

The following essay contains excerpts an article by the author.

“ASIAN VALUES” AS REACTIONARY MODERNIZATION

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In reactionary modernist ideology there is a constant emphasis that cultural values could be strengthened in an increasingly competitive global world only through the use of technology and competition in the world market. In essence, the state as the defender of -cultural interests could be strong only through active participation in the world economy. In this regard, one of the most interesting developments in Southeast Asian politics is the emergence of a new generation of technocratic leaders Habibie in Indonesia, Anwar in Malaysia, and Goh in Singapore who combine a strong fervour for technology and participation in the global economy with an equally ardent ideological commitment to—Asian cultural values. For example, Habibie, Indonesia's powerful minister in charge of technology, has championed a range of economic nationalist programmes, such as the development of a native aircraft industry, to enhance Indonesia's technological capacity; but, at the same time, he has established for himself a strong political base in the Indonesian Muslim Intellectuals Association (ICMI). Similarly, Anwar has managed to cultivate an image of technocratic competence while maintaining a strong political presence within Malaysia's Islamic intellectual community. Of course, these ideological notions are not the preserve of the second generation of leaders. Khoo, in his study of Mahathir's ideology, has pointed out that his central political project has been one of transforming the Malays into a modern community. As with all forms of reactionary modernism, Mahathirism links Malay cultural assertions with the establishment of a strong technologically and economically competitive state.

Culturalization of the economy

The second feature of reactionary modernism is the infusion of cultural language into economic discourse. Culture is not only compatible with economic modernity and markets; it is indispensable to economic functioning and performance. The argument that culture strengthens the economy, while it may be empirical nonsense, is a powerful ideological claim in East Asia. Therefore, for example, Lee Kuan Yew has claimed that Confucian ideas of family loyalty have fostered a sense of discipline and individual responsibility that has created strong incentives for hard work and thrift in East Asian societies. Similarly, Mahathir has claimed for Islam the virtues of individual responsibility, discipline and thrift. The economy is then constituted as an arena that is inextricably linked to the cultural sphere. Therefore, economic management requires the

governance of the cultural body rather than social attributes for individuals; it seeks to govern the community rather than the individual. For example, issues such as poverty and inequality are framed in terms of cultural defects in the community rather than as social problems deriving from the social defects or attributes of individuals. Hence, the management of cultural communities is central to the economic discourse of reactionary modernism, in turn leading to highly culturalist understanding of economic life.

Future orientation

The third feature of reactionary modernism, as noted above, is its future orientation. A notable example of this is Mahathir's -vision 2020, which endeavours to make Malaysia a fully developed country by the year 2020. Singaporean leaders constantly establish other societies at the end point for Singapore; in the seventies it was Japan and, more recently, Switzerland has been the model for Singapore. However, this attempt at radical transformation is carried out in the name of traditional cultural values. But this combination of culture and modernity requires an ideological programme that continuously projects an image of the future of that society. From this vintage point, futurist orientation is central to the ideological logic of reactionary modernization.

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The emergence of the ideology of reactionary modernism in Germany was a response to the distinctive process of late industrialization. This line of reasoning would suggest that Asian values argument needs to be located in a broader structural context of industrialization, one in which the process of modernization and industrialization can be accommodated within reactionary modernism perspective. Historically, in the case of Prussia and Meiji Japan, the onset of industrialization was relatively late (i.e., it needed to catch up with the other countries) and, therefore, the state played a predominant role in the economic process. This was often accompanied by a resort to organic statist ideologies. In East Asia, the state has similarly played a predominant role in the process of industrialization, and ideologies such as Asian values can be seen as a functional response to the process of late industrialization.

Anti-politics

One of the distinguishing features of the Asian values discourse is the distrust and hostility towards pluralist politics. Indeed, in Singapore, there has emerged a kind of anti-political politics.

From this anti-political normative framework, politics is often seen as disruptive to the political unity that is embodied in the state. To use a phrase of Carl Schmitt, the key political theorist of anti-political politics, the state is the political unity of the people. And this political unity (which can be on the basis of any criteria) is the basis of citizens association or disassociation with the political community. For Schmitt, politics (defined in terms of relationships to other states) is defined by the capacity of the state to distinguish between friends and enemies and leads, paradoxically, to a deeply anti-political notion of politics.

There are many ways in which these anti-political ideas are articulated in the Asian values discourse. First, there is the claim that liberal or pluralist politics is unnecessary because there is no independent sphere of civil society. In turn groups and interests are denied political legitimacy: to be in opposition is to be disloyal to the state. From this perspective, opposition "formal or informal" has little or no legitimacy in East Asia. Second, there is the claim and this is especially evident in Singapore that politics obstructs a technocratic and managerial approach to social problems. In short, anti-politics takes the form of managerial approach to politics. These forms of anti-politics are especially attractive to those states that have attempted to build capitalism from above. There is a natural affinity between the technocratic and managerial nature of capitalism and the growth of anti-politics exemplified in Asian values ideology.

This latter point is important because there is convergence between these anti-political ideas and recent and increasingly fashionable notions of governance. Programmes of governance strive to close off and insulate the market from political processes. In this context, it is noteworthy that the Singaporean government often associates Asian values with good governance which in turn is often seen as quarantining the market from politics. In fact, these arguments find great sympathy with ideas of North American think tanks such as Hoover and the Heritage foundation which place emphasis on the importance of protecting property rights "economic liberty" from the corrosive effects of democratic politics. From this perspective, the ideology of Asian values embodies an attempt to have a strong state as well as a free market, but without liberal politics. In fact, for this reason, it can be safely assumed that while, particularly in the context of economic adjustment of the type underway in East Asia, there will be strong pressure to move in a more liberal economic direction, and anti-political ideas will continue to play an important role in the ideological discourse of East Asian political elites though, perhaps, with emphasis on the effective governance type of argument.

As an anti-political ideology, Asian values, like fascism, redefines the notion of citizenship and the relationship between the state and the individual in terms of duties and obligations rather than rights. For example, in Singapore, welfare services are provided by the state as a reward for loyalty to the state rather than as a right or

entitlement. Indeed, in the 1997 election, the ruling party (the Peoples Action Party) made explicit the connection between loyalty to the state and the party and the provision of a range of governmental programmes and services. Similarly, work and the economy are central to East Asian conceptions of citizenship as providing a focus for state exhortation for discipline and harmony in order to construct the imagined political community. Berezin, in an excellent analysis which could just as easily be applied to Asian values ideology of political identity in fascist Italy, argues that work -usually regulated by the private sphere of the market, under fascism destroyed the boundary between the public and private as workers submerged themselves in the national collectivity. In other words, a crucial feature of Asian values ideology is that it only enables the construction of those identities compatible with the state-defined conception of the political community; it fuses the public and private self within the state-defined political community.

Social and political context of reactionary modernization

It should be noted that late industrialization is a necessary, but not sufficient, factor in the production of ideologies of reactionary modernism. Reactionary modernism also requires a state that has a lineage of illiberal and authoritarian traditions; it is only late industrialization in conjunction with illiberal and authoritarian traditions that will produce ideologies of reactionary modernism. In Ger-

many, Herf argues, it was the unique combination of industrial development and a weak liberal tradition [that] was the social background for reactionary modernism. In East Asia the colonial state is a natural source of illiberal and authoritarian tradition. To use Oakshott's terminology, the colonial state was constituted as a form of enterprise organization: a purposive and end-oriented association. It had as its main purpose the provision of security and order in the colonial economy and polity. The post-colonial state has been trapped within these inherited notions of authority and stateness, which prioritize the production of public order and thereby naturally lead to a deep suspicion of pluralist politics. It is the conjunction of these structural elements in East Asia that has nurtured the reactionary modernist ideology of Asian values. From this perspective, the ideological processes in East Asia are no different from fascist and organic ideologies in Western Europe or Japan in the inter-war period.

There are more specific reasons for the emergence of the ideology of Asian values. First, it needs to be acknowledged at the outset that the affinities between Asian values and East Asian economic structures are located in the symbiotic relationship between the state and a range of economic enterprises and groups, especially where economic structures are characterized by cartel-like arrangements between economic enterprises and the state. These arrangements often labelled as "corporatist" require not only a high degree of state intervention and direction but also their incorporation into the

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policy-making process. Corporatist structures also extend beyond the economic sphere to include a variety of other groups and actors in society. The ideology of Asian values provides a fertile soil for the enrichment of corporatist arrangements in East Asia.

Second, sections of the Asian middle classes which are likely to be dependent on state-driven economic processes (contrary to conventional wisdom) are likely to be highly sympathetic to the logic and rationale of technocratic efficiency and managerialism. Indeed, the two countries that have had most of the running on Asian values, Singapore and Malaysia, are each dominated by a party with strong middle-class support. Not surprisingly, the ideological themes currently being played out in these countries reflect to a great degree the institutional interests of a high proportion of the middle class. Moreover, the language of security and threat, so essential to the Asian values discourse, appeals to the insecurities of the large and growing Asian middle class. Hence, those who suggest that Asian middle classes will demand greater liberalization are likely to be sorely disappointed. The Asian values ideology serves only to provide a comfortable canopy for this middle class.

The strength of the reactionary modernist approach to ideology is that unlike the cultural approach, it seeks to relate the use of cultural traditions to the wider material context. In other words, the ideology of Asian values becomes central to understanding the distinctive ethos of East Asian capitalism. At the same time, the normative system inherent in this discourse not an abstract timeless system but traditions that have been selected as the instrumentalist perspective claims to refract modern social and economic conditions. It is, in short, an ideology born of modernity. However, the reactionary modernist perspective is able to move beyond the instrumentalist perspective by identifying the structural conditions that sustain these ideological processes. Because these ideologies have deep structural roots located in the processes of late industrialization and the illiberal character of state traditions, they are unlikely to disappear. In other words, the Asian values discourse becomes something more than a useful instrument of political elites. Robison notes that, as the ideology of the bureaucratic and party elites of guardianist regimes, and of the corporate interests embodied in such industrial mercantilist regimes within several of the industrializing economies of Asia, Asian Values is a force of significance.

Reactionary Modernity

The thesis that Asian values ideology in East Asia is exceptional can be challenged on two grounds. First, this article has

challenged the exceptionalist thesis that the dominance of Asian values reflects in some manner the vestigial presence of pre-modern ideological traditions that survived the advent of modern economic and social structures. On the contrary, Asian values are part and parcel of a different reactionary modernity. It follows that the Asian values discourse is likely to be a permanent feature of the East Asian ideological landscape. Second, reactionary modernism and the dominance of cultural political language in East Asia has a high degree of affinity with fascist and other organic ideologies that dominated Western Europe in the inter-war period. Put simply, the ideology of Asian values is another reactionary modernist ideological variant produced by late industrializing states with illiberal and authoritarian traditions. Sternhell, in his path-breaking analysis of the origins of fascist ideology, argues that fascism is a hybrid of communitarianism (which it drew from syndicalism) and free marketism (which it drew from liberalism). The ideology of Asian values has precisely this combination of communitarianism and free

markets. In other words, it combines illiberal politics within a liberal economy. As Sternhell notes, the Fascist revolution sought to change the nature of the relationship between the individual and the collectivity without destroying the impetus of economic activity private property or its necessary framework the market economy.

Claus Offen has recently proposed a heuristic model predicated on a distinction between what he call the means of

modernity (economic and technological capacity) and the values of modernity. From this standpoint, reactionary modernism takes a positive approach to the means of modernity but a negative perspective on the values of modernity. Indeed, Offen's argument is a reminder that reactionary modernism as an ideological programme is increasingly influential within Western Europe and North America in the shape of neo-conservative and communitarian political movements. He notes that the North American reality in the first half of the 1980s, meanwhile, shows that the juxtaposition of traditionalism and modernism (the co-existence of the death penalty, obligatory school prayer, the outlawing of abortion, creation science, and other concerns of the Modern Majority with the mystification of high-tech, gene technology, and weapons-technological gigantism can indeed attain a certain stability and become a seductive model for political forces in Western Europe. Reactionary modernism, be it Asian values, or fascism, or Anglo-American neo-conservatism, wishes to reap the economic benefits of modernity and its associated technological achievements, but rejects the philosophical and intellectual values, such as individualism, universalism and equality, which are equally the heritage of this modernity. ■

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