Convergence in the pre-take-off-period

H. Th. Chabot

During the past four years eight country seminars have been held under the auspices of the Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, as part of the activities in the Two-Year Course in the Social Sciences. I think it might be useful to speculate here and now on some of the main trends we touched upon during this experiment.

Attention from the outset was concentrated, as one might expect, on the Institute's general focus, that is the process of economic development and social change, but now in particular, in a given country, during a given period.

The approach was initially based on the idea that a relation could be established between the initial aims and tendencies at the beginning of the period, and the final results achieved. I should like to state here at the very beginning, that this task proved much more difficult than it seemed. It was the unexpected results, those not sought for, which turned out, after all, to be the most interesting ones. However interesting unexpected phenomena may seem, to those who only have to observe them, they are not very much appreciated by those responsible for a country's planning, and who try hard to get all society under control. It is not by accident that in Japan unexpected behaviour is considered dangerous behaviour. It is also not by accident that the usual question of business men in young countries is: "How to do real business without being hampered by unexpected political movements?"

In asking ourselves how to get a grip on the unexpected phenomena, we realized that most unexpected results emerged in a sector of society other than the one where the change had begun; thus the relations between the different sectors had to be studied first. We realized that these relations are best studied if we take society as a whole as our starting point.

However, a better idea of the material upon which our discussion is going to be based should be provided first.

The countries studied are the following: Japan during the Mōji period, 1868—1910; Ethiopia under the Emperor His Majesty Haile Selassie I; Turkey under Mustapha Kemal Atatürk 1920—1940; Mexico during the same period; Egypt
during the period of Mohammed Ali 1805—1845; Java from 1900—1930, the so-called ethical period; and finally Ceylon and Jamaica both from 1880—1920, the period of expansion of the plantation economy and subsequent developments. Taking all these countries together, the process of economic development and social change showed a fantastic variety of forms. Consequently, in order to avoid getting lost, one has to have a central point to start from and to concentrate upon as well. The American economist W. W. Rostow formulated as a central point of the economic development process that typical rise of the per capita National Income figure during a relatively short period that has to be gone through, before self-sustained growth and maturity is achieved. Rostow was among the first economists to distinguish between different stages of the entire process by indicating their special characteristics. I recall these stages here: the traditional, transitional, take-off and self-sustained growth, which might lead into various directions.

The point to be made now is that, with the exception of Japan, which had already proceeded to the take-off stage during the Meiji period, all the other countries were studied during the preceding stage, the so-called transitional period of Rostow. It is, in fact, this pre-take-off-stage which I should like to discuss now. It might have the advantage of bringing some of its special problems to the light.

I like to conceive of the take-off period as a narrow gate leading to a period where self-sustained growth gives the various countries the opportunity to implement — within certain limits — their own possibilities and tendencies.

The specific difficulty of the pre-take-off then is, how to find the gate. No ready-made route is available; every country has to find its own. Certain conditions have to be fulfilled before a country will be so much as able to find its own path; certain capacities must be present. Some of them are generally known. But what is not known is, which capacities precisely must be present before one can enter the gate. What is not known is the degree to which these capacities must be available. Nor, I would add, is the interplay of these capacities clearly and generally understood. This means that for the leaders of the countries concerned it is a period of uncertain steps and moves. They do now know what to expect from the moves they make and the measures they take. There is even no one who could tell them what they should do. General suggestions may be given, but then everybody has to wait and see what will result from these. As the road to be taken is not sure, differences of opinion arise as to which direction might be the best. In voicing opinions, nobody really knows whether the point under discussion has anything to do with reaching the gate, or whether both roads suggested will lead to the hoped-for result. In such a case the difference of opinion often results in a controversy between two groups of which either would like to do the job alone, excluding the other.

Besides, there is another thing. There is a general awareness that latecomers at the gate are at a disadvantage. I think it is still doubtful whether generally speaking this is correct. But the fact remains that most countries are speeding up their efforts so as to belong as soon as possible to those who have passed the take-off period. It makes the leading people work under heavy pressure.

It is this set of basic and unescapable uncertainties, which we become aware of when studying the transitional stage and which seems to be related to a contraction of
society in the countries involved, during this stage. Contraction here, is conceived of as a whole of unifying, as well as isolating tendencies in society. I shall try to elaborate on this point below. But already in this stage I like to state that these tendencies proved so consistent in the various countries, that I venture to characterise the whole complex studied, as „convergence in the pre-take-off period”. Convergence here then, simply means the development of a similar trait — contraction — independently in different countries.

Below we shall discuss some unification and isolation tendencies in more detail. Now one more point is to be made.

It may have occurred to you that not all the countries selected are national states. Three of them were colonies and one of the three even only part of a much larger whole. To look upon the national state as the agency of many operations is a rather recent phenomenon, dating, generally speaking, from after the first world war. But I should like to underline that there is no necessity for this. There seems no special reason why aspects of the development process could not be associated with smaller or with bigger units, than the national state.

Now we have to agree that the state as a whole is a phenomenon difficult for sociologists and their colleagues to grasp. To be sure, this pertains to all units above the tribal or village level. Only few social scientists have devoted attention to this issue. It was an older anthropologist, Ralph Linton, who stated, a quarter of a century ago, in 1936, that a state functions best if it has approximately the same basic characteristics as the tribe. As basic characteristics, he mentioned a common culture and a unity of will. Only a few years ago Julian Stewart, in his Puerto Rico study, of 1956, pointed to different levels of culture patterns in the state. He mentioned the same sort of problems which were topics of discussion for the seminar sessions upon which this study is based: centralization and decentralization of government; the carrying-out of top decisions at the village level; capital formation; terms of trade; the development of an élite; social stratification, and so on.

I return now to the data found during our investigations. I have already mentioned the uncertainties inherent in the transitional stage, which make for a contraction of society. This, however, means that the country — at state level — first, conceives of itself as a unit, and secondly, cuts itself off from its environment. In this way we may say, we found in our studies a variety of unification and isolation tendencies. To mention some of them in general terms: increasing stress is laid on one’s own state-symbols, name and flag, as distinct, from other names and flags. There is an increasing control over foreign influences. It means that the countries’ frontiers become more important. It means, again, in practice, that migration of human beings, of goods and of ideas are brought under control. Passports and migration regulations for controlling the stream of individuals. Import and export regulations for checking the stream of economic goods. Censure, in any form, for the mass communications media; papers, magazines, books, movies and radio; checking the stream of ideas.

Unity of will needs a physical basis, and Government can help to create this through physical communications (roads, waterways, railways and ports, the Post Office, telephones and radio).
The physical basis thus having been provided, security stimulates migration within the national borders.

As regards administration, attempts are made to have decisions taken at the top carried out at all levels of society; in remote villages as obstacles on the road to provide strong barriers to unification.

As regards politics, there is a strong tendency towards concentration of power in the hands of the leading group. This involves a tendency to play down the importance of a parliament, in whatever form it may take; and if a party-system is considered at all, there can be no doubt that the one-party-system prevails. Where a two or multi-party-system existed, the parties proved to be without any real influence.

So much, in the way of general indications, to give a rough idea of the unification and isolation tendencies at work. We shall now turn briefly to some examples of unification tendencies, and to one showing the relevancy of isolation.

At the beginning of the pre-take-off we found a period of decay of former glory: often the people are impoverished and chaos rules. Japan saw the break-down of the feudal system, with which the Tokugawa regime was the last to be associated. Turkey, part of the Ottoman Empire of those days, was known as the sick man of Europe. Mexico had just struggled through a period of revolutions, from which, at the beginning of our period of study, the 1917 Constitution emerged. Egypt was already in decline long before it was conquered by Napoleon in 1801. In all these cases the general mood of the people was, that they were willing to do anything to escape the plight they were in. This meant a disintegration of the groups which composed the society of those days. Many people were inclined to follow anyone, who seemed willing and able to guide them on to a new path, to show a way out. In other words, a mood that facilitates the creation of a certain degree of unity in a new group, emerging at state level.

I am not saying that after a poor state of affairs has ruled in a country, good days will necessarily follow; but I would maintain that a poor state of affairs may prepare the ground for a leader, allowing him to introduce the spirit of enthusiasm which the country badly needs.

We have also found in our investigations that the strong man at the top always proves able to establish good contacts with some individuals among his people. This direct contact, in settling disputes, in clarifying misunderstandings, in explaining new measures, in persuading people to accept new measures and in helping to overcome the initial difficulties, has a double effect. It creates enormous good-will; the news spreads easily through the villages. It also provides a measure of control over his officials by penetrating into their daily work among others, in lending a ready ear to individual complaints. This behaviour has been reported of Muhammed Ali, Mustapha Kemal Atatürk and of the Mexican presidents as well. Being tolerant to individual citizens in special cases, but tough to groups, apparently considerably strengthens the unifying tendencies at state level.

We have also found that the introduction of landreforms in Egypt and Mexico and of landtax reform in Japan, is important to increase the return of the land. Quite unexpectedly, however, the reforms turned out also to be unifying forces, as the link between central government and farmers became a direct one. The intermediate groups,
the big landowners or the feudal lords, were put aside and by way of a centralized administration the farmers came into direct contact — administratively speaking — with top-officials. This enabled Muhammed Ali for one, to start conscription for his army (granting of course, that he’s got the idea of conscription from Napoleon). In Japan the new landtax, via an increasing number of landless peasants, happened to increase migration from the countryside towards the town, and thereby to provide cheap labour for the young industries. As regards Japan, some writers even suggest that the miracle of the country’s emergence as a modern state is to be attributed to this new landtax-system.

Thus I have touched briefly on three different aspects of the unifying tendencies in the process under study. There are more, I refer for instance, to the minorities and the role they play in the process: a delicate subject perhaps, but worth mentioning. There is first of all the highly instructive example of Ceylon, instructive particularly when seen in connection with the Jamaica case. The common traits of both countries in this respects are striking; I must now go into more detail, in order to show that, as I see it, the source of the divergencies in later periods, is to be found in the plural society, which grew up during the period under investigation. Geographically both are small mountainous islands in the tropics, near to a vast continent. Demographically, both have a rapidly increasing population. Economically, we see a plantation economy, the strong exogenous trend becoming gradually integrated into the local economy. Administratively, in both cases, a strongly centralized government in the beginning of the period of investigation, with decentralizing tendencies towards the end. Politically, the fight for the power positions between — in the beginning — English officials and English plantation-owners, and — at the end — between the English leaders and the local leaders, with a rapidly growing influence of the latter group on governments affairs. Ideologically both showed the same ideas emanating from the England of those days, ideas on humanism, socialism and individualism, taking shape in various measures and behaviour patterns. In both, again, entrepreneurship, capital and labour were necessarily imported, the difference being that, whereas in Jamaica the group of imported labourers became the core of the island’s population, in Ceylon those imported became a second group, next to the one already present, the Singhalese. In Ceylon no amalgamation took place. The Singhalese had their own ricefields and their own behaviour patterns. The Tamils, coming from Southern India, had their own religion and spoke their own language; they settled in their own parts of the island, away from the Singhalese settlements, in the newly opened-up plantation areas. The two groups remained isolated from one another. Their numerical strength became an important factor: Around 1925 we find more than 3 million Singhalese and more than one million Tamils. Ceylon became a plural society, whereas Jamaica became a unitary one. More spadework remains to be done on this point, but provisionally I am inclined to believe, that the reason why Jamaica has got ahead of Ceylon in development, is to be found in the extra difficulties which Ceylon has had — and still has — in consequence of this state of affairs. Plural society after all, implies the occurrence of structural complications that will easily impede the unifying tendencies at the state level, which countries, in this stage, so badly need. In taking this into account, we should not wonder that among the important steps to-
wards unification, taken by the various leaders of the countries we have studied, the elimination of a minority is an effective factor. This has been done, among others, by Muhammed Ali, by Mustapha Kemal Atatürk and by Mexican presidents. It has been done physically, as well as economically.

The leaders might have felt or guessed that the exceptional position of a minority could prevent them in some way or another in promoting the measures appropriate to enhance unity of will at the state level.

Under Mustapha Kemal, may be for the first time in modern history, an exchange has taken place between Greeks living in Turkey and Turks living in Greece, all going back to their own country. Now the Greeks in Turkey happened to be small traders and shopkeepers in the economic structure of Turkey. As such, they occupied the position of specialists, not easily to be replaced. The point has been made during our discussions that this elimination might have been one of the main reasons for the very slow pace of economic development in Turkey during the decade that followed. It has been also said that the prevailing Turkish attitudes in those days, concerning commerce and physical labour, made the Turks unwilling to fill the gap left. Later on, however, it turned out that the vacuum created, considerably stimulated labour mobility towards these occupations. And of course high labour mobility is essential for successful development. In the same way it was not too difficult after the nationalization of American Oil in Mexico, in 1936, to figure out the losses from this move for the Mexican economy as a whole. Here the decision might have been taken in view of foreign influence which was felt to be penetrating in home affairs. I mention in particular the influence on landreform, a matter in which foreign entrepreneurs have found themselves at time closely allied to big landowners and other vested interests in the country concerned. Here again, the new situation provided a stimulant, in the long run, for occupational mobility and for stronger central control on the State economy.

It would be too much to expect that the measures taken, as indicated here, made Mustapha Kemal or the Mexican president popular with the countries of Western Europe or with the United States. They have been labeled dictators on many occasions, a label not associated with very pleasant feelings, after all. In trying to clarify the situation, we should, however, first ask ourselves how far such an association is relevant. Here history may help us in gaining a better insight in our problem. Dictatorship, as it was known in Roman times, meant a concentration of power in the hands of one or two men in times of crisis to overcome the special difficulties of that critical period. Examples are times of war, famine and epidemics. In our days we should add to these the pre-take-off period; all these examples are concerned with periods when society contracts. Periods, however, essentially limited in time. The unfavourable things associated with dictatorship in recent times are not to be found so much in the measures taken by the leader, but in the disregard of the temporary nature of the dictator's position, (and also, but that is a different subject again, in the difficulties he creates in the international fields).

As a last item I should like to point to the isolation factor, seen as another aspect of the contraction-complex. We have found that in special situations the elimination of minorities can be interpreted as a step towards a country's unification. Thus we should
not underestimate the pressures from abroad on the leader of a country on its way to the take-off.

For gaining a better insight in this problem, I should like to draw on history for a better understanding of the situation. I may invite your attention to Muhammed Ali’s period in Egypt. It is a completely different situation. We should then imagine a situation without postal services and telephones and telegrams, without radio, and the world press.

International contacts were run by foreign agents, who were mainly interested in the moves of the powerful groups and their leaders. They passed on their news by couriers. It means that communications with the neighbouring and other countries were poor. The ideological situation differed considerably as well. Socialism and democracy were still in their pre-Marxian stage; Florence Nightingale still had to launch her appeal on human suffering; nationalism was still in its infancy. We may learn from this that the isolation of the individual states was much greater than it is nowadays. Leaders who wanted to develop their countries had no reason to establish bamboo curtains.

This situation made Muhammed Ali’s position considerably easier. He could deal with such minorities as he found in his way, the Mameluks, without the fear for interference and moral indignation leaders of later periods have had to face. He could build up his system of monopolies without being branded a dictator, and therefore without having to face resistance from abroad.

The Egypt of Muhammed Ali became a pioneer country in the development process. For several reasons it was not successful. But influential authors explained the breakdown of the monopoly system by influences from abroad. The forced admittance of the English merchants on Muhammed Ali’s cottonmarket meant the end of the isolation, essential for his success.

So for those who think mainly of the advantages of being among the late-comers, and of the disadvantages of the fore-runners in the development process, one of the disadvantages for the late-comers may be pointed out as well: a certain degree of isolation is still one of the essentials for a successful approach to development; isolation was more easily attained in earlier days than in modern times.

Now my last point refers, as you may expect, to the international field. It remains to be asked whether the highly important moves mentioned above, elimination of minority groups, and nationalization of property, being considered as essential for the countries’ successful progress, could be acceptable from the point of view of the world community to which all national states ultimately belong. The answer must be in the negative, because — ultimately again — they are one-sided moves and as such unacceptable. Internationally they create a chaotic situation. They run counter to what Busia called the sense of co-operation, one of the basic postulates for the existence of an international community. The idea of "speaking the same moral language" is, again, in these measures, completely lacking. I think we could now see the situation, as follows: Young states are serious in their endeavour to achieve a certain degree of unity at state level; their leaders somehow feel that the further progress of their countries depends on unification and control of groups before many things.

European and North-American states are serious when they speak of property and man-
hours-work in terms of money, and when they speak of the life and death of human beings as being of the utmost importance for them.

For this clash of values in the international field a way-out has to be found. The best basis for a solution in a case like this, is understanding each other's viewpoint, and the strength of each other's emotions involved. May be a clarification of the importance of contraction of society for successfully attaining the take-off stage, may help to find a solution.