisdom, used elliptical language, ambiguity, satire, and cartoons against officialdom, religious conservatives, the unthinking person, and the corrupt bureaucrat. Molla Nasreddin and other such newspapers were tools examining the role of women in a traditional Muslim society (Altstadt 1992: 58). The slogan of development in Azerbaijani society was expressed by Alibey Huseyinzada: “Be inspired by the Turkish way of life, to worship God in accordance with the Muslim religion, and to adapt present-day European civilization”, which later was conceptualized as “*Türkleşmek, Islamlaşmak, Avrupalaşmak*” (Altstadt 1992: 70).

The Azerbaijani intellectuals were not against Islam and adopted it as one of the crucial elements to establish an Azerbaijani national identity. In the declaration of the founding party of the ADR, *Musavat* (Equality) Party, Islam was defined as one of the fundamental pillars of the Azerbaijani identity. At the same time, it was also emphasized that Musavat respect every ethnicity and religion without any discrimination. In the 1917 publication of the declaration in Musavat newspaper, it was stated that “the first element which creates humanity and humankind is its nationality, however, religion is an inseparable element of humankind, as Musavat we declare that national and religious equality will be sustained” (Goyushov 1997: 35). Subsequent to its independence, Musavat declared Azerbaijan a republic and a secular country. They did not prevent people from performing their religious duties and values. Azerbaijan was a secular country and it allowed all religious groups to perform their religious duties (Ismayilov & Maksvell 2008).

Art and literature offered another way to educate the people and adopt “European” modern culture. The Azerbaijanis composed operas, ballets, and other works based on the classics of Turkish language literature and folk traditions and/or Islamic culture. Uzeir and Jeyhun Hajibeyli Brothers, at the end of 1907, wrote the libretto for Uzeir’s opera, *Leyla and Majnun*, the first opera of the Islamic East (Altstadt 1992: 54). All these development of this period can be assessed as the “mini enlightenment” and the first crucial step in the social modernization of Azerbaijan.

As mentioned above, CMT assumes that religiosity would gradually vanish with the development of science and technology, however the Azerbaijani case is different and thus the CMT is not valid here. The Azerbaijani intellectuals acknowledged religion as one of the determining features of national identity. In this case, NMT’s hypothesis that in some cases religion could play a supporting role for modernization and development is valid in the

Azerbaijani case where religion was accepted as one of the pillars of Azerbaijani identity. In addition, secular education, equal rights of women with men, and the enlightenment of society were priorities of Azerbaijani intellectuals that demonstrate a universal and modern approach to mankind.

With the invasion of the Soviet Union, the development and modernization of the country was abruptly halted. The new system was not keen on continuing the natural bottom-up development of the society – which had begun in the 1870s. The Soviet system annihilated the bourgeois class, intelligentsia, and the top administration members of the ADR. With the *korenizatsiia* policy, the Communist Party intended to cut all ties with the past and build a new Soviet generation that was not affected by Islamic, Pan-Turkic or capitalist ideas and would instead embrace the official communist Marxist-Leninist ideology and lead the society on this way instead. To achieve its objectives, the USSR applied atheism in cultural and education systems. It should be noted that the USSR was successful in increasing the literacy rate of society, however, the system was not a natural evolution but instead a forced way of development that ultimately failed to fully eradicate religious practice as – it was pushed to underground instead (Settarov 1964: 120; Ehedov 1995: 153-158; Quliyev 2008: 275-280). According to Alexandre Benningsen (1984: 6-9), the Soviets applied three aspects of secularization:

First, almost complete but not total disappearance of the religious Islamic establishment. The means used to obtain this goal are propaganda and administrative measures. Second, part of “secularization” strategy is the accelerated modernization of the society through sedentization, and it caused deaths of numerous people. Third, social engineering, which was carried out in the Muslim territories by physical elimination between 1928 and 1941 of the entire pre-revolutionary bourgeoisie or aristocratic elite and its replacement by a completely new elite of popular, mainly peasant origin.

During the USSR period, the system tried to build its idealized Soviet citizen, therefore all aspects of personal and social life was controlled by the totalitarian system. Atheism was a state policy so religion was restricted. The education system was adjusted according to this ideological outlook. Economic life was focused to meet the central planning system. The Soviet period could be seen as a leap from a “traditional” society to an industrial one by force but it was an artificial experiment and it failed as Arnason (2000) notes in his exhaustive study on the Soviet modernization program.

The Azerbaijani society once again began to experience a new way of transformation after 1991. After independence, establishing centralized government and stability took time in Azerbaijan. Moreover, the Nagorno Karabakh conflict turned to an intense war between Azerbaijan and Armenia. There were nearly one million Internally Displaced People (IDP) across the country, which created a massive social problem for the fledgling Republic. During this complicated period, there were a lot of demonstrations in Azerbaijan and some Shi’a groups raised the portraits of Iranian Ayatollah Khomeini and green flags of the 1979 Islamic Revolution. These acts were interpreted as an attempt to establish an Islamic government resembling the theocratic Iranian Islamic Republic in Azerbaijan (Hasanov 2011: 197-99). However, subsequent developments demonstrated that, as was the case at the

beginning of the 20th century, Azerbaijan would continue as a secular state and that the social base of an Islamic state has remained very weak.

According to the Constitution, Azerbaijan is secular; it recognizes freedom of religion and consent for people to explicitly practice and propagate their beliefs. According to records, after the first decade of independence, over 1,300 mosques were built or renovated and opened for prayers (Abbasov 2014: 156). Currently, there are over 1,800 registered mosques operating in Azerbaijan.⁸

For 70 years, Azerbaijan was under the strict control of the communist-atheist Soviets, but the country began to witness an Islamic revival to some extent since 1991. There are three main groups of countries from which Islamic ideologies have been imported: the Islamic Republic of Iran, ethnic kin/relative and neighbour Turkey, and Arab states such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Kuwait. Due to its historical and cultural relations, initially Iran tried to propagate Shi'a Islam into Azerbaijan. However, Motika (2001: 114) argues that because of social and political circumstances, Iran has restricted influence. Turkey also exports religion through educational institutions, which is also restricted because at the social base, the Azerbaijani people are not inclined to be very devout. The third way, i.e. the Arab/Wahhabi Islam has also restricted influence because it is not the traditional way of Islam that Azerbaijanis have practiced.

At the present, Azerbaijan illustrates a rare example of a state where Shi'a and Sunni people co-exist peacefully and practice their religious duties together. However, the Shi'a and Sunni believers only consist of approximately 5% of the population. Although the rest of the population (95%) is Muslim, they do not practice the daily duties of Islam. Moreover, Azerbaijan recognizes equal rights to other religions such as Christians, Jews, and some other groups (Motika 2001; Hasanov 2011). Thus, Azerbaijan adopts the semblance of a secular structure and society. It follows also a secular education model (Hasanov 2011). From the viewpoint of the theories of modernity included in this study, Azerbaijan could be seen as a modern society that has considerably decreased the influence of religion in social life.

Thus, the Azerbaijani modernity model presents a mixed version of development. The Azerbaijani people express that they have religious belongings to Islam but most are not religious in daily life. The majority of people do not practice religious duties and the society presents a secular appearance on the whole – akin to most contemporary European societies. In the education system, the country follows a strictly secular mode and there are a few religious centres that teach religious education. So at the social level, Azerbaijan could be perceived as a largely secularized society.

Conclusion

Apart from MMP, as a critical approach towards the approaches put forward by the Eurocentric CMT and NMT, the Postcolonial Theory could also be considered as a suitable conceptual framework for this study. Postcolonial Theory challenges Eurocentric social theories and studies (Go 2016; Göksel 2018a), linear and universalist narratives of the West (Bush 2006: 96-98), and reconfigures dominant narratives to provide more adequate categories of analysis, where adequacy is measured in terms of increasing inclusivity and is oriented “backwards” as well as “forwards” (Bhabra 2007: 15; Göksel 2018a). However,

the Postcolonial Theory has not been adopted in this study because Azerbaijan was never a direct colony of Western empires and the Soviet rule differed from conventional colonialist governance model.

According to CMT and NMT, contemporary Azerbaijan is not a modern country since it is not a developed industrial and liberal democratic state. However, this does not mean that Azerbaijan is a traditional agricultural and religious state/country. The growing role of oil and natural gas consumption in the world has increased the significance of Azerbaijan within the global economic system. From the last quarter of the 19th century onwards, Azerbaijan's economy has depended on its natural resources and, even at the present, most of the state revenues depend on its natural resources. Developments in oil fields have also caused the industrialization of oil-related industries. However, other fields of industry have not developed as the oil and natural gas-related sectors have done. So it could be inferred that Azerbaijan is a semi-industrialized country at the economic level, resembling a classical *rentier* economy.

Azerbaijan is a developing country in terms of economic sphere; however, its rapidly increasing economic welfare since 1991 has not yet contributed to the democratization of the country. Azerbaijan can be best understood as a nation "in transition" at the present. It would not be fully accurate to perceive Azerbaijan as a consolidated authoritarian state such as China and Saudi Arabia, because there are potentially influential opposition groups and – in fact – the ineffectiveness and/or disorganized state of the opposition parties enables the government to adopt a more unilateral/authoritarian decision-making mechanism. On the other hand, external powers, particularly Western governments such as the US, also support the incumbent government, so international support, in fact, strengthen the authoritarian tendencies of Baku. Thus, despite its recent economic development and ability to foster a sizable educated urban middle class, Azerbaijan has not fulfilled the democratization expectations of CMT and NMT so far – albeit countries with similar levels of socio-economic development such as Tunisia has made much progress on that front.

The Azerbaijanis succeeded in establishing the first secular and democratic state in the Muslim world in 1918 but its natural development trajectory was interrupted by the invasion of the USSR in 1920. After gaining independence once again in 1991, the country has declared itself a Muslim and secular state. Although the numbers of mosques and people who practice daily rituals are gradually increasing; it is certain that Azerbaijanis are not going to transform to theocratic Iran and/or Arab countries practicing Sharia law. Most Azerbaijanis define themselves as Muslim and they believe that a religion is important. However, when it comes to practicing the obligations and rituals of the religion, the majority are not practising them, e.g. the daily prayers and fasting. It should be noted that the development of secular society is not just the consequence of the Soviet education system. This thesis could be supported by the fact that the Azerbaijani intelligentsia itself had already established a secular democratic republic prior to Soviet rule, a polity that granted universal suffrage to all its citizens regardless of ethnic identity and gender. In addition, contemporary Azerbaijan is a rare Muslim country that possesses an extremely high literacy rate that meets or exceeds the standards of many developed Western and East Asian societies. So, socially, the Azerbaijanis are secular but they also do not reject religion as CMT; secular lifestyle and religious consciousness exist simultaneously as NMT and MMP suggest. Since a modern society is one

that has experienced a process of transformation in the fields of political, economic and social development (Wagner 2012: 10), Azerbaijan could be accepted as modern today because it continually experiences change and transformation, from agricultural to capitalist, from capitalist to communist, and from communist to a post-communist mix of communism, capitalism and secular modern society that carries some element of religious and traditional practices.

In summary, the Azerbaijani case presents a unique modernization experience and the process continues at the moment. It is not a liberal democratic polity, but economically a semi-developed and a socially secular country. The modernization process has not developed in Azerbaijan as CMT and NMT assume. Moreover, the modernization processes of many other non-Western countries (e.g. Turkey, Tunisia, Iran and Egypt) have not evolved as CMT and NMT predict either (Göksel 2018b). As an example of a post-Soviet Muslim country, Azerbaijan displays the unpredictable/divergent different track of modernization described by MMP, which is why MMP can be argued to offer the most effective approach to generalise and comprehend the phenomenon of modernization in the non-Western world. In addition, the post-Cold War developments in world politics and the success of various emergent models of political-economic development (e.g. Chinese state capitalism) are sufficient evidence to indicate that determining the modernity of a country is not a simple issue, and thus MMP is more successful than CMT and NMT in this regard. In the 21st century, our understanding of modernization needs to ever-changing and flexible in parallel to the changes that await humanity in social, economic, technological and political life.

Notes

1. See Azerbaijan State Statistic Institution, available at: http://azerbaijan.az/portal/General/Population/population_01_a.html.
2. See CIA, available at: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2103.html>.
3. Transparency International, “Corruption perceptions Index 2014”, available at: <http://www.transparency.org/cpi2014/results>.
4. Cornell (2011) *Azerbaijan: Since Independence* (New York: M.E. Sharpe), p. 94.
5. The official website of the Presidency of Azerbaijan, “Speech by Ilham Aliyev official reception on the occasion of the national holiday of Azerbaijan - the Republic Day”, available at: <http://en.president.az/articles/>.
6. For more details, see Cornell (2011: 112).
7. Xalq Qezeti, “Prezident İlham Aliyev: Azərbaycan’da Sabitlik İnkişaf Normal Heyat davam edir”, available at: <http://www.xalqqazeti.com/az/news/economy/61861>.
8. Voice Press, “There are around 1500 Mosques function without Imams”, available at: <http://voicepress.az/olke/1156-azerbaycanda-1500-e-yaxin-mescid-imamsiz-axundsuz-qalib.html>.

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About the Author

Javadbay Khalilzada is a PhD Student and Teaching Assistant at the Department of Political Science, Kent State University, Ohio, USA. He completed his MA degree at the Department of Political Science and International Relations, Istanbul Şehir University, Turkey in 2016. Prior to beginning his doctoral program in USA, he worked at the Department Political Science and International Relations, Istanbul Şehir University throughout the 2015-2018 period. Khalilzada's main areas of research are theories of modernity, politics of Azerbaijan, Russia and the Post-Soviet Caucasus, and foreign policy analysis.