IN SEARCH OF AN EAST ASIAN DEVELOPMENT MODEL

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Edited by

Peter L. Berger

AND
Hsin-Huang Michael Hsiao



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An East Asian Development Model?

Peter L. Berger

For a long time now the focus of my work has been on the problems of modernization and development. An art collector will naturally be drawn to Florence, a mountain climber to the Himalayas. In very much the same way a social scientist interested in modernization will have his attention fixed on East Asia, to the point where he may reasonably conclude that this is the most interesting region in the world today. Needless to say, this in no way negates the other reasons for which one may be interested in this region—because of its importance in political and strategic terms, the splendors of its great civilization, its natural beauty or its sheer human vitality. I, for one, appreciate all of these, and I have also had a strong interest in the religious and philosophical traditions of Asia. But I can claim no particular competence in these areas. Allow me, then, to address an issue on which I can claim a measure of competence, namely, the question of whether Eastern Asia in general and Taiwan in particular can serve as a model relevant to other parts of the world, and, more particularly, whether there are cultural factors relevant to this issue.

The social sciences, for better or for worse, are a product of the West. They originated and developed during a period when the West was predominant throughout most of the world. Not surprisingly, when social scientists sought to explain the complex phenomenon we know as modernity—an aggregate of technological, economic, sociopolitical, and cultural processes—they looked on the societies of Europe and North America as marking the boundaries of the phenomenon. Later, after World War II, when the dissolution of the European empires led to the rapid development of new nations in what we now call the Third World, it also seemed natural to social scientists to look at this development through Western eyes; that is, they looked on it as a planetary expansion of the Western case, which remained the paradigmatic case for an

understanding of modernity. We should not blame them too much for that (I'm thinking here of the growth of modernization theories in the 1950s and early 1960s); nor is it fair, in most instances, to accuse them of ethnocentrism. After all, modernity was a creation of the West, and it did expand from its Western base to other parts of the world. My point is, quite simply, that this Western-centered perspective is no longer adequate.

An analogy from the natural sciences may be useful here. A chemist trying to understand a particular chemical reaction will always carry out some sort of control experiment. The social scientist, of course, cannot carry on experiments of his own, but sometimes history provides him with the same experimental logic. Thus, anyone seeking to grasp modernity today may conjure up the image of a gigantic laboratory in which three test tubes are bubbling away, each containing a similar reaction ("modernization"), but with significantly different elements in each. There continues to be the case of advanced industrial capitalism in the West. There is also now the case of advanced industrial socialism, in the Soviet Union and in its European allies. The comparison between these two cases is very important, but it will not concern us here. But there is yet another case, that of advanced industrial capitalism in East Asia. It is my contention that this case is absolutely crucial for an understanding of modernity; it is, if you will, an essential "control experiment." In this logic, it is not just a question of understanding East Asia, but rather a question of understanding what happens elsewhere (including the West) in light of this Asian experience.

The countries I have in mind here are, of course, the successful capitalist ones in the region: Japan, the so-called Four Little Dragons-South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore-and, increasingly, at least some of the countries of ASEAN besides Singapore. Their economic successes have powerfully impressed themselves on the consciousness of people everywhere (not always, pleasurably i.e., the American automobile and steel industries). The same economic successes have induced both social scientists and politicians in other parts of the world to speak of an "East Asian development model." I recently met with a group of Senegalese intellectuals to discuss problems of African development; when they heard that I had just returned from East Asia, that was all they wanted to talk about. A few months ago I spent some time in Jamaica and, not really to my surprise, a question that kept coming up was what would have to happen to make Jamaica "another Taiwan" (incidentally, this thinking is very much present in the Caribbean Basin Initiative). I will return, briefly, to these practical implications at the end of my remarks here. But now let me return to the central theoretical issue.

It is my contention that these countries are sufficiently distinct, as compared with the West, that one is entitled to speak of them as a "second case" of capitalist modernity. I cannot substantiate this view in detail here, but let

me list some of the distinctive features. There are, of course, salient economic features: high growth rates, sustained over many years; the remarkable fact that in some of these countries (Taiwan is probably the most important one) high growth has been associated, at least for a while, with diminishing income inequality; an astounding improvement in the material standards of living of virtually the entire population; a highly active government role in shaping the development process (while East Asia certainly has capitalism, with the possible exception of Hong Kong, it certainly does not have laissez-faire capitalism); an underdeveloped welfare state (even in Japan); low tax rates and high savings rates (two probably interconnected facts); and an economy geared to exports.

Yet it is obvious, even to the most "hard-nosed" economists, that these economic features do not exist in a vacuum. Rather, they are linked to distinctive social and cultural features. Some of these include: a very strong, achievement-oriented work ethic; a highly developed sense of collective solidarity, both within the family and in artificial groupings beyond the family; the enormous prestige of education, with the concomitant motivation to provide the best education for one's children; and severe (some would say, brutally severe) meritocratic norms and institutions, which, while egalitarian in design, serve to select out elites when they are at an early age. Now, no one is likely to question that these social and cultural features are also, somehow, part of the "East Asian model" (economists, somewhat awkwardly, often refer to these features, often in a footnote, under the vague category of "human capital"). The question is to what extent the economic and the sociocultural features are causally linked. I think it is fair to say that at this point we don't know the answer to this, and that it would be very important indeed to get closer to an answer.

Let me return to the image of laboratory control experiment. Various historians and social scientists have assumed that the rise of individualism has been part and parcel of the "modernity reaction" (to stay with the language of the chemical laboratory). This is not an arbitrary or foolish assumption, as long as one limits one's attention to the Western case. The roots of Western individualism probably go back to very early, formative periods of Western civilization. It can be plausibly argued that this Western individualism provided a fertile soil for the birth of a number of important elements of modernity such as, for an important example, the birth of the capitalist entrepreneur. Conversely, as modernity came into being, it dissolved older, more collectively oriented communities and institutions, throwing the individual much more on himself, and thus fostering both the values and the social-psychological reality of individualism. A good deal of classical sociological thought was concerned with this shift, as in Ferdinand Toennies's notion of the change from Gemeinschaft to Gesellschaft, and Emile Durkheim's of the change from me-

chanical to organic solidarity. In other words, the development of modernity in the West suggests a reciprocal relationship with individualism: Western civilization generated a distinctive individualism that was very congenial to modernity; in turn, the process of modernization greatly accentuated this individualism, and, one may add, successfully exported individualism to other parts of the world. Not surprisingly, various theorists of modernization (for instance, Talcott Parsons) assumed that individualism (or, as he called it, "ego-orientation") is inevitably and intrinsically linked to modernity.

The East Asian experience, at the very least, makes this assumption less self-evident. To be sure, there has been successful exportation of Westernstyle individualism in this region as well (often to the chagrin of traditionminded Asians). However, it can be plausibly argued that East Asia, even in its most modernized sectors, continues to adhere to values of collective solidarity and discipline that strike the Western observer as very different indeed from his accustomed values and patterns of conduct. The recent discussion about Japanese styles of business and industrial management has brought this feature into sharp relief. Could it be that East Asia has successfully generated a non-individualistic version of capitalist modernity? If so, the linkage between modernity, capitalism, and individualism has not been inevitable or intrinsic; rather, it would have to be reinterpreted as the outcome of contingent historical circumstances. If one reached such a conclusion, this would be much more than a reinterpretation of the past. Much more important, it would suggest the possibility of changes in this linkage in the future (changes that one might either welcome or deplore, depending on how committed one is to the values of Western individualism). Within the broad comparative logic that I have alluded to, one would then conclude that the specific aggregate of economic and sociocultural features that we know as industrial capitalism in the West could be disaggregated, perhaps reassembled in different ways (again, for better or for worse). I don't think that the evidence allows us to reach such a conclusion just yet. Thus the evidence of the inroads of individualism among young people in the East Asian societies is, as far as I'm familiar with it, uneven and inconclusive. But the very fact that the East Asian experience raises this question indicates its great importance as a vast "control experiment" that puts our assumptions about modernity to the test.

All of this reopens the questions, in an astonishingly fresh way, about the relation of modern capitalism and culture that preoccupied Max Weber in the early decades of this century. Weber's great work, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, continues to serve as a central point of reference for all who strongly disagree with Weber's thesis about the religious roots of capitalism and modernity in the West. Now, as is well known, Weber (also, one may say, in the mode of a vast, imaginary

laboratory) wrote extensively on Asia, notably China and India, concluding that Asian cultures and religious traditions were deeply uncongenial to modernization. I think one may say today, quite simply, that Weber was wrong. I have imagined a number of times that the good German professor would come back to life today, say on top of a high-rise office building in downtown Taipei, that he would take one look out the window and say, "Well, I was wrong!" But to state that Weber was wrong—or, to put it more scientifically, that his theories about Asian culture have been empirically falsified—is not terribly interesting, except perhaps to disappointed Weber devotees. The much more interesting question is why he was wrong: what did he overlook? More specifically, are there cultural roots, and especially religio-ethical roots, of modern Asian capitalism? If so, what are they? Weber's questions were eminently important, even if some of his answers have to be discarded.

Again, let me say very frankly that I don't think we have, or can have, the answer to these questions at this time. An enormous amount of research and reflection will be required before we can come closer to some empirically supportable answers. But let me at least indicate some plausible areas of exploration.

For several years now the so-called post-Confucian hypothesis has enjoyed a certain vogue. It is essentially simple: both Japan and the newly industrialized countries of East Asia belong to the broad area of influence of Sinitic civilization, and there can be no doubt that Confucianism has been a very powerful force in all of them. The hypothesis is that a key variable in explaining the economic performance of these countries is Confucian ethics—or post-Confucian ethics, in the sense that the moral values in question are now relatively detached from the Confucian tradition proper and have become more widely diffused. Historical evidence on the spread of Confucian education and ideology is very relevant to this hypothesis, but equally important is empirical research into the sway of Confucian-derived values in the lives of ordinary people, many of whom have never read a Confucian classic and have had little education, Confucian or other. Robert Bellah has coined the happy phrase "bourgeois Confucianism" to distinguish this from the "high" Confucianism of the Mandarin elite of traditional China. The work currently being done by S.G. Redding and his associates at the University of Hong Kong on the norms of Chinese entrepreneurs is informed by precisely this point of view.

I'm strongly inclined to believe that, as evidence continues to come in, this hypothesis will be supported. It is inconceivable to me that at least some of the Confucian-derived values intended by the hypothesis—a positive attitude to the affairs of this world, a sustained lifestyle of discipline and selfcultivation, respect for authority, frugality, an overriding concern for stable family life—should not be relevant to the work ethic and the overall social attitudes of the region. At the same time, I strongly suspect that Confucianism is by no means the only cultural and religious factor in play. Other factors will have to be explored.

A very important area of exploration, I believe, is that of East Asian Buddhism. It is possible to make the argument that, as Buddhism crossed the Tibetan plateau and the great Himalayan passes, it underwent a profound transformation, changing from what was perhaps the most world-denying religion in human history to an emphatically world-affirming one. If so, this transformation was certainly the work of the Chinese mind, which, in its fundamental stance in the face of reality, is somewhere around the antipodes of the mind of India. To be sure, some of these world-affirming themes can already be found in Mahayana Buddhism in India, but it was in China and the other Mahayana countries of East Asia that salvation was located consistently in this world, culminating perhaps in the frequently reiterated proposition that nirvana and samsara are one and the same (or that the true body of the Buddha, the dharmakaya, is this world as we know it empirically). There are other East Asian traditions that must be explored to determine their effects, intended or unintended, on man's attitudes to the world of nature, to work in the world, and to the proper goals of life. I'm thinking here particularly of Taoism and Shinto.

Yet another important area of investigation, in the quest for a "spirit" of Asian modernity, would be folk religion. Allow me to tell a little story in this connection. When I was last in Taiwan, in 1982, I discussed the "post-Confucian hypothesis" with Professor Yih-yuan Li of the Academia Sinica. He was skeptical about the hypothesis and expressed the opinion that Chinese folk religion would be at least as important as Confucianism for the matter at hand. I was a little puzzled (partly, no doubt, because of my near-total ignorance in this area). A few weeks later, in what my old teacher Alfred Schutz used to call an "aha experience," I understood what Professor Li meant. I was in Singapore, on a tour of a part of the city in the company of a Singaporean anthropologist, when we came upon a spirit temple. We went in and talked to the medium, a young man who, as I recall, was an electrician by occupation. He conducted seances in the living room of his home and he gladly explained things to us. The center of the room was occupied by a bookshelf with several shelves, on which were arranged plaster-of-paris statuettes of different divinities and supernatural beings. On the top shelf, in the middle, was a statuette of Kuan Yiu, the Chinese Goddess of Mercy. All the other figures were placed hierarchically in relation to her. What impressed me was the manner in which the medium spoke about them. He would say something like this: "This fellow over here has been very bad. He is not good for anything and we have just demoted him, putting him down from the third to the fourth shelf. If he doesn't improve his performance, he will be thrown out completely. But this one has been very helpful to the community, so we have placed him very close to the Goddess." And so on. What struck me was that this man was speaking about supernatural beings in very much the same way, and indeed in the same tone of voice, that a corporation executive might speak about his staff. The little pantheon in the living room, then, could be seen as a sort of metaphysical table of organization.

All this, of course, suggests a very different hypothesis (I don't want to preempt what Professor Li has to say on the subject, but in my own mind I call it the "Li hypothesis"): the "great traditions," including Confucianism and Mahayana Buddhism, after all exist on a substratum of unsophisticated, deeply rooted attitudes to the world (cognitive as well as emotional). Could it be that, in the case of Sinitic civilization, it is in this substratum, rather than in the "great traditions," that we must seek the roots of this-worldliness, activism, pragmatism, and the like?

Can other countries, be it in the Third World or in the West, learn from the East Asian experience? I suppose that nobody would deny that something can be learned from the experience of societies different from one's own, but the question rather intends the notion that East Asia might provide a "model" for others in the sense of a coherent and distinctive strategy of societal development. The answer to the question will hinge to a considerable degree on the role one will eventually ascribe to cultural factors in the economic performance of the region. Broadly speaking, two hypotheses are possible here, one "culturalist," the other "institutionalist." The first hypothesis would be to the effect that the economic success of Taiwan, for example, has been crucially determined by the fact that Taiwan is populated by Chinese people, whose attitudes to the world have been shaped by Chinese culture and Chinese social institutions. Having postulated this hypothesis, one may then explore which Chinese cultural patterns and themes have been important in shaping the "spirit" of modern Chinese capitalism. Alternatively, the second hypothesis would postulate that the economic success of Taiwan is only marginally due to such cultural factors, but is rather to be explained in terms of specific economic policies and practices that have nothing to do with the fact that the people executing them are Chinese. It goes without saying that each hypothesis will have very different implications for the possible "exportability"that is, the "model" character—of the Taiwan experience. If the "institutionalists" are right, there is indeed a model to be exported; if the "culturalists" are right, one must be skeptical of such exportability. It makes sense to suggest to, say, Arabs or Latin Americans that they should adopt the fiscal or the trade policies of Taiwan; it makes no sense to suggest that they should adopt Confucian ethics.

Let me confess here that I'm not only uncertain as to which hypothesis to

put my chips on, but while my intuitions as a social scientist (and especially as a sociologist formed very largely by a Weberian approach) are to the "culturalist" side, my moral and political prejudices draw me to the "institutionalist" hypothesis. It is, after all, the much more optimistic one. After pondering these questions for some years, my hunch, for whatever it is worth, is that the correct answer lies somewhere in the middle, between the two hypotheses starkly formulated. I will come back to this point.

Let me point out that the question of the relation between economic performance and cultural traditions is not only relevant to those who might want to learn from the East Asian experience—people like development planners who want to turn Jamaica into "another Taiwan," or American managers who believe that the Japanese hold the secrets of sustained productivity. The question is equally important to East Asia itself, especially as thoughtful people in the region think about the future. No one can dispute the economic (and, for that matter, the social) achievements of these societies. But will these achievements endure in future years?

Obviously this will hinge on a variety of political and economic developments that have nothing to do with the aforementioned two hypotheses: Will the region remain free of war? What will be the actions of the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union with respect to the region? Will the international economic system continue to be favorable to the kind of development strategy adopted by these countries? What will be the trade policies of Western governments? And so on. But there is also this: if cultural factors are indeed important, as postulated by the "culturalist" hypothesis, then these countries have to be very much concerned with systaining the cultural traditions at issue. I take it that this is a matter that greatly troubles Singapore's Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, and the recent efforts to introduce a curriculum of Confucian ethics into the schools of Singapore reflects this concern. In this connection too there are important research agendas, for example on the adequacy of the various educational systems in the region and on the way in which attitudes change during the lifetime of individuals. At this time there is much debate in Japan over the educational system: Are its meritocratic norms too harsh? Do these testing mechanisms really select out the kind of elite that Japan may need in the future—innovative and independent-minded—or do they reproduce one generation after another of authority-bound, hard-working conformists? There is some evidence to the effect that young people in some of these countries (especially Japan) are more individualistic and less "collectivity-oriented" than their elders. But is this a sea change in attitudes, or is it simply a passing phenomenon of youth (before an individual settles down to "serious" life)? I don't think that we know at this point; it would obviously be very interesting to know.

Let me come back to my hunch in this matter, namely, that the answer

probably lies in the middle between the two hypotheses. Economists use the term "comparative advantage": in international trade, when a country can produce a product relatively more cheaply than other products, it is said to have a comparative advantage in that product. Two countries with a comparative advantage in two different products can trade the products to their mutual benefit. Perhaps cultural factors operate in the same manner. And the distinctive cultural patterns of Sinitic civilization may be highly functional in the post-World War II period, producing the East Asian "economic miracle." There is no guarantee that this comparative advantage will continue in the future. On the other hand, cultural traits also change (although some anthropologists don't like to think so); they usually change spontaneously in response to new circumstances, but they occasionally change as a result of deliberate interventions by government (especially, of course, in educational policies). Therefore, I'm very much persuaded that it is an error to think of culture as a static, invariant reality.

I must come to an end, if not to a conclusion. I am aware that I have raised many more questions than I have answered. This, I am afraid, is of the nature of the beast we call social science. Contrary to what many people think, science can never give us certainty, only probabilities. But I hope that I have said enough to justify my initial proposition that East Asia is one of the most interesting areas in the world today. An economic and social experiment of enormous significance is being conducted in this region. What happens in these countries is of very great significance not only here but everywhere.

Notes

1. Economists speak here of an "anti-Kuznets effect," referring to Simon Kuznets's thesis, substantiated in most places, that high growth is associated with increasing inequality until a leveling process begins at a later stage.

2. This approach may apply to other civilizations as well. Anthropologists especially will be sympathetic to the idea that "high culture" is finally a manifestation on a different plane of underlying patterns and themes shared by everyone in a particu-

lar society.