RELIGION, VALUES, AND CAPITALISM IN ASIA

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The question of the relationship between religion and other phenomena that come within its conceptual and semantic field, such as values, on the one hand, and modern economic development, on the other, has occupied the minds of scholars since the last century. While the issue was first dealt with theoretically and sociologically by Ibn Khaldun in the fourteenth century, it was taken up again in systematic fashion by European classical social theorists in the nineteenth century. By the turn of the twentieth century, North American, Japanese, and Indian sociologists, economists, and political scientists began to write about the work ethic and other cultural or non-economic factors of development. Since the Second World War many others have joined in the debate. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss a number of fundamental problems that underlie the media and academic discourse surrounding the question of religion and development in East Asia that have to do with problematic Orientalist constructions.

Owing to the vastness of the field, however, there is the problem of delineating my area of concern for this chapter. The field is vast, covering various world religions, numerous disciplines in the social sciences, and a multitude of topics such as industrialization, economic growth, education, and business firms. In addition, one has also to consider the budget of concepts that are related to religion such as ideology, culture, values, and the work ethic. Even if one chooses to focus on a region such as Southeast Asia, one is not left with a more manageable task.
What I propose, therefore, is to define my interest in the relationship between religion and economic development by way of limiting it with reference to a related concern, that of "Asian values". In what follows, I take the Asian values debate as my entry point into the topic of the religious work ethic and its relationship with capitalist modernization in Southeast Asia. I link this debate to scholarly concerns among economists and sociologists, beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, with the so-called Weber thesis and its implications for the study of the influence of non-Western religions on economic development. I then turn to a discussion of Max Weber's Protestant ethic thesis, highlighting some of his insights as well as his Orientalist "errors". The sections after then discuss a number of problems associated with attempts to apply Weber's theory of capitalism to the East Asian area. These are, first, that the wholesale and uncritical adoption of a Weber-type inquiry by many writers on East Asia (within which I include Southeast Asia) unwittingly leads to a curiously auto-Orientalist position with regard to the role of Confucianism and Islam in the East Asian "miracle"; second, the instrumental use of "values"; and third, the failure to understand the complexity of Weber's argument on the nature of the relationship between Protestantism and the rise of capitalism. These problems are found in both media and academic discourses. I follow with a discussion on the state and Asian values, concluding with some suggestions as to what a research agenda on the work ethic and the broader issue of values that is conscious of the above-mentioned problems might look like.

Asian Values, the Work Ethic, and the Spirit of Capitalism

The topic of Asian values began to appear in academic discourse in the 1970s and in the media discourse of the West as well as East and Southeast Asia from the 1980s. Nevertheless, the antecedents of this discourse are to be found in the social science literature of the early 1970s, which sought to distinguish the process of "modernization" from that of "Westernization" (Alatas 1970). This was in response to prevalent ideas in modernization theory that values, attitudes, and cultural patterns as a whole change in the process of modernization and that such changes, however painful they may be, are inevitable (Rudolph and Rudolph 1967; Kahn 1979). In response to this, there were Asians, particularly the Indians and the Japanese, who insisted that a form of modernization that selectively kept Western influences and retained tradition was possible. Compatible with this position was the "discovery" that there were functional equivalents to the Protestant ethic to be found outside of the West. At the same time, efforts were being made to define Asia in terms of its various "culture areas" (Bacon 1964; Benda 1972). The logical step was then to define Asianness in order that the elements that distinguished Asian from Western civilization could be identified and then made to constitute theoretical accounts of modernization in Asia.

As a result, from the late 1960s onwards, several works appeared that either attempted to identify functional equivalents to the Protestant ethic in non-Western societies or at least made a case for the existence of ethic in non-Western societies or at least made a case for the existence of ethic in non-Western societies or at least made a case for the existence of economic factors conducive to modern rational capitalism in the various world religions. It was in this way that religion became a category in the discourse on development.

It is, therefore, fitting to begin with the work of Max Weber himself in order to establish the criteria of assessment of those works that made Weberian or Weberian-inspired arguments in favour of a positive correlation between "Asian" religions and modern rational capitalism.

The Protestant Ethic Thesis of Max Weber

The relationship between values and economic development is complicated. Capitalism as an economic system requires an attitude that Weber called the "spirit of capitalism". This attitude obtained in context from Protestantism. For Weber, the "question of the motive forces in the explanation of modern capitalism is not in the first instance a question of the origin of the capital sums which were available for capitalistic uses, but, above all, of the development of the spirit of capitalism" (Weber 1958a, p. 68). He also says, "Where [the spirit of capitalism] ... appears and is able to work out itself, it produces its own capital and money-supplies as the means to its own ends, but the reverse is not true" (Weber 1958a, pp. 68-69). In other words, the spirit of capitalism creates the institutions but not the reverse.

The spirit of capitalism is a unique phenomenon that existed in a certain historical period in Europe. It has specific traits and characteristics whereby the acquisition of money was combined with the avoidance of...
spontaneous enjoyment of life. In other words, the acquisition of money is not for the satisfaction of material needs, but for a higher reason as is evident from a quotation Weber gives us from the Bible: "Seest thou a man diligent in business? He shall stand before kings" (Weber 1958a, p. 53).

The attitude in pre-capitalist times was one of traditionalism — man does not wish to earn more and more money but wants to live as he is accustomed to living, and to earn as much as is necessary for that purpose (Weber 1958a, p. 60). This is the backwardness of traditionalism from a capitalistic point of view.

In contrast, in the spirit of capitalism both labourer and entrepreneur regard work as an end in itself, as if it were a religious calling (Weber 1958a, p. 63). Therefore, the chances of overcoming traditionalism were greatest where there was religious upbringing. There was something about Protestantism which instilled an attitude in people that was very capitalistic in nature. It is opposed to traditionalism that is expressed, for example, in Catholicism that "activity directed to acquisition [of capital] for its own sake was at bottom a pudendum which was to be tolerated only because of the unalterable necessities of life in this world" (Weber 1958a, p. 73).

Weber thus makes a distinction between the Catholic world and the Protestant world. In the successful capitalist centres of trade — merchant capitalism — in Florence, Italy in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the capitalist spirit was considered ethically unjustifiable. In eighteenth century Pennsylvania, where there were very small, poor enterprises, the same attitude was "considered the essence of moral conduct" (Weber 1958a, p. 75). Modern capitalism was to develop in those areas with the spirit of capitalism.

Capitalism requires an outlook on life that makes acquisition of capital a religious calling. Only then can it become a systematic way of life. Weber never claimed that capitalism could not exist outside the Occident. Rather, he claimed that the spirit of capitalism — an attitude of commercial gain and profit based on rational calculation — could originate only in the West, and was a result of certain characteristics peculiar to the worldly asceticism of Puritanism, a Protestant movement in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries derived in part from the doctrines of Calvin.

Puritanism is not against activity in this world. It is not even against wealth acquisition. The moral objection to wealth is the "relaxation in the security of possession, the enjoyment of wealth with the consequences of idleness and the temptations of the flesh, and above all, distraction from the pursuit of a righteous life" (Weber 1958a, p. 157). For Weber, modern capitalism was the result of the melding between capitalist enterprise and ascetic Protestantism, above all, of the Calvinistic version (Weber 1958a, p. 128) in which worldly asceticism was a means of salvation. The effect of this ethic was psychological — it freed the acquisition of wealth from the inhibitions of traditionalistic ethic (Weber 1958a, p. 171) and drove its adherents to hard work, discipline, and frugality, since the attainment of wealth as a sign of God's blessing. The practical result was an ascetic compulsion to work hard and to save, and to avoid spontaneous enjoyment. This attitude towards life is what Weber calls the spirit of capitalism.

There are two important theoretical points to make about the effect of the Protestant Ethic on the development of the spirit of capitalism. First, there was an elective affinity or congeniality between Calvinism and the modern capitalist attitudes or ethics. There is a connection between the irrational value commitments of Calvinism with the rational, calculative economic conduct. The one seems irrational from the other's point of view, but they come together in capitalism.

Second, the fact of congruency is related to the idea that Calvinism did not consciously seek to create a capitalist system. Capitalism was an unintended consequence of the Protestant ethic. In other words, we ought not to take a mechanical approach to values. We cannot simply invoke certain values and expect them to have the desired effects once people accept these values.

**Weberian Orientalism?**

Can we accept Weberian arguments, or do they have what can be called an "Orientalist" dimension to them? A case for Weberian Orientalism can be made in two ways. One would be an inherent Orientalism in the works of Weber, and the other would be how Weber's writings have become "Orientalized".
To begin with, Weber's own possible Orientalism. Weber's arguments about the origin of modern rational capitalism in the West as embodied in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* should be read in the light of his comparative sociological studies of religion as seen in *The Religion of India* (1958b) and *The Religion of China* (1951).

In *The Religion of India*, Weber's reading of "caste" and "Hinduism" as defining and distinct features of Indian society is problematic on two counts. It betrays a textual reading of the phenomenon and an essentializing of Indian society. For example, Hinduism derived its name after a river, the Indus River in the Indian sub-continent, but is a name which was imposed from the outside to encompass a wide variety of beliefs over a vast area of land. The adherents of such beliefs did not always consider themselves as belonging to a single entity that we now know as "Hinduism". Yet many textualist and essentialist studies of Hinduism subscribe to such constructed myths.

Similarly, Weber's reading of Confucianism and Taoism in *The Religion of China* is an instance of the imposition of the Judeo-Christian notion of "religion" as if it were a universal category. Furthermore, Weber's characterization of Confucianism as "world affirming" and of "Confucian rationalism" as a "rational adjustment to the world" contributed to the image of Chinese society as static, unchanging, or at least as not inclined towards change. This again feeds into Orientalist constructions of the non-West as "passive", lacking a history and essentially "different" from the West.

Weber's Orientalism, therefore, can be characterized as: (a) mixing fact and fiction; (b) imposing categories and concepts from the outside that clash with internal cultural self-understandings; (c) homogenizing heterogeneous entities; (d) adopting a textualist approach; and (e) essentializing whole societies.

In contrast to the above, the attribution of Orientalism to Weber is the result of some reactions to his scholarship. According to Weber, the form that capitalism took in the West could only originate in the West because it required an attitude of commercial gain and profit, a "spirit" that generally emerged in Protestant-dominated areas of Europe. He acknowledged that although the Islamic and Confucian world-views do stress frugality and hard work, the capitalist spirit did not emerge in the Arab world or in China because of these missing elements: an ascetic compulsion to work, a this-worldly asceticism and the rationalization of life.

The nature of Third World consumption of Weber has taken place with an assumption that for Weber, capitalism was an advanced, progressive economic system, and thus something "good and desirable" and, following from this, that Western society was in this respect superior. As a result, some non-Western students and scholars took a defensive position and attempted to show that their own religions (Islam, Buddhism, Confucianism) were conducive to the development of capitalism, or that they were not against wealth acquisition. In such cases, Orientalist tendencies were attributed to the works of Weber, even though they are not to be found there. The result of some such related reactions to these notions of Western superiority lead to the later claim that "Asian values" had the functional equivalents to the Protestant capitalist "spirit".

**The Search for Functional Analogues to the Protestant Ethic**

Initial discussions on Asian values did not always have these intentions. A paper by Singapore sociologist Peter S.J. Chen dealt specifically with the nature of Asian values (Chen 1976). Chen's goal, however, was not to discover any functional equivalent to the Protestant ethic but rather to suggest that Asian values such as group spirit, mutual assistance, filial piety, friendship, and value-ladenness (among scholars) would "define and play a role in rectifying the adverse effects of modernization" (p. 11).

John Hall (1965), Ronald Dore (1967), Robert Bellah (1968), and Herman Kahn (1979) were among the first to suggest a positive relation between a Confucian ethic and economic growth in East Asia. This idea, in the hands of those who attributed an Orientalist stance to Weber, provided the material on the basis of which defensive searches for functional analogues to the Protestant ethic in religions and philosophies such as Islam, Buddhism, and Confucianism could be made. The idea had been taken up by the political elite and in the media in many East Asian nations during the last two decades. In Singapore, this took the form of the "Speak Mandarin" Campaign, the introduction of
Religious Knowledge” as part of moral education in secondary schools in the early 1980s, and the later parliamentary White Paper on “Shared Values” (Kwok 1995; Wee, this volume). In Malaysia, there were provocative attempts to compare Confucianism with Islam, as well as to understand Confucianism from the point of view of Islam. Osman Bakar suggests:

A Muslim does not go against the teachings of his or her religion if he makes the claim that Confucius was a prophet of Islam. ... The Chinese, being an ancient race and civilization, surely must have received at least one message from Heaven. Confucius deserves to be considered as a candidate for the recipient of that message. If he were indeed a prophet, then his prophetic function would be that of a Law-bringer, that is, one who brings the Shari‘ah to the Chinese people. The Analects is, in fact, basically a source of moral and ethical teachings for the organization of society, which is what the Shari‘ah is all about. (Osman Bakar 1995, pp. 98–99)

Time and time again, it has been suggested that values explain economic progress. The values that were singled out, including the ones highlighted by Chen (1976), are strong family ties, filial piety, frugality, discipline, thrift, diligence, hard work, and self-sacrifice. These values were not only held to be important factors in the process of economic development, but also the basic ingredients of a religious ethic.

It should be fairly obvious to most that these values are important for development. But it is also obvious that these values are to be found in all the major philosophies and religions of the world. Certainly, they can be found in the doctrines and practices of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Islam. Yet, modern rational capitalism did not originate in the Islamic or Sinic civilizations. Even if the argument is made that a Confucian ethic interacts successfully with a capitalist system transplanted from the West, there are a number of objections that can be raised vis-à-vis the Confucian or Islamic ethic explanation of economic growth, the first six of which come under the general heading of “auto-Orientalism”.

The first is the problematic presence of Eurocentric terms of reference. The point of departure is Eurocentric in that the terms of reference imply the superiority, uniqueness, and desirability of capitalism, the Euro-Protestant dimension of capitalism, and the propensity of Asia to become like Europe. It is contradictory that scholars suggest that...
society, this truth cannot be arrived at simply through the examination of Japanese religious symbols and texts.

The third problem is the widely recognized danger of essentializing the "nature" of a society's culture. This culturalist approach contends that there is a uniquely East Asian driving force behind the process of Asian capitalist development — Confucianism in the case of Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, Islam for Malaysia, or the "shared values" of Singapore. The problem here is not the normative explanation but rather the positing of essential attributes of the system that appear to have been derived arbitrarily (Jayasuriya 1997).

Another problem aspect of the self-Orientalization of the culturalist explanation of East Asian development is the claim of uniqueness. For example, Harry Oshima agrees with Weber's description of the East Asian economies as being "more rational, pragmatic, and utilitarian than the ethical systems found in the other religions of Asia and hence conducive to the assimilation though not the emergence of capitalism" (Oshima 1986, p. 7). But, as pointed out by Kim, features such as "this-worldliness" and benevolent authoritarian government are not confined to Confucianism alone, but are found in Taoism, Shintoism, and Mahayana Buddhism (1994, p. 100) and, I may add, other religions as well.

A related fifth objection is that even if it is true that economic practices informed by certain values can be identified, what remains unclear is if these values can be "located exactly in the Confucian portion of the culture" (Kim 1994, p. 88).

Sixth, there is also the tendency to make sweeping statements that homogenize regions. It has been said of Confucian values that it "proved surprisingly durable and found acceptance within the ethical fabric of modern Japan.... Similar attitudes and values, whether directly attributable to a Confucian legacy or not, are now powerfully felt elsewhere in Asia and have been incorporated into the world transformation that has taken place with the rapid emergence of the economic power of the nations of East Asia" (Collett 1995, p. 109). Such statements need to be backed by empirical research into the beliefs and practices of communities.

It appears, therefore, that the social sciences in East Asia, at least as far as a section of the discourse on Asian values and the work ethic are concerned, are constituted by textualist, essentialist, and homogenizing approaches that emphasize the uniqueness of East Asia, in the tradition of what John Lie refers to as auto-Orientalism (1996, p. 5).

Seventh, the analogy between Asian values and the Protestant work ethic is an ex post rationalization. Capitalism was introduced to a region devoid of an ethic analogous to that of Puritanism. In general, it is not incorrect to say that capitalism was grafted on to pre-existing modes of production and that it did violence to the social and intellectual systems of those times. We need to be seriously reconsider what is being retrospectively claimed regarding high rates of growth being due to Confucianism or Islam. The work ethic "embedded" in Confucian consciousness and corporatist Islam seems to have followed rather than preceded economic development in the region.

An eighth and final objection is that Confucianism and traditional values are being invoked in a very instrumentalist manner. Consider the title of an article that once appeared in the Singapore "The Cash Value of Values". Very often, values are discussed in the context of their direct and intended function in economic development with the dimension of unintended consequences totally ignored. I have in mind, here, a discursive "clash of civilizations" as an unintended consequence.

The belief in the efficacy of values for growth and the subsequent flexing of Asian economic muscles, at least at the rhetorical level and prior to the Asian financial crisis of 1997–99, fits in nicely with the thesis of the clash of civilizations. The idea of inter-civilizational rivalry made its entry into international political discourse with the publication of Samuel Huntington's "The Clash of Civilizations" (1993). While many in Asia did not subscribe to Huntington's thesis that national and ideological conflicts are being replaced by civilizational oppositions, it did appear that a clash was taking place, at least at the discursive level.

For example, the thorny nature of the Anglo-Malaysian relationship in 1994 took on overtones of moral rivalry between East and West, if only at a rhetorical level. This is certainly the case on the Malaysian side, where Kuala Lumpur had criticized the British for doubting the competence of Malay-Muslims, and for their condescending colonial attitude towards Malaysia.
When the British media started to scrutinize and criticize British-funded development projects in Malaysia — which included the massive Pergau dam — and then proceeded to allege corruption among Malaysian leaders, including a "special payment" of US$50,000 to high-level politicians ("Wimpey Offered Contract Bribe to Malaysian Prime Minister", *Sunday Times* [London], 24 February 1994), Kuala Lumpur imposed a ban on awarding government contracts to British firms, including privatized projects, and curbed the outgoing flow of government-sponsored undergraduate students to Britain. (Malaysia has the largest number of overseas students in the United Kingdom.)

Clearly, Kuala Lumpur saw the British actions as not just as an attack on the integrity and honesty of Malaysian politicians but an expression of prejudiced views held by former colonial masters on, as former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim put it, "a country led by a brown Muslim" (*Sunday Times* [London], 13 March 1994). The imagery here was not simply one of an Anglo-Malaysian business war, but of a civilizational conflict between "white" and "brown" peoples. In fact, even before Anglo-Malaysian affairs came under the halogen glare of publicity, Anwar had spoken of an "Asian renaissance" not only in economic but also in cultural and intellectual terms. He mentioned the need to launch a counteroffensive against the "imperialistic diffusion of Western or Western-influenced cultural products" (*Straits Times*, 1 February 1994). Not only must Asians be clear about their economic and political priorities, they must also set their own intellectual and cultural agendas, he added.

After the Kuala Lumpur–London row broke out, Dr Mahathir himself had said that his government's decision to stop giving government contracts to British firms constituted a means of economic arm-twisting which "we learnt from Western countries" (*Sunday Times* [London], 20 March 1994). He accused the British media of still possessing a colonial mentality and of believing that "non-whites can be easily bribed and can be bribed at any time ..." (*Sunday Times* [London], 20 March 1994).

In an interview by the London *Sunday Times*, Dr Mahathir agreed that there was a racist element in the British media coverage of the Pergau dam affair and that there was an assumption that "all these people — these natives — are not straight. They all receive money and they run to tiopot countries, banana republics and things like that" (*Sunday Times* [London], 20 March 1994).

The then Defence Minister, Dato' Sri Najib Tun Razak, also accused the Western media for characterizing Islam as an anti-democratic and war-mongering religion. Although Najib was not referring to the row with the British, his statement expressed sentiments in Kuala Lumpur that what Malaysians were up against was not just the critical media of advanced capitalist nations but a colonialist mentality that was prejudiced against Islam and condescending towards coloured peoples.

Indeed, this reading of the Anglo-Malaysian fracas resonates well with a question put forward by Singapore's Ambassador-at-Large, Professor Tommy Koh, to the West at the 1994 World Economic Forum. After having considered Asians as their subordinates and menials for 200 years, could the West "go through a wrenching psychological change and contemplate that in the next twenty to fifty years, Asian states will equal if not surpass you [the West]"? (*Straits Times*, 31 January 1994). Kuala Lumpur's view was undoubtedly that the British have not been able to deal with this.

Another example of the discursive clash of civilizations is the hour of criticism of Western values and lifestyles which some have referred to as "West-bashing". Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong of Singapore, in his 1994 National Day Rally Speech, highlighted a number of aspects of Western civilization which were in difficulty, including the breakup of the family, falling educational standards and a decline in moral decay, homosexual activities, single parent and economic slowdown" (*Voice of Malaysia* radio broadcast, 29 May 1993, cited in *Financial Times*, 5–6 March 1994).

**The State and Asian Values**

Apart from issues of auto-Orientalism, the instrumental use of "values" in economic discourse and a failure to see the nuances in Weber's arguments on the relationship between Capitalism's rise and Protestantism,
we also need to consider "Asian values" and the interventionist state in the analysis of values and development.

Following the Second World War and formal independence, many governments in Southeast Asia sought to expand the role of private capital in the economy. In many countries, the governments failed to create a viable indigenous capitalist class. The traditional role of the state in terms of regulatory functions by way of monetary, fiscal, and tax policies, licensing and subsidy programmes, and so forth, did not work. Many Southeast Asian states then decided to involve themselves in the sphere of capital accumulation beyond their regulatory and infrastructural roles. These states became directly involved in the process of capital accumulation through the establishment of state-owned enterprises and financial institutions. This role of the state manifests itself in a number of ways.

First, there are corporations established by the state, as well as those nationalized by the state. This is a well-known phenomenon in Southeast Asia and examples are plentiful.

Next, there is also the phenomenon of ruling political parties becoming major owners of, and investors in, business and properties. For various reasons, ruling political parties in Southeast Asia have acquired the means to buy, own, and manage major concerns. The extent to which this transpires varies from country to country, and it is most prominent in Malaysia. It is not easy to trace the links between the corporate sector and a political party. For example, while it is well known that the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) in Malaysia has a significant corporate presence in publications, communications, banking, insurance, property development, construction, hotels, manufacturing, and food retailing, it is hard to trace its links to these sectors because of the "informal way in which party assets are held, that is, through trustees or nominees appointed by party leaders, often as a means of political patronage" (Gomez 1990, p. 29).

Another aspect of the state's involvement in the process of capital accumulation is corporate sector ownership by major political personalities, gained by virtue of their position in, or connections with, government. This may or may not be the result of nepotism. The group of capitalists that have evolved this way are known in Indonesia as "client businessmen" (Muhaimin 1990, p. 1), but the term applies equally to other Southeast Asian countries. Such "clients" include those from within and without the bureaucracy.

State involvement in economic development in terms of the role of political parties and client businessmen is potentially damaging to the economy because very often those who obtain rights, licences, franchises, and the like are neither qualified nor competent in business. Patronage represents a major means by which such businessmen join the ranks of the economic elite. The disadvantage of this is that major corporations that were established through patronage or through political party connections are not up to standard as far as efficiency, technical know-how, and entrepreneurship are concerned. In this sense, the role of the state in development is negative.

Kleptocrats or "corrupters" extend various forms of favours to private capitalists, and such favours may include incentives, licensing, protectionism, funding from state banks, concessions, and joint ventures. The relationship between kleptocrat and capitalist is one between patron and client. This is a special relation between a politically powerful patron and a client who needs his/her protection due to the inadequacies of formal economic institutions. Since colonial times, the Chinese were the clients of colonial patrons and although this relationship — now with the post-colonial state — continued after independence, patronage was also extended towards the development of indigenous capital.

Patronage involves rent-seeking. This problem applies specifically to the kleptocrat-capitalist relationship and has to do with the incentives facing potential monopolists in the economy. Monopolists make profits over and above the normal returns to capital. These profits represent a real net loss to society. However, there are further costs to society that arise from rent-seeking behaviour. In economics, "rent" refers to the return to a factor of production that is in strictly limited supply, for a competitive industry, economic profits are in limited supply and rent-seeking behaviour here refers to actions taken by firms to obtain and preserve extra normal profits. Part of the profits are eaten up by the expenses of rent-seeking behaviour such as bribes and other forms of payment to state kleptocrats. Therefore, the social costs to society include the extra-normal profits of monopolists as well as the payments made...
by the rent-seeking behaviour itself which aims to restrict competition and preserve such profits.

Given such a role of the state, and the fact that leaders like Soeharto and Park Chung-Hee ruled by appeal to certain elements of “Asian-ness”, such as Javanese culture or indigenous democracy, it is not surprising that many had become sceptical of the notion of “Asia”. The “Asian” idea “is a kind of sales gimmick, used for political and commercial public relations” (Buruma 1995, p. 66). Apart from the fact that many local cultural practices are disappearing in Asia, what is often presented as “Asian values” either suspiciously promotes an authoritarian style of government, or is universal enough in practice so as to make them indistinguishable from, say, American values.

Towards a Positive Appropriation of Weber

Given the serious problems associated with the consumption of Weber in Asia, and the bad press that the “Asian values” discourse has received as a result of the conduct of many Asian states, what should our attitude be with respect to the utility of a Weberian sociology of religion as far as the study of the relationship between values and development are concerned?

Despite the various substantive and methodological weaknesses in Weber, the value of his theoretical contributions should be noted. For example, while he may have been mistaken about the nature of caste in India and about Confucianism in China, the larger point about the relations between and connectedness of religious, political, and economic structures is worth pursuing. Some positive aspects of his work follow.

The first is the balance between ideal and material factors. In The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, Weber seems to explain the rise of capitalism in terms of psychological or ideological motivations and refers to historical materialism as “patent nonsense”. On the other hand, Weber stresses that it was not his intention to substitute a one-sided idealism for a one-sided materialism. This issue can be resolved by making a distinction between Weber’s conception of sociology and how he actually practised sociology.

To put it crudely, his conception of sociology was that it was an interpretive science which examined social action in terms of its meaning for actors — that is, how actors consciously master their reality and legitimate their actions by way of various types of rationality. For example, Weber’s interest in sixteenth century Puritanism was in regard to capitalist activity as meaningful social action. This led many to suggest that Weber was an idealist because of his alleged stress on the religious/psychological causes of the rise of capitalism. But Weber himself was very conscious of the complex interplay between ideal and material factors.

In the General Economic History (1961), Weber refers to many materialist preconditions of the rise of capitalism: appropriation of the means of production, freedom of the market, mechanized technology, calculable, non-arbitrary adjudication and administration; free labour; and the commercialization of economic life. One could argue that Weber saw the Protestant ethic as one ideal factor that could be added to a list of material factors.

What this implies is that a serious approach to the problem of religious ethics, values, and development would entail a more sophisticated application of Weber. Both material and ideal factors are important in explaining East Asian economic development. East Asia then presents us, by way of an empirical field, with the opportunity to go beyond the Weber thesis and to develop his general sociology, taking into account his sociology of law and authority in addition to his sociology of religion. One may disagree with Weber as far as his understanding of the substance of Confucianism, Hinduism, and Islam goes, but may find his institutional approach valid and useful (Hamilton and Kao 1987, p. 292).

Another aspect of Weber’s work on the Protestant ethic that warrants more serious attention is the question of unanticipated consequences. For example, against the commonplace view that Confucianism hindered capitalist development, one could suggest that in fact may have been an unwitting impetus to capital accumulation as Confucianism taught craftsmen and merchants to “buy” their way out of their occupation and to place themselves in a less despised class? Or, assuming that status attainment is central to the Confucian worldview can it be argued that the effort to accumulate capital was directed to the goal of status attainment and upward mobility, the unintended consequence being the accumulation of vast stores of capital?
Such questions cannot be answered without empirically oriented research to which the prevailing textualism and other problems remain as obstacles.

Conclusion

In looking at this relationship between values and development, there is a task of demystification as hand that is not simply an exposing of a gimmick, followed by placing oneself in the institutionalism rather than in the culturalism camp. A third position is possible, where local discourses on development are "authentic" in the sense that they are consciously theoretically articulated while at the same time grounded in the realities of the region and mindful of the pitfalls of auto-Orientalism.

I do not suggest that there is no such thing as "Asia" or "Asian values" (as long as Asia is not understood as a homogeneous entity). It is now fashionable to dismiss the individualist-collectivist dichotomy when discussing differences between the West and Asia. But it is unfortunate that potential sound concepts that may emerge from the positing of such dichotomies are nipped in the bud because so many of us have become sceptical of a now-discredited discourse that was largely state-initiated and dominated. Undoubtedly, for example, differences between Singapore and the United States as far as individualism is concerned exist. Those differences cannot be fruitfully captured by tendentious phrases such as "the corrosive individualism of the West". This is not to say that there are no areas of life in which Americans may display a greater or lesser sense of individualism than Singaporeans but only that intellectuals must not abdicate the serious investigation of values and developments. A critical assessment of both the social sciences and "Asian" discourses on the question of values and development should lead to a counter-Orientalist, counter-auto-Orientalist, and non-instrumental appropriations of classic works, such as those of Weber, for alternative thinking on religion, values, and capitalism in Asia.

NOTE

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