
THE TYPICALITIES OF THE ENGLISH? WALT ROSTOW, *THE STAGES OF ECONOMIC GROWTH*, AND MODERN BRITISH HISTORY*

GUY ORTOLANO

Department of History, New York University

E-mail: ortolano@nyu.edu

Walt Rostow wanted his landmark contribution to modernization theory, The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-communist Manifesto (1960), to offer an alternative to Marxist analysis, and in service of that effort he sought to replace class with nation as the agent of history. Britain figured prominently in the resulting account, functioning as everything from a trailblazing pioneer to an idiosyncratic anomaly to a cautionary tale for weak-kneed Americans, but it never explicitly offered the model for other nations to follow that historians today associate with the text. In explaining how that misreading came to dominate discussions of Stages, this essay rethinks a US historiography that collapses modernization theory with American exceptionalism, and a UK historiography premised on the claim that Britain made the modern world. Attending to the function of Britain in Stages reinserts British history into postwar conceptions of world history—not as a paradigmatic case, but nevertheless as a significant one.

There *are* continuities and family likenesses; but for most purposes they are not the epochal resemblances but the discontinuities which demand the closest analysis.

E. P. Thompson, “The Peculiarities of the English.”¹

* I am grateful to the colleagues and audiences who commented upon various pieces of this article, and must particularly thank Karl Appuhn, Charles Capper, Greg Downs, Nils Gilman, John Shovlin, and the anonymous reviewers for *MIH*, as well as Philippe Fontaine, Nicolas Guilhot, and the ANR/CIRHUS workshop on postwar American social science at NYU. The writing of this article was supported by a Charles A. Ryskamp Fellowship from the ACLS.

¹ E. P. Thompson, “The Peculiarities of the English,” in Ralph Miliband and John Saville, eds., *Socialist Register*, 1965 (London, 1965), 311–62, 358, original emphasis.

The past might be a foreign country, as L. P. Hartley wrote, but for US modernization theorists foreign countries were the past. Born of the disciplines of sociology, economics, and political science, modernization theory flourished in American social science from the late 1950s through the 1960s.² Its practitioners distinguished between “traditional” and “modern” societies, mapping the progress of peoples on a continuum from the former to the latter, and they understood “modernity” as a desirable end characterized by a combination of economic prosperity, social mobility, civic engagement, and secular culture.³ As that description suggests, and although they sometimes spoke of “the West,” modernization theorists tended to believe that the United States had moved furthest along history’s track.⁴ “It presented America’s past as a blueprint for the world’s future,” Michael Latham writes, “and put history on America’s side”—no mean achievement in a decolonizing world riven by Cold War rivalries, with the United States and the Soviet Union competing for the allegiance of postcolonial states.⁵

² Key works included David Apter, *The Gold Coast in Transition* (Princeton, 1955); Daniel Lerner, *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East* (Glencoe, IL, 1958); S. N. Eisenstadt, *Essays on Sociological Aspects of Political and Economic Development* (The Hague, 1961); Marion Levy, *Modernization and the Structure of Societies: A Setting for International Affairs* (Princeton, 1966); Cyril Black, *The Dynamics of Modernization: A Study in Comparative History* (New York, 1966).

³ On modernization theory see Howard Brick, *Age of Contradiction: American Thought and Culture in the 1960s* (Ithaca, NY, 2000), 44–53; David Ekbladh, *The Great American Mission: Modernization and the Construction of an American World Order* (Princeton, 2010); Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America* (Baltimore, 2003); Michael E. Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and “Nation Building” in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2000); Barbara Weinstein, “Developing Inequality,” *American Historical Review*, 113/1 (Feb. 2008), 1–18.

⁴ The status of the United States as modernity’s model is evident throughout David C. Engerman, Nils Gilman, Mark H. Haefele, and Michael E. Latham, eds., *Staging Growth: Modernization, Development, and the Global Cold War* (Amherst, MA, 2003). See, for example, Michael E. Latham, “Modernization, International History, and the Cold War World,” 1–22, 2; Michael Adas, “Modernization Theory and the American Revival of the Scientific and Technological Standards of Social Achievement and Human Worth,” 25–45, 26; Gilman, “Modernization Theory, the Highest Stage of American Intellectual History,” 47–80, 50, 56, 61, 62 (but compare 54, where he rightly notes that, for a number of these theorists, there were various routes to modernity); Haefele, “Walt Rostow’s Stages of Economic Growth: Ideas and Action,” 81–103, 97. See also Mark T. Berger, “Decolonisation, Modernisation, and Nation-Building: Political Development Theory and the Appeal of Communism in Southeast Asia, 1945–1975,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 34/3 (Oct. 2003), 421–48, especially 429; Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley, CA, 2005), 117; Latham, *Modernization as Ideology*, 25, 63.

⁵ Latham, “Modernization,” in Theodore Porter and Dorothy Ross, eds., *The Cambridge History of Science: The Modern Social Sciences* (Cambridge, 2003), 721–34, 722.

While the United States figured as history's ultimate end, for the most influential modernization theorist it arrived there via Britain. Walt Whitman Rostow was an economic historian specializing in nineteenth-century Britain, until the 1960s when he became the most senior national security figure to serve continuously through the Kennedy and Johnson administrations.⁶ The link between these two Rostows, the economic historian and the presidential adviser, was his seminal contribution to modernization theory, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-communist Manifesto* (1960).⁷ *Stages* identified a purportedly universal sequence of economic development, from "traditional society" through the "preconditions for take-off," from "take-off" through the "drive to maturity," and finally into the age of "high mass consumption" enjoyed in the contemporary United States. Learned yet accessible, analytical and prescriptive, *Stages* sold more than 250,000 copies in its first dozen years, helping to establish Rostow as the most famous economic historian in the world—indeed, in the words of one contemporary, as the most famous economic historian since Karl Marx.⁸ For many scholars, especially those working outside the United Kingdom, Rostow's version of modernization theory validated the study of British history, transforming their subject from the specific experience of a particular people and place into the universal experience of, sooner or later, all peoples and places.⁹ Today, although his position in economic history has long since receded, Rostow remains central to the history of modernization theory: David Rieff, in the *New York Review of Books*, calls him the "intellectual father" of modernization

⁶ On Rostow's policy career see David Milne, *America's Rasputin: Walt Rostow and the Vietnam War* (New York, 2008); for his significance to modernization theory see David A. Hollinger and Charles Capper, eds., *The American Intellectual Tradition*, vol. 2, 1865 to the Present, 6th edn (New York, 2011), 379.

⁷ W. W. Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-communist Manifesto* (Cambridge, 1960).

⁸ According to Henry Rosovsky in 1965, "Rostow is without a doubt the most famous economic historian of our age . . . Indeed, one would probably have to go back to Karl Marx—with whom Rostow likes to compare himself—to find an equally prominent member of our profession, and Marx achieved his greatest fame posthumously." Henry Rosovsky, "The Take-off into Sustained Controversy," *Journal of Economic History*, 25/2 (1965), 271–5, 271. The publication figures, referring to English-language copies alone, derive from David Cannadine, "The Present and the Past in the English Industrial Revolution, 1880–1980," *Past and Present*, 103/1 (1984), 131–72, 153, and were first called to my attention by John Brewer.

⁹ See, for instance, Takeshi Nagashima, "Britain as a Model for Japan's 'Modernization'? Japanese Views of Contemporary British Socio-economic History," *Twentieth Century British History*, 23/4 (Nov. 2012), 555–62.

theory; Thomas Meaney, in the *London Review of Books*, labels him modernization theory's "head salesman."¹⁰

Rostow cultivated the comparison with Marx, not least in the provocative subtitle he appended to *Stages*. The preface to his "non-communist manifesto" explained that he had first become frustrated with Marxist determinism while an undergraduate at Yale in the 1930s, and in the decade before *Stages* he labored to develop alternatives to Marxist analysis.¹¹ One such alternative was his concept of "propensities," discussed further below, but another was far more ambitious and significant: Rostow sought to replace *class* with *nation* as the agent of history. The elevation of nation over class was no mere academic exercise, as Rostow understood his professional life as a "counterpoint between the world of ideas and the world of public policy," in which ideas were inseparable from action.¹² The principle at the crux of both worlds was—as the subtitle to *Stages* indicated—anticommunism. As an economic historian and a presidential adviser, Rostow sought to counter Marxism in the mind and communism on the ground. Integral to both efforts was the shift from class to nation, and in service of this project the case of Britain figured differently—but no less centrally—for Rostow than it had for Marx.

It is not surprising to note that Rostow dwelled on Britain in *Stages*, but it is more problematic to explain how Britain figured there. Historians have long maintained that Rostow presented British history as a universal template for national economic development. "Rostow," in the words of David Cannadine, "offered the British industrializing experience between 1780 and 1800 as the paradigmatic case of economic transformation, through which all modernizing nations had subsequently to pass."¹³ More than fifty years after the publication of *Stages*, with modernization theory commanding renewed attention from intellectual and international historians, this interpretation of Britain's role in *Stages* figures as something like common sense. David Milne refers to the book's "central emulative example of the British Industrial Revolution," while William J.

¹⁰ David Rieff, "An American Passion for Tyrants," *New York Review of Books*, 19 June 2014, 28–30, 28; Thomas Meaney, "The Swaddling Thesis," *London Review of Books*, 6 March 2014, 33–5, 35.

¹¹ Rostow, *Stages*, ix; Rostow, *The Process of Economic Growth* (New York, 1952); Rostow, *The United States in the World Arena: An Essay in Recent History* (New York, 1960); Rostow, *The Process of Economic Growth*, 2nd Norton edn (New York, 1962). For further discussion of these texts see section II below.

¹² Rostow, *View from the Seventh Floor* (New York, 1964), 45. His major policy books from this era include *Stages*, *The United States in the World Arena*, and, with Richard Hatch, *An American Policy in Asia* (Cambridge, MA, 1955).

¹³ David Cannadine, *Making History Now and Then: Discoveries, Controversies, and Explorations* (New York, 2008), 239.

Ashworth writes that Rostow presented Britain's industrialization as a "blue print and road map for developing countries."¹⁴ Most recently, in a dashing account of Britain's transition to modernity that is certain to prompt lasting debate, James Vernon identifies Rostow as having "used the British case of industrialization as an exemplary world historical model whose stages of economic growth and modernization others should follow."¹⁵ According to Rostow, in most versions of this view, Britain's past led to America's present, defining the path along which American policymakers sought to propel the emerging nation-states of the postcolonial world.

Yet while Britain did figure centrally in *Stages*, it did not do so in the way that historians have long suggested. Rather than defining the sequence through which all nation-states must pass, Rostow's engagement with British history actually introduced variations, exceptions, and alternatives into his account. Numerous versions of "Britain" figured in *Stages*, from a precocious pioneer to an idiosyncratic anomaly to a cautionary tale for weak-kneed Americans—but none was explicitly the version associated with modernization theory today, the paradigmatic case for all others to follow. After identifying a series of developments, contextual and biographical, that facilitated the emergence of Rostow's version of modernization theory, this essay offers a close reading of his most important book. It seeks to explain how this work emerged, what use it made of British history, and why we have inherited a particular—and particularly misleading—version of its argument. The ultimate aim is neither to indict a more slipshod Rostow, nor to redeem a more supple Rostow, but rather to intervene in a pair of broader conversations to which Rostow and *Stages* are foundational: a US historiography that collapses modernization theory with American exceptionalism, and a UK historiography premised on the claim that Britain made the modern world. Attending to the role of Britain in *Stages* reinserts British history into postwar conceptions of world history, not as a paradigmatic case but nevertheless as a significant one.

I

Modernization theory represented a mid-century American intervention into a venerable tradition, and from this perspective it is not obvious that Britain should have figured prominently in it at all. This tradition had long sought to identify the progress of human development, its practitioners variously identifying England, Europe, and the West as history's frontier.¹⁶ These figures

¹⁴ Milne, *America's Rasputin*, 65; William J. Ashworth, "The Ghost of Rostow: Science, Culture, and the British Industrial Revolution," *History of Science*, 46 (2008), 249–74, 252.

¹⁵ James Vernon, *Distant Strangers: How Britain Became Modern* (Berkeley, CA, 2014), 2, 135.

¹⁶ Latham, *Modernization as Ideology*, 59–68; Latham, "Modernization," especially 728.

included, in different ways, Adam Smith, Ferdinand Tönnies, and Max Weber, but nobody articulated its presumptions more succinctly than Marx: “The country that is more developed industrially,” he famously wrote in the first edition of *Capital*, “only shows, to the less developed, the image of its own future.”¹⁷ Britain (or, more accurately, England) thus claimed a central place in social theory at a moment when its position at the forefront of world affairs was secure. It might therefore be assumed that Rostow and his contemporaries simply inherited this habit of thinking through the case of Britain: that as the British Empire limped into the post-1945 world order, so, too, did British history stumble into post-1945 social theory—each taking their place more out of convention than conviction, soon to be displaced by more robust American actors and ideas. Howard Brick locates the moment of modernization theory between the publication of David Apter’s *The Gold Coast in Transition* in 1955 and Marion J. Levy’s *Modernization and the Structure of Societies* in 1966, a period that is exactly simultaneous with the collapse of Britain’s empire, from the debacle at Suez in 1956 to the shuttering of the Colonial Office a decade later.¹⁸ From this perspective, it seems, the post-1945 context should have seen Britain written out of—not into—American conceptions of world history.

Moreover, in the century between *Capital* and *Stages*, a series of assumptions necessary to sustain a normative reading of British history came under challenge. First, Marx departed from the strict linearity of *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), introducing what Kevin Anderson calls a “multilinear” account in which prospective national paths were more various than that first traveled by England. By the time of the 1872–5 French edition of *Capital*, which he urged his correspondents to read as the authoritative version, Marx even qualified that famous quotation: “The country that is more developed industrially,” he now wrote, “only shows, to those that follow it on the industrial path, the image of its own future.”¹⁹ Countries that had yet to industrialize, Anderson notes, were pointedly excluded from this reformulation, leaving open the possibility for alternative paths towards history’s end.²⁰ Second, moving beyond Marx, in the aftermath of the Indian Mutiny of 1857 and the uprising in Jamaica’s Morant Bay in 1865, Victorian liberals came to doubt the commonality of the world’s peoples. Instead of a universal course of history binding European powers to their colonial subjects,

¹⁷ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London, 1990), 91. But see the discussion in Kevin B. Anderson, *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies* (Chicago, 2010), especially 177–8, discussed below.

¹⁸ Brick, *Age of Contradiction*, 45.

¹⁹ Quoted in Anderson, *Marx at the Margins*, 178 (emphasis Anderson’s).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 171–80, 237–44.

Henry Maine's generation became convinced of a chasm between "traditional" and "modern" societies, a chasm that rendered the challenge of colonial rule not one of modernization but one of management.²¹ Third, at the turn of a century characterized by European imperialism and Atlantic immigration, the nation-state was not necessarily conceived as the primary unit of historical analysis. Dan Rodgers argues that, in American historiography, the nation-state secured its centrality over broader referents (such as "civilization" or "modern society") only in the 1940s, as the Second World War persuaded a generation of American historians that their own national experience differed in kind from that of their colleagues in Europe.²² And finally, amid the dogged economic slump that followed the Great War, British cultural critics downgraded the status of the Industrial Revolution in the making of the modern world. Industry seemed to bog history down, not drive it forward, so they pushed history's decisive break back two centuries instead, emphasizing less the development of industry than the emergence of capitalism.²³

These are complex histories, each properly the subject of monographs, but together they indicate that Britain made its way into postwar American minds through something other than sheer inertia. Indeed, after the Second World War, the fortunes of British historiography actually ran countercyclical to the fate of the British Empire; to paraphrase one of Rostow's contemporaries, Britain may have been losing an empire, but British history was finding a role. Rostow's version of modernization theory required that the history of the world's peoples become understood as a common experience, that the nation-state become established as the unit of economic and historical analysis, and that the Industrial Revolution become reestablished as the hinge of modern history. Each of these developments occurred, but—as Michael Adas, Frederick Cooper and Randall Packard, and

²¹ In addition to Karuna Mantena, *Alibis of Empire: Henry Maine and the Ends of Liberal Imperialism* (Princeton, 2010); see Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830–1867* (Chicago, 2002); Thomas Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj* (Cambridge, 1994). On a related dynamic in the French context see Gwendolyn Wright, *The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism* (Chicago, 1991).

²² Daniel T. Rodgers, "Exceptionalism," in Anthony Molho and Gordon S. Wood, eds., *Imagined Histories: American Historians Interpret the Past* (Princeton, 1998), 21–40. The Second World War also intensified anthropologists' interest in the nation, even if they had already been moving in that direction: see Peter Mandler, *Return from the Natives: How Margaret Mead Won the Second World War and Lost the Cold War* (New Haven, 2013). And at the same time, as discussed below, economic thought was similarly moving towards consideration of the national economy.

²³ Stefan Collini, "Where Did It All Go Wrong? Cultural Critics and 'Modernity' in Inter-war Britain," in E. H. H. Green and D. M. Tanner, eds., *The Strange Survival of Liberal England: Political Leaders, Moral Values, and the Reception of Economic Debate* (Cambridge, 2007), 247–74.

David Cannadine have shown—they only fully did so in the context of European decolonization, postcolonial nationalism, and economic growth following the Second World War. Once in place, however, these combined developments enabled theorists to imagine the world's history as a race between nation-states towards a common industrial modernity.²⁴ It was within this conception of history—linear, national, and above all industrial—that Rostow could posit, and readers could entertain, Britain's centrality. This is not to suggest that it was impossible to write about the nation-state or focus upon Britain before 1945—as we shall see, already in his 1940 PhD dissertation Rostow was doing both.²⁵ But in the shifting intellectual context that followed the Second World War, it did become possible to do so in a newly deliberate and programmatic way.

II

Walt Rostow figures in US history as one of “the best and the brightest,” the brilliant and confident young men who arrived in Washington with John Kennedy in 1961. David Halberstam cast Rostow as the quintessential happy warrior, his militant recommendations easier to dislike than his gregarious person. “He had time for everyone,” Halberstam wrote, “he was polite to everyone, there was no element of put-down to him.”²⁶ More recently, Nils Gilman, although by no means uncritical of Rostow, treats the integrity of his intellectual commitments with begrudging respect.²⁷ Nevertheless, Halberstam and Gilman broadly concur with the more severe judgments of David Milne and Mark Haefele, who depict Rostow as an incurious ideologue with a damaging foothold in the corridors of

²⁴ On the triumph of each concept respectively: Adas, “Modernization Theory and the American Revival of the Scientific and Technological Standards of Social Achievement and Human Worth;” Frederick Cooper and Randall M. Packard, “Introduction,” in Cooper and Packard, eds., *International Development and the Social Sciences: Essays on the History and Politics of Knowledge* (Berkeley, CA, 1997), 1–41; Cannadine, “The Present and the Past in the English Industrial Revolution.” For further evidence of the second point, the triumph of the nation-state as unit of analysis, see Terence K. Hopkins and Immanuel Wallerstein, “The Comparative Study of National Societies,” *Social Science Information*, 6 (1967), 25–58; for further discussion see Berger, “Decolonisation, Modernisation, and Nation-Building,” 421–48; for further development of these points collectively see Matthias Schmelzer's discussion of the “growth paradigm” in “The Crisis before the Crisis: The ‘Problems of Modern Society’ and the OECD, 1968–74,” *European Review of History*, 19/6 (December 2012), 999–1020.

²⁵ Rostow, “British Trade Fluctuations, 1868–1896: A Chronicle and a Commentary,” PhD dissertation, Yale University (1940), published as Walt W. Rostow, *British Trade Fluctuations, 1868–1896: A Chronicle and a Commentary* (New York, 1981).

²⁶ David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York, 1972), 636.

²⁷ Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future*, 202.

power. “For Rostow,” Haefele writes, “the logical coherence of his arguments was less important than using his theories to fight communism.”²⁸ Milne, likewise, condemns Rostow as “prolix, dogmatic, and seemingly wedded to theories he himself had created,” possessed of a dangerous combination of idealism and bellicosity that rendered him the “ultraliberal, über-cold warrior.”²⁹ Some of the most damaging scenes in Milne’s fine biography relate Rostow’s anti-intellectual sifting of the evidence as Lyndon Johnson’s national security adviser. “According to CIA sources,” Milne writes, “Rostow . . . simply cut out the bad news and forwarded the paper to the president.”³⁰ The portrait that emerges is damning, Rostow’s geniality insufficient to temper the impression of an ideologue with influence.

Yet this image of Rostow, refracted through memories and histories of his role in escalating the Vietnam War, should not entirely obscure the more careful academic struggling to reconcile historical particularity with economic theory during the 1940s and 1950s. In 1940, having studied as a Rhodes scholar at Oxford from 1936 to 1938, Rostow completed his Yale doctorate on “British Trade Fluctuations, 1868–1896: A Chronicle and a Commentary.” The dissertation took the national economy as its analytical frame, and the national economy in question happened to be Britain’s. The focus upon Britain (rather than “England” or the “British Empire”) testifies to the fact that Rostow’s unit of analysis was neither a people nor a system, but rather the nation-state. This approach was in line with contemporary developments in economics that were establishing the very notion of a “national” economy, such as the development of national income accounting by Simon Kuznets, and the measurement of gross national product by Colin Clark.³¹ Dependent on this work, Rostow considered the effects of international forces, such as the Franco-Prussian War and the North American transcontinental railroad, on Britain’s economy, but his analysis was strictly national—aiming, as he put it, to provide a kind of “economic Hansard” to shed light upon an “entire economic system.”³² The rhetorical terms of reference, no less than the object of study, were thus decidedly British, Rostow confident that a national economy constituted “an entire economic system.” But rather than justifying these choices or staking claims upon them, he left the issue largely unremarked; instead of tactical choices in service of grand ideological designs,

²⁸ Haefele, “Ideas and Action,” 88.

²⁹ Milne, *America’s Rasputin*, 82, 95.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 167; see generally Milne’s discussion at 164–77.

³¹ On Kuznets and national income accounting see Robert W. Fogel, “Simon S. Kuznets, April 30, 1901–July 9, 1985,” NBER Working Paper Series, Working Paper 7787 (2000), available at www.nber.org/papers/w7787.pdf, accessed 19 Sept. 2014.

³² Rostow, *British Trade Fluctuations*, 4–5.

these aspects of his work seem to have emerged from the more humdrum need of the PhD student to secure and manage an abundance of data.³³ During the next two decades, however, Rostow would transform these assumptions into arguments: first advancing a rationale for focusing upon Britain (and the nation-state more generally), then folding that emphasis within a still larger polemic against Marxist analysis.

Rostow's first major book, *British Economy of the Nineteenth Century* (1948), pursued a dual agenda: examining particular aspects of Britain's economic history, while urging his colleagues in economic history to risk broad generalizations.³⁴ Rostow had left a faculty position at Columbia University to work in the Office of Strategic Services during the war, and afterwards he served as Harmsworth Professor at Oxford from 1946 to 1947. It was in Oxford that he completed *British Economy of the Nineteenth Century*, a volume of essays that drew upon his PhD dissertation, his Oxford lectures, and his completed (but not yet published) collaboration with Arthur D. Gayer and Anna Jacobson Schwartz on British economic history during the Industrial Revolution.³⁵ *British Economy of the Nineteenth Century* acknowledged that historians must remain wary of models, displaying due caution out of deference to the evidence: "The coat," as Rostow put it, "must be cut to the cloth."³⁶ Several chapters recovered the range of actual responses to identical developments, and Rostow—skeptical of the economic reductionism that he believed typical of Marxist analysis—clearly took pleasure in noting the variety of such responses even among members of the same social strata at the same time.³⁷

But while mindful of the historian's inhibitions towards generalization, Rostow urged his fellow economic historians to develop explanatory frameworks, and to this end he offered Britain as more than merely an illuminating example. Britain, he now argued, had originated processes that subsequently became universal, a "cyclical pattern" that "gradually widen[ed] throughout the world from the end of the American Revolution to the outbreak of the First World War."³⁸ Elsewhere, noting that nineteenth-century Britain had encountered the issues of full employment, capital formation, and economic growth that were poised to preoccupy Anglo-American economists during the 1950s, he referred to Britain's

³³ Thanks to Roger Backhouse.

³⁴ W. W. Rostow, *British Economy of the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, 1948).

³⁵ Arthur D. Gayer, W. W. Rostow, and Anna Jacobson Schwartz, with the assistance of Isaiah Frank, *The Growth and Fluctuation of the British Economy, 1790–1850: An Historical, Statistical, and Theoretical Study of Britain's Economic Development*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1953).

³⁶ Rostow, *British Economy of the Nineteenth Century*, 6.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 108–44.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.

history as a “laboratory for the theorist concerned to test his hypotheses.”³⁹ These ruminations on the applicability of British history marked a departure from his dissertation, introducing not one but two justifications for studying Britain. The first saw later global processes as having first emerged in Britain, casting Britain’s experience as the origin of modern history and thus a lens onto the world’s past; the second suggested that British history served as a laboratory for future economists, depicting Britain’s nineteenth-century experience as so precocious that it previewed available choices now facing Britain and the US. British history thus served two distinct functions for Rostow by the late 1940s, offering a lens both onto the world’s past and into its future. These interpretations emerged in response to the book’s central analytical problem: how could the economic historian remain faithful both to the particularity of history and to the generalization of theory? The nation-state in general—and Britain in particular—came to figure centrally in Rostow’s resolution of that problem.

Yet even as he was developing his case for the utility of British history, as part of this effort to reconcile the competing imperatives of particularity and generalization, Rostow began to question the validity of national frames in economic analysis entirely. He returned to Britain as Pitt Professor at Cambridge in 1949–50—this made two years in Oxbridge out of four, in addition to his Rhodes Scholarship a decade earlier, a social as well as intellectual orientation that goes some way towards explaining his persistent Anglocentrism. In 1951 he joined the humanities faculty at MIT, where he remained until leaving for Washington a decade later, and in the early 1950s he saw two major works through publication. The first was *The Growth and Fluctuation of the British Economy* (1953), a monumental work begun by Arthur Gayer back in 1936. Gayer soon took on Rostow and Schwartz as collaborators, and they had essentially completed the book by 1941, but publication was delayed due to the war and did not finally proceed until Gayer’s tragic death in 1951. This double-decker landmark of economic history analyzed British business cycles annually over six decades. Unusually for a 1,028-page examination of British economic history, the preface that Rostow and Schwartz penned in 1952 questioned the validity of national economic analysis: “Britain’s evolution,” they warned, “cannot be understood except as part of a distorted but real international economy.”⁴⁰ *The Growth and Fluctuation of the British Economy*, they conceded, sought British origins for phenomena that extended far beyond Britain, leading the authors to the uncomfortable conclusion that the national economy offered an insufficient

³⁹ Ibid., 2.

⁴⁰ Gayer, Rostow, and Schwartz, *The Growth and Fluctuation of the British Economy*, 1: xiii.

foundation for economic analysis: “a national approach to modern economic history,” they wrote, “must, to some important extent, be abandoned.”⁴¹

In *The Process of Economic Growth* (1952), however, published the same year in which Rostow and Schwartz inserted that despairing preface, Rostow made clear that abandoning strictly national economic analysis did not mean abandoning the nation-state as an economic unit—and the alternative that he now offered only accentuated Britain’s analytical centrality. The problem, for Rostow, lay in treating national economies not as discrete units, but rather as independent ones, and therefore his solution proposed to integrate numerous national economies into a larger explanatory framework. This solution responded to the problem of narrowly national analysis identified in *The Growth and Fluctuation of the British Economy*, and it did so by resolving the tension between particularity and generalization identified in *British Economy of the Nineteenth Century*. *The Process of Economic Growth* thus combined the historian’s attention to particularity with the economist’s commitment to generalization, placing distinct national economies within a wider explanatory frame. The role of the nation-state was not jettisoned but secured, and in the resulting account no nation-state assumed a more prominent role than Britain. In *The Process of Economic Growth*, Britain’s Industrial Revolution figured as “the classic story” of industrialization, even as Rostow extended the concepts he developed in its analysis to consider the “differential rates of growth in . . . the United States, Germany, and France in the first half of the nineteenth century,” and from there “to the process whereby Latin America, Australasia, China, and Japan were drawn into the world economy.”⁴² The world economy, not the British economy, now figured as the “entire economic system” and thus Rostow’s ultimate object of study, but in order to apprehend that system the nation-state remained his foundational unit of analysis.

Rostow was helping to develop the quantitative economic history that came to be known as “cliometrics,” but he remained on the margins of that field as its partisans drew attention away from the social, technological, and historical considerations that he believed no less important to economic history—an error, he believed, that cliometricians shared with Marxists.⁴³ In a later edition of *The Process of Economic Growth*, he insisted that “economic growth is not an antiseptic economic process,” since even “the most apparently technical of acts (tax reform, for example) is inextricably linked to the social and political

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Rostow, *The Process of Economic Growth*, 1.

⁴³ John S. Lyons, Louis P. Cain, and Samuel H. Williamson, eds., *Reflections on the Cliometrics Revolution: Conversations with Economic Historians* (New York, 2008), 84–5; Roger E. Backhouse, “Economics,” in Roger E. Backhouse and Philippe Fontaine, eds., *The History of the Social Sciences since 1945* (Cambridge, 2010), 38–70.

life of societies,” and he leveled identical charges against purportedly Marxist notions about the relationship between economic, social, and political factors in history.⁴⁴ To counter this reductionism, whether cliometric or Marxist, *The Process of Economic Growth* developed the notion of “propensities” instead. Propensities, Rostow explained, were variables through which individuals related to their environment without being determined by it, such as “the propensity to develop fundamental science” and “the propensity to accept innovations.”⁴⁵ Rostow explained that he hoped the notion of “propensities” might eventually replace Marxist determinism with a more dynamic model of causation; in the book’s second edition, published eight years later, he explained that his account of history was not rigid and Newtonian, stipulating axiomatic laws, but fluid and biological, identifying patterns within processes.⁴⁶

As he was sharpening his position against a reductive Marxism, Rostow’s investment in the nation deepened. From his base at MIT he began advising Senator Kennedy, eventually contributing the slogans “New Frontier” and “Let’s get this country moving again” to the presidential campaign, and meanwhile he was keenly aware of policymakers’ desire for a manifesto to counter the Soviets.⁴⁷ *Stages*, of course, eventually became that manifesto, but *Stages* was actually just one of two books that Rostow completed in 1959. *The United States in the World Arena*, a mammoth account of US history, was organized around the concept of the “national style”—a term that had emerged from a colloquium in 1957 featuring Robert Oppenheimer, George F. Kennan, Clyde Kluckhohn, Henry A. Murray, and David Riesman.⁴⁸ The national style, Rostow explained, was the collection of habits and predispositions that shaped the way a country understood and pursued its interests, and he argued that the United States must dedicate itself to building congenial new nation-states in Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America. The parallel is inexact, since *Stages* discussed policy and *World Arena* discussed history, but in a sense *The United States in the World Arena* did for policy what *The Stages of Economic Growth* did for history: they both advanced an understanding of history in which the nation figured as the agent of history and the nation-state figured as the unit of analysis. Or, perhaps, as its protagonist: while Rostow was completing his history of the United States, that “favored adolescent of the nineteenth century,” E. P. Thompson was composing his own “biography of the English working class from its adolescence until its

⁴⁴ Rostow, *The Process of Economic Growth* (1962), iii.

⁴⁵ Rostow, *The Process of Economic Growth* (1952), 7–9, 11.

⁴⁶ Rostow, *The Process of Economic Growth* (Oxford, 1960), viii.

⁴⁷ Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*, 155–60; Haeefe, “Ideas and Action,” especially 84–5.

⁴⁸ Thanks to Nils Gilman.

early manhood.”⁴⁹ By the early 1960s, these gangly adolescents, nation and class, were at last coming to maturity, part of a larger contest to define history’s subject.

For two decades before *Stages*, Rostow had been analyzing the nation-state and emphasizing Britain, but the manner of these engagements changed during the 1950s. The key shift followed his questioning of the national economy as an analytical unit in *The Growth and Fluctuation of the British Economy*.⁵⁰ Rostow’s response was not to dissolve the national economy within some larger framework, but rather to locate distinct national economies within the international system; he thus continued to think through the example of Britain, even as he sought to generalize beyond that singular case. This move—from *British Economy of the Nineteenth Century* (1948) to *The Process of Economic Growth* (1952)—carried three consequences: it secured the foundational status of the nation-state in Rostow’s analysis, it enhanced the significance of Britain in what was now an account of world economic development, and it led to a more explicit conflict with Marxism. These three strands eventually came together in *Stages* (1960), but they did not do so immediately. In 1952, despite offering the non-Marxist concept of “propensities” in *The Process of Economic Growth*, Rostow disclaimed any pretensions of having formulated a sufficient alternative to Marxism. Eight years later, however, the second edition included a footnote announcing that the author had developed that alternative at last.⁵¹

III

The Stages of Economic Growth originated as a series of Cambridge lectures in 1958, before being published—with its arresting new subtitle, *A Non-communist Manifesto*, first splashed on the cover of the *Economist* magazine—in 1960.⁵² *Stages*, Cannadine has shown, was simply the most visible instance of a broader

⁴⁹ E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Gollancz, 1963), 11. It is worth noting, in the context of these personified metaphors of development, that David Landes referred to industrialization as “the puberty of nations”: David Landes, *The Unbound Prometheus: Technological Change and Industrial Development in Western Europe from 1750 to the Present* (Cambridge, 1969), 357.

⁵⁰ *Growth and Fluctuation* was published in 1953, but Rostow and Schwartz penned their preface in 1952.

⁵¹ Compare Rostow, *The Process of Economic Growth* (1952), 9; and Rostow, *The Process of Economic Growth* (1960), 9 n.

⁵² Rostow, “Rostow on Growth: A Non-communist Manifesto,” *The Economist*, 15 Aug. 1959, 409–16. Finally published in 1960, *Stages* was truly a product of the 1950s: in 1956 Rostow posited a development scheme in three stages: “The Take-off into Self-Sustained Growth,” *Economic Journal*, 66 (1956), 25–48; in 1958 he delivered his Cambridge lectures; and in 1959 he readied those lectures for publication while previewing them in the *Economist*.

shift in economic history discussing the Industrial Revolution not in the depression-era terms of economic “fluctuation,” but rather in the postwar terms of economic “growth.”⁵³ Its first six chapters identified the stages through which every nation must pass: traditional society, the preconditions for take-off, the take-off into growth, the drive to maturity, and the age of high mass consumption. Rostow argued that in the key stage, take-off, growth essentially became automatic, driven by leading sectors of the economy and characterized by a doubling of productive investment. His scope of analysis was global, relating the stages to “the dilemmas and worries of the men in Djakarta, Rangoon, New Delhi, and Karachi; the men in Tehran, Baghdad, and Cairo; the men south of the desert too, in Accra, Lagos, and Salisbury,” but the unit of analysis was national: “The fact is that the whole transition we are examining took place historically within a system of nation states and of national sovereignty.”⁵⁴ These national experiences Rostow lined up with audacious precision, in a table that identified the dates of take-off, maturity, and high mass consumption across fourteen countries. The final four chapters turned to contemporary issues: Soviet and American growth, the history of wars and colonialism, the prospects for world peace, and the problem of communism. Rostow labeled communism “a kind of disease which can befall a transitional society,” and he called for the democratic north to propel developing nations along the path of growth instead.⁵⁵ *Stages* thus combined historical examples, economic evidence, schematic clarity, ideological polemic, and moral exhortation into a single accessible work, and its impact—and its author—soon spanned the worlds of academia and policy.⁵⁶

As the “classic,” textbook case of industrialization, Britain featured prominently in the first half of the book.⁵⁷ Rostow identified two aspects of the early modern world that propelled Europe to the fore of history, and Britain to the fore of Europe. First came “the discovery and rediscovery of regions beyond Western Europe,” developments that generated sophisticated techniques of trade, shipping, and finance—along with a new commercial class committed to developing them still further.⁵⁸ Second was “the spirit of science and productive gadgeteering,” from the giants of the Scientific Revolution to the mechanics of the eighteenth century, who together—in an account of the Industrial Revolution

⁵³ Cannadine, “The Present and the Past in the English Industrial Revolution,” 147–52.

⁵⁴ Rostow, *Stages*, 166, 107.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 164, 164–7.

⁵⁶ Robert A. Packenham testifies to Rostow’s influence in *Liberal America and the Third World: Political Development Ideas in Foreign Aid and Social Science* (Princeton, 1973), 245, 251–2.

⁵⁷ Rostow, *Stages*, 31–4.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.

that remains familiar to this day—contrived to “break the bottlenecks” that constrained energy supplies and productive capacities.⁵⁹ Rostow noted that these preconditions had applied to the Netherlands and France; why, then, was it Britain that emerged as the “classical tale” of take-off into growth? He answered that the Dutch were too committed to finance, at the expense of manufacturing, while the French were “too rough with their Protestants,” producing so sclerotic a society that their best minds focused on political rather than economic revolution. “Britain alone was in a position . . . to pull it off,” Rostow concluded. “Something like this we can take to be the classical tale.”⁶⁰

Yet the classical tale was the story not of a typical case, but of a precocious pioneer.⁶¹ The book’s opening table clearly signaled Britain’s priority, and Rostow affirmed that contention six pages into his text: “Among the Western European states,” he wrote, “Britain, favoured by geography, natural resources, trading possibilities, social and political structure, was the first to develop fully the preconditions for take-off.”⁶² First in preconditions, first to take off: Rostow dated Britain’s achievement from the two decades after 1783, more than forty years before its nearest rival, France.⁶³ By that time, he continued, the Industrial Revolution had irreversibly taken hold, so that, by the Great Exhibition of 1851, Britain had become the first nation to enter the fourth stage, maturity.⁶⁴ The British Empire figured nearly as prominently (if never as explicitly) in Rostow’s account: the book’s opening diagram listed fourteen nations according to their dates of take-off, five of which—Britain, the United States, Canada, Australia, and India—bore connections to the empire.⁶⁵ But it was Britain itself that dominated the first half of the book, figuring like the best athlete on the track: collecting gold medals not only in the most glamorous events (take-off, maturity), but in every race it ran (first nation to enjoy expansion without take-off, first nation to minimize its food bill).⁶⁶ This impression was reinforced visually, in tables

⁵⁹ Ibid., 32. The most prominent contemporary advocate of this view is Joel Mokyr, *The Enlightened Economy: An Economic History of Britain, 1700–1850* (New Haven, 2009).

⁶⁰ Rostow, *Stages*, 33–4.

⁶¹ Although Rostow insisted upon the peculiarities of the British case—peculiarities that, he maintained, prevented Britain from serving as a model for subsequent nations—the problems with offering the unique British case as a more widely applicable model soon became a standard critique of *Stages*: Cannadine, “The Present and the Past in the English Industrial Revolution,” 156–8.

⁶² Rostow, *Stages*, 6.

⁶³ Ibid., 38.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 40, 59.

⁶⁵ Ibid., xii.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 40, 23.

and charts featuring Britain at their top.⁶⁷ In short, in a book that equated modernization with industrialization, and that understood economies as national units, the world's first industrial nation figured as modernization's global pioneer.

A pioneer, but no model, as Rostow surprisingly insisted that the unique British case actually fell outside the stages of growth. He explained that there were two typologies of take-off: the *general case* of a country modernizing in response to the threat or experience of occupation or colonization, a characterization that applied to most of Europe, as well as Asia, the Middle East, and Africa; and a *second case* of a country having been carved out of an already modernizing Britain: the United States, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, "and, perhaps, a few others."⁶⁸ He pointedly excluded Britain from both groups, since its experience of industrialization—"a kind of statistical accident"—disqualified it from inclusion among either of these typologies.⁶⁹ Rostow even insisted, in explaining how economies industrialize, that textiles were insufficient to launch take-off (except in the British case), and that the transition from traditional society resulted from external, not internal, factors (except in the British case).⁷⁰ Britain had experienced industrialization, obviously, but that experience was exceptional, and therefore not the basis of useful generalization. In fact, Rostow believed that Marx's system failed because it was modeled too closely on the British case alone. Marx had written *The Communist Manifesto* at a time when only Britain had matured, Rostow argued, leading him to base his analysis on that single unrepresentative example. "A concentration on the British case," he concluded, "permitted a much simpler concept of the transition period and of the take-off than our contemporary range of historical knowledge would allow."⁷¹ On this point, at least, Marx would have agreed, as his later work, beginning with the *Grundrisse* and continuing through the various editions of *Capital*, pressed beyond the English example to suggest a wider range of paths towards history's end.⁷² Rostow did not note this development in Marx's thought, but he shared the later Marx's determination to avoid the mistake of *The Communist Manifesto*. Indeed, the author of the "non-communist manifesto" even asserted that the world's first industrial nation—the "classic" case and pioneer that all other nations followed—did not fit into his generalized model at all.

With a little elbow grease, however, Rostow crammed Britain into his scheme after all, in a way that underscored the importance of national feeling to economic

⁶⁷ Ibid., xii, 38, 59.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 17.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 31.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 53–5, 6.

⁷¹ Ibid., 157–8, quotation at 158.

⁷² Anderson, *Marx at the Margins*, 154–95.

development. “The general case,” he reminded his readers, “is of a society modernizing itself in a nationalist reaction to intrusion or the threat of intrusion from more advanced powers abroad.”⁷³ It is clear how that characterization would have applied to European nations under and after Napoleon, as well as to the colonized nations of Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, but its applicability to Britain is less obvious. If anything, it might be expected that Rostow would have fit Britain into the second of his two typologies, that of English-speaking nations that had been carved out of Britain. But instead it was the first, “general” case into which Rostow eventually shoehorned Britain, reinterpreting its early modern struggles against Rome, Spain, Holland, and France as examples of the “reactive nationalism” that later spurred modernization in threatened and colonized countries. Thus the world’s first industrial nation fit into the stages of growth after all—not as the pioneering example that other nations followed, but as an illustration of a scheme that was not derived from British history at all.⁷⁴

But despite Rostow’s insistence to the contrary, a version of British history did implicitly structure the book’s framework. Although *Stages* emptied that model of content and denied its applicability to Britain, the stages of growth nevertheless amounted to a narrative familiar to historians of Britain. The story began when a traditional society, “pre-Newtonian” in outlook, came to view the physical world as mutable in service of its interests.⁷⁵ Then a modernizing elite, not necessarily Protestant (but therefore some variant of it), became committed to social, economic, and political modernization.⁷⁶ That elite, along with landed classes pursuing agricultural revolution, harnessed entrepreneurial zeal, emergent financial services, and the latest innovations in science and technology.⁷⁷ These inventions in particular sent the economy into take-off, until, “some sixty years” later, it reached maturity, and the story’s chronological markers—1783, 1815, 1832, 1851, 1914—testified, in this part of Rostow’s argument, to a silent Anglocentrism.⁷⁸ Britain was thus both nowhere and everywhere in *Stages*, and it is in this sense that historians are correct to assert that Rostow treated British history as paradigmatic.

Then, following the Great War, the United States finally surged ahead of Britain—not only through the stages of economic growth, but also through *The Stages of Economic Growth*. Through the first five chapters Britain had figured as the book’s main character, propelling its story and topping its charts, but

⁷³ Rostow, *Stages*, 34.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 34–5.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 4, 19.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 20–21.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 32–3, 9.

beginning in Chapter 6 Britain's position vis-à-vis the United States reversed. First the chronological benchmarks shifted, from markers in British history to American eras instead: progressivism (not New Liberalism), the Great Depression (not the slump), and the postwar boom (not austerity).⁷⁹ This reversal was illustrated visually, as Britain's earlier primacy had been, in the book's tables and charts, which now featured the United States at their top—until the final chapters when Britain (and, indeed, the rest of the world) became erased entirely, leaving only the United States and the Soviet Union.⁸⁰ The most telling indication of this shift took the form of a chart that did not list the United States at all, as the US now figured as the referent (“USA = 100%”) against which all other nation-states were compared.⁸¹ At this point, Rostow's discussion of Britain and Western Europe devolved into a condescending pep talk. He assured them that they retained “roles of dignity, initiative, and responsibility” to play in the fight against communism, and that there remained “a great deal, of first-rate importance,” that they could accomplish alongside the United States (on “a proportionate scale,” of course).⁸² He counseled them to avoid “excessive . . . nostalgia or self-pity,” since their fates remained in their own hands—as much as that was possible, and certainly “no less so than for the other peoples of the planet.”⁸³ By the end of the book, Britain—once the “classic” case of take-off into growth—figured as but one nation among many.

Even while being ushered offstage, Britain still had one final role to play: not the precocious upstart that had pioneered modernity, but the cautionary tale of a great power in decline. Britain's purported economic decline had only recently become a staple of political and intellectual discourse as Rostow was writing, the result not of immiseration or impoverishment—Britain's economy was growing as Rostow was writing—but of developments in economics and statistics that altered what was being measured and how.⁸⁴ In Rostow's analysis, the US displacement of Europe dated to the 1920s, when a new middle class, oriented towards consumption and dwelling in the suburbs, propelled the US into industrial modernity's final stage of high mass consumption.⁸⁵ “The question

⁷⁹ Ibid., 74.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 84, 85, 94, 96, 97.

⁸¹ Ibid., 86.

⁸² Ibid., 137–8.

⁸³ Ibid., 138–9.

⁸⁴ Jim Tomlinson, “Inventing ‘Decline’: The Falling Behind of the British Economy in the Postwar Years,” *Economic History Review*, 49/4 (Nov. 1996), 731–57; Tomlinson, “Thrice Denied: ‘Declinism’ as a Recurrent Theme in British History in the Long Twentieth Century,” *Twentieth Century British History*, 20/2 (2009), 227–51; David Edgerton, *Science, Technology and the British Industrial “Decline”, 1870–1970* (Cambridge, 1996).

⁸⁵ Rostow, *Stages*, 77.

now arises: why did not Western Europe, which had also attained maturity by the First World War, join the United States in the age of high mass-consumption in the 1920's?"⁸⁶ He explained that a prosperous nation enjoying economic maturity faced three choices as to how to invest its income. Their eyes fixed on the world before 1914, Britain and France had invested in empire and welfare, leaving the United States to drive forward into high mass consumption alone.⁸⁷ Henceforth it was the United States that provided the world with its pioneer, model, and future—as British writers and critics, from H. G. Wells to F. R. Leavis, had maintained since the interwar period.⁸⁸ But, Rostow warned his American readers, the United States of 1959 was not as wealthy as it looked, and if its leaders failed to look forward—that is, if the US behaved in 1960 as Britain had in 1920—they threatened to compromise their economic advance.⁸⁹ In this sense, by the end of the book, Britain offered a vision of the future after all: not the dazzling future of a nation blazing history's frontier, but a dystopian future of a nation veered badly off course in its journey through time.

To summarize, numerous versions of "Britain" figured in *The Stages of Economic Growth*. Britain had long figured as the "classic," (1) *textbook case* of industrialization, and Rostow agreed that it had been the world's (2) *pioneer* into self-sustaining growth. But its history was therefore that of (3) an *idiosyncratic anomaly*, outside the stages of growth and irrelevant to the experience of subsequent nation-states—unless anachronistically shoehorned into a (4) *general case* of reactive nationalism that explained growth in a world in which the meaning and desirability of take-off was already understood. Once history, and Rostow's narrative, entered the twentieth century, Britain assumed a position as merely (5) *one nation among many*, until dramatically reappearing as, first, (6) a *cautionary tale* of a great power that had taken decisions that led to its own decline, and, finally, (7) an *alternative future* of a post-1960 United States if Americans failed to heed the lessons of history.

To be sure, throughout the first half of the book, the stages assumed the form of a hollowed-out (8) *implicit model* of British history, and it is this iteration that most nearly approximates the conventional interpretation that *Stages* treated Britain as exemplary. But historians who collapse the entirety of *Stages* into this view rarely (if ever) acknowledge that it was only at most implicitly present, by comparison with frequent and forceful assertions that the unique British experience not only failed to offer a model, but in fact failed to fit the stages of growth at all. Indeed, anticipating this misreading of his argument, Rostow

⁸⁶ Ibid., 82.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 119, 73–4.

⁸⁸ Christopher Hilliard, *English as a Vocation: The Scrutiny Movement* (Oxford, 2012), 56–71.

⁸⁹ Rostow, *Stages*, 81, 119.

insisted that his stages were not extrapolated from Britain's example—that was the mistake, he maintained, of *The Communist Manifesto*, not of his non-communist manifesto.⁹⁰ But however determined to transcend the British case, Rostow's thinking and writing had developed by grappling with precisely that example, with the result that the account he produced inevitably remained populated by British references and examples—sometimes as idiosyncrasies, sometimes as patterns; sometimes as past lessons, sometimes as future warnings. Despite its periodic and implicit reliance upon the British case, however, one reading of British history never explicitly appeared in *Stages*: the paradigmatic case, the universal model, the exemplary instance. Britain did many things in *The Stages of Economic Growth*—indeed, depending on whether the counter is a lumper or a splitter, it did up to eight things—but it did not provide the example for all other nation-states to follow.

IV

Whatever generated today's consensus that *Stages* treated Britain as exemplary, that reading did not immediately emerge from engagement with the text itself. In September 1960, for the first time in its history, the International Economic Association (IEA) met to discuss the work of a single individual. Nearly forty economic historians, statisticians, and theorists gathered in Konstanz, Germany to discuss Rostow's concept of take-off. Rostow referred to his introduction of a new vocabulary as an "act of aggression" against an established field, signaling that he welcomed the slings and arrows that he found himself dodging on the shores of Lake Constance.⁹¹ According to one summation, placing the conference's responses to Rostow's thesis on a continuum between "don't like it" and "very positively approve," only one specialist in Konstanz fell into the latter camp—Walt Rostow himself.⁹² The other participants ranged between absolute rejection and qualified approval, raising questions about the concept of take-off, the validity of generalizing from past experience, and the suitability of analyzing development along national lines.⁹³ Rostow graciously engaged

⁹⁰ Rostow repeatedly insisted that his stages did not impose a single pattern upon diverse nations; in addition to the examples cited above, as he sought to differentiate his account from that of Marx, see also Rostow, *Stages*, 1, 46, 51, 90; for further discussion of this point, see note 96 below.

⁹¹ W. W. Rostow, ed., *The Economics of Take-off into Sustained Growth: Proceedings of a Conference Held by the International Economic Association* (New York, 1963), xiii, 337.

⁹² Rosovsky, "The Take-off into Sustained Controversy," 272.

⁹³ Questions about whether take-off differed from an industrial revolution were raised by David Landes (Rostow, *The Economics of Take-off into Sustained Growth*, 391) and Douglass North (400); questions about the validity of generalizing from past experience were raised

many of these criticisms, conceding, for instance, that in some cases (Quebec, southern Italy, the southern United States—but not, he maintained, Britain) it might make sense to analyze economies regionally rather than nationally. He pushed back more aggressively, however, in a dispute about national patterns with Harvard's Alexander Gerschenkron.⁹⁴ Gerschenkron's knobbly and good-humored paper, "The Early Phases of Industrialization in Russia," argued that national experiences, far from replicating one another, in fact varied according to the ground that late-arriving nations needed to make up.⁹⁵ Rather than shared national sequences, Gerschenkron identified diverse national paths, prompting Rostow to interject that two billion people were then embarked upon a common process of economic take-off.⁹⁶ Yet even this exchange over the typicality of national experiences, like the discussion at the conference more generally, was not argued through the role that Britain played in *Stages*. Britain might have been at the center of the text but, with few exceptions, it was not at the center of the discussion.

One of those exceptions took the form a clash between Phyllis Deane and David Landes. Deane's paper, written with H.J. Habakkuk (who did not attend the conference), argued that Rostow was mistaken to identify a departure in British economic history during the final two decades of the eighteenth century—in other words, to put the point more sharply, that Rostow's central concept of take-off did

by Fritz Neumark (308), E. A. G. Robinson (311), H. W. Singer (380), and Robert Solow (474); questions about the validity of national rather than regional analysis were raised by Kenneth Berrill (301), Robinson (311), Simon Kuznets (395–6, 398), and Gautam Mathur (399).

⁹⁴ Ibid., 314, 327.

⁹⁵ Alexander Gerschenkron, "The Early Phases of Industrialization in Russia: Afterthoughts and Counterthoughts," in Rostow, *The Economics of Take-off into Sustained Growth*, 151–69, discussed at 378–90; I am grateful to Eric Hounshell and Roger Backhouse for calling Gerschenkron to my attention.

⁹⁶ Rostow, *The Economics of Take-off into Sustained Growth*, 388–90, 384. Rostow had earlier insisted that, while each country's experience was unique, the problems they encountered were universal (313), and this effort to dissociate his thesis from a reductive modernization theory anticipated Vernon: "every society has its own *unique path* to sustained population growth and mobility," Vernon concludes. "A product of contingent circumstances, the speed, scale, and intensity of this process varied enormously from country to country. Nonetheless, once a society of strangers had taken shape, it generated *similar problems* of remaking the forms of government, exchange, and association that were in turn addressed by culturally specific forms of abstraction and embedding. My argument is modular; it is not monocausal or diffusionist." Vernon, *Distant Strangers*, 132–3 (emphasis mine). Rostow might have claimed the latter sentence as a description of his ambition in *Stages*, but his own recognition of endless national particularity was belied when he referred to Ethiopia as "a rather less promising version of Australia, Uruguay, and Argentina." Rostow, *The Economics of Take-off into Sustained Growth*, 306.

not even apply to the case he knew best.⁹⁷ Deane and Habakkuk presented instead a history not of take-off over two decades, but of development over a century: they pushed the origins of industrialization back to the 1740s, argued that agricultural rather than industrial development sustained the population growth of the 1780s–1790s, and noted that steam power did not extend beyond limited sectors until the 1830s.⁹⁸ The discussion that followed—the fourth of the day—marked the conference’s most charged dispute yet. Landes branded Deane and Habakkuk’s contribution a “negative paper,” one that seemed motivated by a “desire to show the weaknesses in Professor Rostow’s theory”—a charge with which Deane gamely agreed.⁹⁹ Landes countered by insisting that “something unique happened” in late eighteenth-century Britain, accelerating “after 1780” and constituting a “great event in human history.”¹⁰⁰ Simon Kuznets and Douglass North, while generally skeptical of Rostow’s thesis, objected that this discussion was focusing too narrowly on industrial development, rather than economic growth generally, but for Deane and Landes these questions were—in the context of Rostow’s thesis—one and the same.¹⁰¹ Deane asserted that Rostow’s take-off took Britain’s Industrial Revolution as its “prototype,” while Landes insisted (against Rostow’s protests) that take-off was simply another term for the Industrial Revolution.¹⁰² In short, Rostow intended for his scheme to transcend the case of Britain, and even skeptical interlocutors like Kuznets and North sought to curtail discussion of the British example, but critics like Deane and supporters like Landes converged to maintain that to argue about take-off was to argue about Britain.¹⁰³

⁹⁷ H. J. Habakkuk and Phyllis Deane, “The Take-off in Britain,” in Rostow, *The Economics of Take-off into Sustained Growth*, 63–82.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 68, 77, 72.

⁹⁹ Rostow, *The Economics of Take-off into Sustained Growth*, 335, 340.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 342–3.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 337.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 63, 391; see North’s critique at 400, discussed below. In response to a similar claim by Landes earlier at the conference, Rostow had differentiated take-off from the Industrial Revolution, suggesting that the latter was a “literary concept” by contrast with the more technical term of take-off—although labeling a development “take-off” in the 1960s United States was no less metaphorical than equating another to a “revolution” in nineteenth-century Europe (312).

¹⁰³ This convergence may help to explain why, despite the generally negative reception that Rostow’s thesis received at the conference, scholars of countries with a tradition of treating British history as normative—W. G. Hoffman on Germany, and S. Tsuru on Japan—were among Rostow’s more enthusiastic supporters in Konstanz. On the norming of British history in German and Japanese academic cultures see David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Society and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Oxford, 1984); Nagashima, “Britain as a Model for Japan’s ‘Modernization’?”

The dispute between Deane and Landes resurfaced in their respective histories of the Industrial Revolution later that decade, but by that time *Stages* had come to figure as a touchstone far beyond the specialists' disputes in Konstanz.¹⁰⁴ In adjacent fields, from anthropology to social history, the slipperiness of Britain's role in *Stages* actually facilitated its entry into various works. For Clifford Geertz, in *Peddlers and Princes* (1963), post-1945 Indonesia was "a pre[-]take-off society" currently embarked upon the "transition to a modern society," and in this respect it resembled "Tokugawa Japan, pre-1917 Russia, and the England of 1750."¹⁰⁵ The terminology and timing—as well as the book's first citation—all referenced Rostow, and this version of "England" was the exemplary instance that subsequent nations followed. Eric Hobsbawm, in *The Age of Revolution* (1962), likewise adopted the metaphor of take-off and dated it from the 1780s. The industrializing process, he explained, that was "still going on" globally had been "initiated by Britain": this was Britain less as paradigmatic case than as the origin of history, less model being replicated than pioneer being followed.¹⁰⁶ For Harold Perkin, in *The Origins of Modern English Society* (1969), Britain served neither purpose. Perkin's peerless work of original synthesis called *Stages* one of the "most brilliant and clear-sighted approaches" to the study of industrialization, but it also perceptively identified the problem Rostow faced in forcing Britain into a typology that had no place for its accidental trailblazer.¹⁰⁷ This was Britain neither as a model for others, nor as the pioneer of a continuing process, but rather as an idiosyncratic outlier from a more general phenomenon. Geertz, Hobsbawm, and Perkin thus all referenced *Stages* and Britain's role within it, but the fact that each engaged different versions of its "Britain" shows how the concept's very promiscuity enabled it to seed different accounts in different ways.

Economic historians, meanwhile, continued their assaults. Nearly forty years after that IEA meeting, Landes recalled the criticisms Deane and Habakkuk had leveled against Rostow in Konstanz; what he did not realize at the time, he added, was that this "little cloud, no bigger than a man's hand" would soon

¹⁰⁴ Phyllis Deane, *The First Industrial Revolution* (Cambridge, 1965); Landes, *The Unbound Prometheus*. See also the discussion in Cannadine, "The Present and the Past in the English Industrial Revolution," 154–5.

¹⁰⁵ Clifford Geertz, *Peddlers and Princes: Social Change and Economic Modernization in Two Indonesian Towns* (Chicago, 1963), 1–6, quotations at 4, 2.

¹⁰⁶ Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution, 1789–1848* (New York, 1996; first published 1962), 28–9, quotations at 29. See also Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire: From 1750 to the Present Day* (Harmondsworth, 1968), 48.

¹⁰⁷ Harold Perkin, *Origins of Modern English Society* (London, 1969), 1–16, quotation at 6.

develop into “a tempest.”¹⁰⁸ Recall that this line of discussion had seen two major critiques of Rostow’s thesis. The first, advanced by Deane and Habakkuk, challenged Rostow’s periodization of British industrialization by drawing its origins back to the 1740s; the second, advanced by North, maintained that the industrializing Britain of the late eighteenth century was a poor point of reference for developing nations in the mid-twentieth century.¹⁰⁹ Both critiques, Cannadine shows, flourished during the next decade: Deane and Habakkuk’s data found a place in influential textbooks, while versions of North’s admonition often figured in criticisms of *Stages*.¹¹⁰ His signature thesis besieged, Rostow’s position within the field declined; while he was preoccupied, of course, as Johnson’s national security adviser, contemporaries maintain that his standing in the field went south before the war in Vietnam did.¹¹¹ But if the proceedings at Konstanz inaugurated the criticisms that undermined Rostow’s thesis, they also presaged an ironic result of those criticisms, when Deane and Landes found themselves united regarding the role of Britain’s Industrial Revolution in *Stages*. Whether arguing that *Stages* mistook British industrialization (Deane), that it reframed British industrialization (Landes), or that it wrongly offered British history as a model for other nations to follow (North), each response depended upon—and advanced—the view that *Stages* offered British history as normative. Rostow, as we have seen, rejected this interpretation, but his critics remained unconvinced by his protests, and by repeatedly attacking this interpretation they effectively entrenched it. By the time of Cannadine’s 1984 masterpiece on Industrial Revolution historiography in *Past and Present*—still required reading, now three decades later—it had become a commonplace to assert that *Stages* presented British history as paradigmatic.

This narrowed reading of Britain’s role in *Stages*, which emerged upon publication and has persisted ever since, illustrates an obscure aspect of Herbert Butterfield’s critique of Whig history. Butterfield’s target in *The Whig Interpretation of History* was elusive, including English histories that featured the triumph of liberty, as well as teleological histories that featured the triumph of the present. Less familiar, however, is Butterfield’s animus against the elisions that

¹⁰⁸ David Landes, “The Fable of the Dead Horse; or, the Industrial Revolution Revisited,” in Joel Mokyr, ed., *The British Industrial Revolution: An Economic Perspective*, 2nd edn (Boulder, CO, 1999), 128–59, 133–4, quotation at 134.

¹⁰⁹ North, from Rostow, *The Economics of Take-off into Sustained Growth*, 400.

¹¹⁰ Cannadine, “The Present and the Past in the English Industrial Revolution,” 156–8, especially n. 125 (on the 1960s textbooks) and nn. 128, 133 (on the problem with treating Britain as normative).

¹¹¹ Packenham, *Political Development Ideas in Foreign Aid and Social Science*, 252.

accompany the abridgment of scholarly into popular history.¹¹² Whig history, in this third sense, might be understood as history with the wrinkles ironed out—for instance, the multiple versions of “Britain” in *Stages* that commentators smoothed into a single normative case. The match with Butterfield’s critique is inexact, since it was Rostow who authored the popular account, while his interlocutors wrote the more “technical” histories, but we can nevertheless discern the mechanism that Butterfield identified in the reception of Rostow’s argument. To be sure, Rostow’s snappy, polemical, and ideological account—born of a lecture series, aiming to shape policy, and read (or at least purchased) in the hundreds of thousands—lent itself to brisk treatment. But it must also be acknowledged that he anticipated and countered the charge that his account normalized British history—indeed, that he developed his account in part to correct the Anglocentrism of *The Communist Manifesto*—even as his scheme nevertheless became associated with precisely that interpretation.

V

The Stages of Economic Growth remains a canonical text in American intellectual history, one that is central to today’s emerging historiography on modernization theory.¹¹³ Rostow wanted his “non-communist manifesto” to displace Marxist analysis in economic history and communist influence in the developing world, and therefore he sought to replace *class* with *nation* as the agent of history. Britain—the site of both Marx’s analysis of capitalism and Rostow’s analysis of industrialization—figured centrally in the resulting account, but not in the way that historians usually suggest. Modernization theory developed in a postwar intellectual context that made it possible to imagine modern history as universal experience, organized around the nation-state, and propelled by industrialization, and in this context Rostow developed a historical scheme in which Britain figured prominently. Indeed, Britain performed up to eight different functions within *Stages*, but never explicitly the one most commonly associated with *Stages* and modernization theory today: the model for all other nations to follow. Initial criticisms of Rostow’s thesis, from specialists in and around economic history, did not much engage its debt to British history, indicating that the eventual consensus around that critique did not automatically emerge from critical engagement with the text itself. Meanwhile,

¹¹² Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (London, 1931). On this aspect of Butterfield’s thought see Stefan Collini, *Common Reading: Critics, Historians, Publics* (Oxford, 2008), 138–55.

¹¹³ For evidence of the canonical status of *Stages*, see its repeated inclusion in subsequent editions of Hollinger and Capper, *The American Intellectual Tradition*.

scholars in adjacent fields, from anthropology to social history, contributed to the text's sensational ascendancy by incorporating mutually exclusive versions of its "Britain" into their arguments. As the 1960s advanced, however, the criticisms mounted. By admonishing Rostow for treating British history as normative, these criticisms helped entrench a reading of *Stages* that Rostow had already repudiated—and it is that narrowed reading that we inherit today.

This close reading of *Stages* unsettles a pair of familiar claims about modernization theory. The first, most frequently advanced by historians of the United States, maintains that modernization theory established the American past as the blueprint for the world's future; as one scholar puts it, "For Rostow and his colleagues, the point was to translate America's peculiar path to modernity into normative policy."¹¹⁴ This interpretation, while not exactly incorrect, is incomplete, insofar as it erases the roles played by ideas about other countries in defining the modernizing process. Attention to the place of British history in *Stages* expands the frame of reference of the emerging historiography on modernization theory, indicating that this particular vector of American exceptionalism was not exactly synonymous with American egocentrism. To be sure, modernization theorists understood the United States to have achieved a unique place in history, but for "the boldest and most widely quoted" of those theorists that place could only be apprehended through engagement with Britain.¹¹⁵

The second claim, more commonly advanced by historians of Britain, asserts that Rostow established Britain's Industrial Revolution as the paradigmatic case of economic growth. As we have seen, *Stages* was certainly read this way from the time of its publication, and one way of understanding Rostow's scheme is indeed as a hollowed-out version of British history. To recall this dimension of modernization theory is to recall a golden age for British historiography, the halcyon days when this national field promised to reveal the world's history in microcosm. Today British history commands no such position in US history departments, and its historians have accordingly sought new ways to assert the significance of their field.¹¹⁶ In light of these developments, this article's reading of *Stages* may be misunderstood as yet another blow to a national historiography long since provincialized, seemingly revealing that even this well-known text did not claim the significance for Britain with which it has long been associated.

¹¹⁴ Meaney, "The Swaddling Thesis," 35.

¹¹⁵ Hollinger and Capper, *The American Intellectual Tradition*, 379.

¹¹⁶ Peter Stansky *et al.*, "NACBS Report on the State and Future of British Studies in North America" (1999), available at www.nacbs.org/archive/nacbs-report-on-the-state-and-future-of-british-studies, accessed 26 Aug. 2013. For the context of this shift see Cannadine, *Making History Now and Then*, 215–20.

But that interpretation would be mistaken, because based on the assumption that fields win or lose standing to the extent that their subjects can be shown to have arrived at certain social or political arrangements “first,” or (in a stronger version of the same claim) that they “made” the modern world we now inhabit.¹¹⁷ In practice, however, fields earn their places within a mature discipline less by such planting of flags and thumping of chests than through the more modest—but more credible—work of posing and engaging interpretive problems that colleagues find intriguing or generative. British history’s position in the American academy will be secured not by Britain’s history, but by its historians. And if these historians must abandon the pretension that, for Rostow at least, our field once offered the outline of modern history, we can take courage from the fact that *The Stages of Economic Growth* presented a Britain far more compelling than a five-item checklist: not a monolithic and universal history, but a various and peculiar one—and yet, as Rostow showed, no less significant or revealing because of it.

¹¹⁷ Steve Pincus, *1688: The First Modern Revolution* (New Haven, 2009); Niall Ferguson, *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* (London, 2003); Roy Porter, *The Creation of the Modern World: The Untold Story of the British Enlightenment* (New York, 2000). Vernon similarly distances himself from a conception of historical argument as the identification of first arrivals in *Distant Strangers*, 17.