

Democracy for all? A consideration of the relationship between economic change, social and cultural structures, and the universality of democracy

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As is well known, debates about 'Asian values', and 'Asian democracy' have grown up, along with claims that this is to be an 'Asian Century', in the wake of the economic development of the region which so mesmerised the world, until recently. Therefore, little sense can be made of those debates and claims if we do not consider their relation to that economic development. In addition, however, if we are to look at the relation between economic developments and cultural and political change it is important to be clear about and understand what culture is and how it is constituted in order to understand that relation. I would like to examine three aspects of the issue: the nature of culture, the nature of the relation between cultural structures and economic circumstances, and the implications of the nature of that relation for future developments. I intend to do this from a conceptual perspective as this offers the deepest insight into the nature of the issue.

Culture

Firstly then, what is culture? This is a concept which is central to anthropology but which recently like a weed appears to be popping up everywhere. In addition, it appears to be used to mean all sorts of things to all sorts of people. Perhaps most commonly when non-specialists think of 'culture' they think of what Edward Said (1993) has summarised as 'all those practices, like the arts of description, communication, and representation, that have relative autonomy from the economic, social, and political realms and that often exist in aesthetic forms, one of whose principal aims is pleasure'. This idea encompasses many areas commonly thought of as 'culture'—art, literature, theatre, dance, costume, architecture, crafts, and so on. Looked at in these terms we usually think of one culture as different from another: Indonesian *gamelan* music, classical Japanese *gagaku* court music, and classical

Western music; Western ballet, Thai and Japanese dance; Vietnamese water puppets, Japanese *bunraku* puppet theatre, and Western puppetry—to most people these are self evidently culture and clearly different from each other.

The anthropologist, on the other hand, sees these not as culture itself but as products of culture. If we are to understand the relation between culture and economic change we must distinguish between culture and its products. This will become clearer as I explain a deeper meaning of culture. But this is my first criticism of the non-specialist conception of culture: it focuses on the products of culture rather than culture itself and thereby runs the risk of confusing changes in the products with changes in the culture itself. This will clearly not help us understand the relation between culture and democracy, or, indeed, culture and anything else.

There is another criticism to make, however. It is of the idea that even these aesthetic forms are relatively autonomous from society and the economy. In the contemporary social sciences such an idea makes little sense.

There is another way in which ‘culture’ is used in discussions of social and economic developments which is closer to the broader concept used in disciplines such as cultural anthropology. This idea too, however, is of little use to the specialist or those who would like to engage in serious consideration or analysis of contemporary developments. I refer, of course, to the type of concept used in discussions of ‘Asian values’, the idea that this will be an ‘Asian Century’, an assumed ‘Asian’ model of development, and an outgrowth of these, ‘Asian’ democracy. More generally, there is a debate about whether democracy should be considered a universal concept or whether it is culturally specific. These arguments rely on the anthropological concept of culture as a specific form of life but abuse it and remain unaware that they are simply unconsciously repeating the debates which originally lead to the emergence of the concept of culture two hundred years ago.

Many of us are familiar with the writings of various authors determined to show some special Asian development process and the development of a culture or values in, at best, distinction, at worst, opposition, to what is characterised as Western dominance and what is said to be Western culture. Yoichi Funabashi (1993) talks about a new regional identity coming vigorously to life and opposed to the West, as is

made clear in his idea that what is happening is 'Asianisation' not 'Westernisation'. Leaders in Singapore and Malaysia have made high profile pronouncements about Asian development and how it is supposed to be connected to values claimed to be uniquely Asian (and contrasted with Western values), for example, consensual decision-making, conflict avoidance, respect for authority and order, and emphasis of community over the individual. We are all familiar with these. Again, these are placed in opposition to what are claimed to be alien and Western values and cultural features. Mushakoji (1993) argues for East Asian Confucian communalism in opposition to Western individualism (in fact, he argues that individuation has not occurred in East Asia, thus attempting to turn it into an essential, 'empirical', and therefore undeniable, difference). Tai (1989) argues that an East Asian cultural emphasis on harmony, group orientation, and affective bonds will create an East Asian alternative to Western economic development. Ogura (1993), in his 'call for a new concept of Asia' goes so far as to say Western-style modernisation and industrialisation have reached a dead end and so a distinct Asian way is necessary. More aggressively, Mahbubani (1992a; 1992b; 1994) argues that adherence to endogenous 'Asian' values is preferable to the alleged decadence of the West.

What is important for us here is not the search by these and other writers for examples of cultural distinction as if their presence provided some sort of empirical 'proof' of Asian (or other) distinctiveness (which can then be used to 'explain' Asian development). What is more important, for the serious student of culture, is that this is part of a wider oppositional phenomenon stretching around the globe as peoples everywhere speak increasingly of their 'culture' as needing respect, and defence against Western capitalism and ways of life. This is so widespread as to be a phenomenon in itself and one which, in order to show its political nature in constituting and promoting 'cultures', has been called 'culturalism' (Dominguez 1992; Turner 1993; Sahlins 1993).

However, even this is an old process which itself began in Europe. As a term 'culture' was developed by German intellectuals in the late eighteenth century¹.

¹ This summary relies on Sahlins (1995).

Faced with the economic, political, and intellectual power and domination of France and frustrated by Germany's lack of power and political and national unity the notion of cultural differences became essential to their national project. In the 1750s the term 'civilisation' had been coined in France to explain its superior accomplishments and justify its imperialism. Unlike 'culture' as we now understand it, 'civilisation' could not be differentiated according to different ways of living in different societies, it referred to a universal ideal order of human society. It was in opposition to these global claims that Germans developed the idea of culture. Culture, unlike civilisation, could not be transferred between peoples and it was culture which truly identified and differentiated a people. This concept developed in a relatively underdeveloped region, and expressed its nationalist demands (and indeed its relative backwardness) against the hegemony of Western Europe, especially France. Importantly, it expressed resistance and opposition to economic and political developments which were seen as threatening not only the people's future but also their past. In short, it was an idea to defend an idea of tradition and traditional culture against the encroachment of the more advanced West and to express the rise of that relatively backward area (Germany). This is, clearly, the same oppositional struggle contained in debates about Asian cultures and values.

However, the situation today is not the same as it was in the eighteenth century. Today we have global information flows, trade, and transnational cultures. This is a fundamental difference, the importance of which I shall return to. One of the effects of the reorganisation of the world into a global system is that the very concept of culture itself is being undermined. The coherence and systematicity that culture claims for itself is increasingly difficult to sustain in the global system. I would argue that it is precisely because at this time in history the idea of culture is so vulnerable that it is so strongly defended and talked about. However, the possibility of maintaining the previous diversity of cultures in the increasingly integrated world system and economy that we are faced with today is so reduced that I, for one, question it.

If the notion of distinct cultures risks becoming untenable can any useful ideas be reclaimed from the idea of culture? I think yes, but not ideas concerned to

demonstrate cultural distinctiveness or opposing one culture to another. Of continuing value will be the idea of culture as the symbolic structures through which individuals understand the world and are able to live in it. Far from setting up abstract national or regional cultures as marks of distinction this culture is common to all people, just as language is. For that reason alone it is not as attractive or useful politically as the notions I have just described, but is far more useful for understanding the relation between economic transformation and social, cultural and political change.

It should be kept in mind, however, that although the phenomenon described by this anthropological idea of culture is a reality shared by all people everywhere and through all times it does not deny the reality of differences in time and space. Indeed this idea of culture is in fact better able to explain and allow us to understand such differences than the superficially attractive but ultimately analytically useless notions I have just described. Those other notions simply posit difference as an essential given but cannot explain how cultural change or continuity occurs. Nor can they explain why it is that responses to similar circumstances can differ in different societies and localities. All they can offer is the circular proposition that because cultures are different cultural responses are different, and because cultural responses differ therefore cultures are different. This tells us nothing about the great issue of the day namely, the integration of the whole planet into a single world system and the socio-political implications of that integration. Nor does it tell us anything about what social and cultural changes we might expect from now on.

One of the questions people in various disciplines are currently concerned with is how it is that different localities react in different and specific ways to the shared circumstance of integration into the world system, and despite the fact that they share the same sort of relation to that circumstance. This is the question underlying the debate about the 'East Asian' 'nature' of development in East Asia, whether there is any or several specifically East Asian paths to development which are essentially different from Western models. It also underlies the unease at the prospect of the whole world sharing one 'Western-style' democratic system. The fundamental conceptual problem that this gives rise to is the question of the nature of the relation between cultural structure and economic (or physical, or geographical)

circumstance. If we do not understand the notion of this relation between structure and circumstance we cannot understand social and cultural change and continuity.

The relation between culture and economics

The connection between structure and circumstance occurs through action. It is thus made at the local level which is the primary level of political action, something that professional democratic politicians have been aware of for a long time. As Edward Said has rightly identified in his criticism of 'homogenising history', discussion of this question therefore needs to take place at that level. On the other hand, even a local study cannot afford to overlook global forces and their influences. Today, no community is immune to the vagaries of those forces or can escape integration into the global economy and world-system. However, contrary to the picture painted by many, these localities are not powerless nor is there only one possible road for them to travel, even in the face of such large forces. The influence that the *circumstance* of these global forces have on action is not direct but is mediated by the *structures* of the local population: cultural and social structures, structures of conception and understanding. It is these structures through which the *significances* of changing circumstances are derived and so influence the types and specific features of the *action* taken. It is this realm of the significance of circumstances, events, structures, and the relations between them which is crucial. In my own research my approach, which I call cultural-logical, therefore looks at the logics of cultural structures as expressed in real action by human subjects in actual circumstances in order to provide a greater understanding and more widely applicable method for analysing and understanding events such as social and cultural change.

Culture, in a very real way, creates the acting person as a subject and an individual. This occurs through the complex process that we commonly denote by the simple term 'socialisation' in which the logics of a culture are forced into the inner being of each of us. This socialisation provides us with the structures which allow us to create ideal conceptions and categories of understanding and to assess the 'reality' of circumstances and experience. It is in this way that these symbolic structures

create the terms of our relation to the world and the logics by which we live our lives. Put less abstractly, culture, through socialisation, provides us with the categories through which we understand the world and so provides us with senses of reality and of what is natural. Further, it is also the relation (or sometimes the tension) between such internalised logics and our other perceptions, actions, and experiences that creates the continuation and change of the culture from which the logics were projected.

This points to the conjunctive nature of our relation to the world. It is in the conjunction of action, culture, and context that cultural structures are reproduced, transformed, or otherwise given meaning. This is the nature of history and the historical nature of structure. Because of this historical nature itself related to the tension between action, culture, and circumstance, culture is very fluid and can simultaneously and in the same circumstances both reproduce traditional categories and transform them. What we refer to as cultural change (for example in the development of democratic systems in Asia) is just this: traditional categories are not only being reproduced but revalued and transformed in practical action. Two things are of practical interest to us here: one is the idea that action is basic to both the continuation and change of cultural and social structures; the other is the fact that people's understanding of situations can only occur through cultural structures. Because of this latter people's actions do not have a direct relationship to the conditions in which they are produced, or to the conditions producing their cultural structures. Of course, I am not saying that there is no such relation or that it might not even be close, but I am saying that it is not *direct*.

Relations between symbols have two moments, the *conventional* and the *contextual*. Conventional values are those formed through the significant relations between symbols determined through their positions in structure. Saussure (1966) called this synchrony. Contextual values are those formed through the use of internalised symbols and signs in practical interpretation and action. However, as we all know, practical situations do not have to follow our interpretations of them. In such cases our interpretations, and the values on which we based them, may have to be reworked, and so revalued. This is a process many of us hoped was occurring in

the finance ministries, central banks, and cabinets of those Asian countries whose development, since 1997, has stopped looking miraculous. It is also what is happening in debates about 'Asian' values and the cultural specificity of democracy. In short, where contextual (or, practical) values differ from conventional the latter become liable to revaluation and change. Our lives, then, are always dual and based on an interaction between their two aspects: the cultural order as *constituted in society* (convention), and as *lived in practice* (context). In this it is the person (more specifically the *acting* person) who is critical. Bourdieu (1977; 1990) has shown us that the creation of the individual through socialisation means that his specific dispositions are a structural variant of his group or class. The implication of this for the issues we are discussing today is that it is through the acting individual that collective structures are revalued and transformed.

Also critical, however, is the relation of culture to event. An event is a happening of *significance*. Significance, however, is in its nature symbolic and is assigned to a happening only to the extent that it is integrated into the cultural order (or structure). The same is true of material force. The practical problem ignored by the debate about whether East Asian development is special and different from the West and whether its politics should be different, is the question of cultural divergence on a common material base. If cultural difference can exist even though the material economic base is the same (and the whole debate rests on there being recognisable differences) this indicates that there is no necessary starting point for a cultural scheme in material or natural reality. It is the *relationship* between material circumstance and the cultural order that is the crux of the problem. In that relationship material force is highly significant, but can be so only to the extent that such force is integrated into the cultural order. From this it follows that the specific social effects of material or material forces depend on the cultural order and the relation of those forces to the culture. That is to say, the details of action taken in response to material forces depend on the *significance* ascribed to those forces. Moreover, in their rush to locate cultural differences those involved in the 'Asian values' debate further ignore the point that what is important is not that there are differences, (without something recognised as different the debate could not

continue) but the significance of those differences. The essentialist debate has no method for assessing that significance.

Generally, then, we can conceive of a mutual relationship between material circumstance and culture. Cultural structures are related to the material conditions of existence through the practical action of individuals who have determinate schemes of perception. That perception is itself based in part on the significant material realm. On the other hand, cultural structure, as a set of meaningful relations between categories, is only potential until realised as events or action. Events necessarily act on culture, but because of the complementary relation of culture to event, the action of events is realised in particular ways influenced by culture, as we see, for example, in the varying responses of Japan, Korea, and Thailand to their financial and economic difficulties, and also in their development of democratic structures. This provides a key to understand the practical situation of transition to democracy, or any other.

We can see this argument illustrated in debates about Asian political and economic development and values. The significance attached to Asian development by many Asian commentators and elites was one of challenging the West, of heralding an Asian renaissance summed up in the notion of the 'Asian century'. An important question now, and indeed for the future of East and South East Asian development, is what significance local elites and policy-makers attach to the ongoing events of the area. Local cultural differences mean that the details of the circumstances in these different countries are different and we might expect therefore different policy responses.

After the Asian financial crisis, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), in return for its financial assistance demanded reforms to bring the struggling economies into closer alignment with global standards and patterns of trade, finance, and banking. In so doing the IMF, without meaning to, achieved a greater convergence of financial policies and structures than those countries' own local forces until the crisis. This illustrates the importance of action over circumstance in achieving convergence in cultural or social change. The actions of the IMF had the potential to force more, greater, and deeper structural and cultural change than the circumstances of economic

development before the crisis. This is one of the reasons the IMF was, and continues to be, vociferously opposed by those attached to the existing order.

Implications for the future

The situation in East and South East Asia illustrates another important point, however. That is that no culture or society in the contemporary world is formed solely or independently out of local structures. In previous periods it may have been possible but is no longer. Larger, world-encircling structures of information and significance also have a role. These are the global discourses with which we are all familiar: discourses of democracy, development, economic rationalism, cultural identity, and others. Improved transport and communications are implicated in this, but their importance is not so much simply as the material circumstances of transport and communications technologies and infrastructure, but rather what those technologies and infrastructures allow: the transmission and communication of ideas and, thus, significances. What is of interest and importance is the interaction between these global and local forces, as it is an interaction and not simply a one-sided imposition by the global. It is the practical operation of this interaction which is of crucial importance for the future course of social and cultural change in any particular place.

The strength and frequency of these interactions is today much greater than at any other time in human history. Indeed it is so great and constant that we can say that the current period is quite different from any which has gone before. It is the unrelenting scale, constancy, and frequency of interaction which may eventually lead to cultural convergence, rather than specific and common material circumstances. I do not say, however, that any such convergence will be quick or smooth. Nor do I say that convergence will mean the obliteration of all differences. Even in countries and societies outsiders (and even insiders) may think of as highly homogenised such as Japan and the US regional, class and other cultural differences remain. On the other hand, it is clear that what we think of as the striking cultural differences between for example Japan and the US are markedly less dramatic in scope, form, and substance

than they were 150 or 200 years ago.

As I have stressed so far, it is the connection of structure *and circumstance* (through action) which is important for understanding cultural and social change. The major material circumstance affecting people and their cultures in the transition to industrial or market economies is the movement towards individual wage labour. As an individual moves from dependence on traditional collective structures and practices such as labour on relatives' or the community's land to the independence of individual wage labour he becomes able to reproduce himself through his action as an individual. Such a movement often leads to a transformation of traditional authority and collective relations. This occurs even in a society such as Japan which often is presented and presents itself as essentially unchanged and collective. However, now even the Japanese government has been forced by a dramatically falling birth-rate and declining rate of marriage to admit that the Japanese family is changing. Unacknowledged by officialdom single person households, a rarity traditionally, are also increasing. I do not have the space to go into the varied and complex influences causing these three developments but they do amount to a transformation of traditional authority and collective relations to such an extent that developments not even considered a generation ago (or if they were, considered impossible) are now commonplace and, for the people involved, quite reasonable given the circumstances.

In colloquial English such a process is termed a 'generation gap', something universal to all cultures. What such a gap represents, however, is a transformation of pre-existing authority and collective relations. The reason such gaps arise is that because structures formed in particular types of conditions produce dispositions and structures which then serve as the basis of subsequent perception and appreciation of experience, over time different definitions will arise as to what is natural, reasonable, probable, possible, impossible, and so on. Situations thus develop in which what one group or generation regards as unthinkable (such as not marrying, not having children, or living alone) another takes as eminently reasonable. This is the process of the generation gap, but it is also the process of cultural change more generally.

I mentioned earlier that rather than material circumstances per se increasingly extensive, rapid, and continuous communications are likely to encourage cultural

convergence. This is a point which is so obvious if one looks at the history of the development of separate cultures and culture contact that it is surprising that today even many specialists seem to miss it. Instead they fall into easy acceptance of the culturalism I referred to earlier. But the responses a culture and society may make to the new 'culture contact' where in some sense cultures are never out of contact, are not set or fixed. However, there are two forms they are likely to take: orthodox or heterodox. These are specific conditions which occur when the assumptions and structures of a culture face alternatives. The concept of doxa (Bourdieu 1977; 1990) is useful in understanding this process. Basically, doxa is constituted in the relation between the objective cultural order and the person's subjective principles and methods of understanding. As I have discussed under the heading of socialisation this is the basis of the individual's sense of reality. Because it is inculcated through socialisation and provides the person with his sense of reality doxa is that which is *taken for granted*, the *self-evidence* of the natural and social worlds. Because it is taken for granted and self-evident it does not receive explicit articulation. However, doxa cannot exist when it is recognised that alternatives exist, and this is precisely the situation would-be culturalists find themselves in today. The reason the two cannot co-exist is that in order to recognise alternatives that which was previously taken for granted as natural must have been successfully challenged in that status. Heterodoxy is the recognition that alternatives exist. It is the choice of competing alternatives in which the very possibility of choice is acknowledged. However, as we all know, not everyone is comfortable with the idea that alternatives exist; indeed many find such an idea frightening. They deny and criticise all alternatives as unacceptable or false. This is an attempt to return to taken-for-granted values and structures but one which is bound to fail. It must fail because it denies that alternatives are acceptable but in so doing must accept the existence of the alternative challenge if only to reject it. Thus, try as it might it cannot return to the state of implicit unanimity.

The special feature of life today, caused by the revolution in transport and communications, is that virtually wherever we are alternatives are presented to us virtually every day—alternatives in social life, morality, economic organisation, work, leisure, artistic and aesthetic activities, politics—in almost all areas of life. The

world-wide transition to greater market and trade liberalisation is one such massive change brought about by the recognition of alternatives. Within the established market economies of the West it has been axiomatic for more than a generation that political, economic, cultural, and social life consists in the constant negotiation of alternatives. In other areas the existence of alternatives has been seen as a threat to be countered and as a result we have seen the rise of religious, political, and ethnic fundamentalisms whose pursuit of orthodoxy has caused untold suffering.

This, then, is the stuff of cultural change. Let me conclude by returning to the question and the problematic of culture. Culture is problematic because of the certainty and power of the market economy. However, these last two will not bring a determined set of changes. The changes will depend on the interaction of local cultural structures with wider global structures and circumstances. This interaction and change will be realised through action, but action in a heterodox environment. In this choice from among alternatives will be the hallmark of successful adaptation to the new realities of the market and global economies. However, there will be strong, but misguided, calls for orthodox responses which will not ultimately be able to deal effectively with the need for informed decision-making and the negotiation of alternatives.

Without doubt material circumstances are an important influence on culture and cultural change. However, they do not determine the form of culture or cultural change. That form is determined through significant practical action. It is possible, and indeed for an anthropologist unremarkable, to have varied cultural forms reproduced on the same material base. To that extent the search for special 'Asian' characteristics to 'Asian' development and politics is of no interest in trying to understand the relation between economic and cultural change, though as culturalism (not culture) it is worthy of study. Also, economic liberalisation and development in themselves need not lead to cultural convergence. I hope that I have made clear that while in the current period we can expect a movement from dependence on collective labour and structures to individual labour and consumption in the industrial economy, and therefore can expect traditional structures of social authority and collectivity to be challenged, the result of that challenge is not pre-determined but will depend on

local structures, circumstances, and action.

It is clear that the social and cultural organisations of countries such as Japan and South Korea remain distinct from those in the US and UK, just as those in the US and UK remain from those in Germany and France, or Italy and Spain. This may encourage those who support ‘Asian values’ and the idea that there is a special Asian identity and culture being formed which will challenge and ultimately overcome what is seen as an alien and intrusive Western culture. But those people should not be encouraged. That response is simply a form of culturalism which ignores the fundamental challenge posed to the growth of whole, essential, and distinct cultures today by transport and communications and cross-cultural exchanges. A true Asian culture would be doxic—it would be ‘natural’ and the need to explicitly articulate it (especially in opposition to the West or any other culture) would not be present. The ‘Asian way’, ‘Asian values’, ‘Asian culture’, ‘Asian century’ response is just that, a *response* to the West and it is an orthodox response. It attempts to deny the applicability of Western alternatives to the Asian situation (as if there was only one Asian situation). Similarly, any nationalist or nativist attempts to explicitly assert a national culture in opposition to some external challenge is a phenomenon of the same order. But to the extent that such attempts oppose themselves to some (usually Western or market-economy) alternative they cannot return to or construct taken for granted spaces for themselves. This is appropriate in a historical period in which communications and the flow of information mean that the presentation of alternatives is so great as to be, for many in both East and West, overwhelming. In such a period the recognition that alternatives exist, that little can be taken for granted, that change is constant, and that assumptions need regularly to be questioned appears favoured over the long term. Those who cannot adjust to this varied and ever-changing situation run the risk of falling by the wayside. Even in such a period, however, where planet-wide structures and forces appear irresistible local cultural structures remain important in shaping local responses to those forces and structures, and so all difference will not be removed though we may expect the degree of difference to be drastically reduced. Cultural structures and dispositions, practices and discourses, are all formed in history and continually gain new meaning in the

historical process through action. Thus, cultural difference will remain, but so will cultural change. We have not reached the end of history; rather we are embarking on a new phase.

In short, the development and spread of modern transport and communications is perhaps a more important influence on cultural change than the global spread of the market economy per se. This is because although there is a relation between material circumstance and cultural significance it is not direct but is mediated by those very structures of significance. What is important about transport and communications is that they allow the transmission of alternative significances. This *directly* influences cultural change by challenging what is taken for granted by presenting alternatives. Indeed, it may not be too much to say that it is this seemingly obscure process of the negotiation of alternative significances which lies behind the transition and debate about democracy in some Asian countries.

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