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Research Notes

Rethinking Political Theory in the Wake of China's Rise

Ken Tsutsumibayashi

Abstract

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The article attempts to capture one aspect of the project entitled "East Asian perspectives on political legitimacy (EAPL)"—a project principally coordinated by Professor Melissa Williams of Toronto University, with the collaboration of scholars of various backgrounds from universities in East Asia and North America (including Keio University, Japan). The project's ultimate aim is to cultivate the field of comparative political theory, though primarily focusing on East Asian intellectual traditions.

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Outlook article

The dazzling spectacle of the opening ceremony of Shanghai Expo was no doubt one that

reinforced the image of China as an emerging global superpower. For many, this is an image that inspires both awe and anxiety. How is it possible for a country with such a huge and diverse population to develop so dynamically in such a short space of time? How is it possible to maintain social cohesion (at least to the level that it does) in the face of such a dynamic change? Will China continue to grow economically and become irreversibly locked into the ever complex and increasingly unfathomable system of global capitalism? Is China's unique system sustainable in the long run? How will it affect the world? Will China exercise its political influence on the world multilaterally and responsibly?

These are only some of the questions a foreign observer might ask in trying to grapple with what seems like a new emerging world order (or disorder as the case may turn out to be) with China in the driving seat. However, since I am not a China specialist, but rather a historian of Western political thought, I am hardly qualified to provide learned answers to the questions posed above. So instead of tackling them head-on, I would like to address just one related question by way of referring to what was discussed at a particular workshop held recently in China.

While the Shanghai Expo was ceremoniously being unveiled in the city center, another event, quite different and certainly less mediatized, was taking place in the suburban area of Shanghai, at the beautiful campus of Fudan University. These two events were totally unrelated—it is just a coincidence that the two events occurred at the same time in a relative proximity—and yet, as one of the participants to the workshop, I could not but entertain in my mind a curious link between the two.

The workshop was entitled "The cultural sources of deliberative politics in East Asia" and was hosted by the Fudan Institute for Advanced Study in Social Sciences and the Shibusawa Ei'ichi Memorial Foundation. It marked the first in a series of workshops organized under the project "East Asian perspectives on political legitimacy (EAPL)"—a project principally coordinated by Professor Melissa Williams of Toronto University, with the collaboration of scholars of various backgrounds (though interested one way or another in cultivating the field of comparative political theory) from universities in East Asia and North America[1]. Subsequent workshops will be held in Singapore (August 2010), Seoul (June 2011), Hong Kong (August 2011), Tokyo (December 2011) and Toronto (February 2012).

As the title suggests, the Shanghai workshop was in part an attempt to explore and explain the extent to which East Asian cultures might be relevant to the understanding of the past and present state of politics in the region. But the ambition of the overall project, hence of the workshop, goes much further. It is first and foremost an attempt to articulate, through studies of non-Western intellectual traditions (those of East Asia in the first instance), certain normative and theoretical arguments that may contribute to "de-parochializing" the Western conceptualizations of politics and enriching the overall discourses of political theory. As I understand it, this is not an attempt to seek an "alternative" theory of politics that will purportedly replace the existing Western paradigms. It is rather an attempt to question the monopoly of the latter and to cultivate a comparative perspective by shedding light

upon the diverse ways in which politics can be understood and practiced around the world, which in turn is expected to contribute to better mutual understanding and meaningful communication between different cultural traditions, thereby enriching intellectual traditions on all sides. In addition, by so establishing the field of "comparative political theory", the project aims to develop a "globalized curriculum" that can be integrated into the undergraduate university courses on politics in the West as well as in the non-West.

Now, all this seems to reflect in part the ever-growing presence of East Asian countries in the global economic, political and (increasingly) cultural scenes. Given how interdependent and integrated the world has become, it seems only natural to consider how the reality of diversity in various realms could affect the ways in which we theorize and practice politics. And China's emergence as an economic giant has no doubt contributed to this movement. At the Shanghai workshop, therefore, China was given the due attention that it deserved.

It would certainly be impossible to give detailed accounts of what was discussed at the workshop, so I will merely mention a couple of topics that seem relevant to this article. In line with the title of the workshop, deliberative democracy (its reality and possibilities in China) was discussed. Such terms as "authoritarian deliberation" and "deliberative authoritarianism" were introduced to explain China's unique practice that linked centralized authority with local deliberative practices. Another important issue was the role of Confucianism in trying to understand and to develop Eastern versions of democracy. It goes without saying that this is a popular theme that is much talked about in China and such terms as "Confucian democracy" and "Confucian political theory" have already gained considerable currency in many academic as well as non-academic circles.

However, both of these topics are controversial—and indeed this was reflected in the scintillating discussions that followed the thought-provoking presentations on deliberative politics and Confucianism. Here, in the remaining part of this article, I will try to develop an argument around a question that links these two issues with a problem that China may face in the future. The question can be posed as thus. Could China continue to achieve rapid economic development while maintaining a sufficient level of social cohesion, and will deliberative democracy and Confucianism help in any way?

In addressing this question, I wish to refer to a certain pattern of behavior which seems discernible in various different contexts, regardless of cultural differences. This is not some rationally founded principle with an ontological claim to universality, but rather one that derives from a lesson of history. It states firstly that poverty, when widespread, does not necessarily lead to popular unrest or to degradation of communal values. Secondly, and ironically, it is often when social conditions improve for many that the less well-off or the less-privileged begin to express discontent, possibly giving rise to social and moral instability. This was true in France just before the Revolution (as Tocqueville explained) as was in Japan on the eve of the Meiji Restoration[2].

Thus with greater economic freedom, accompanied with increasing population move-

ment, social mobility and widening disparity of wealth, China may soon find itself confronted with problems of social and moral instability, not to mention atomization of individuals (as often seen in many advanced capitalist nations). And while there are many reasons for the growing attention to deliberative discourse and Confucianism, perhaps the most pressing derives from the sense of urgency to deal with such problems.

Whether politics based on deliberation or Confucianism will serve to ease the situation, only the future will tell. But one might be justified in postulating the following. First, the introduction of deliberation (even when confined to the local level) could give rise to unintended consequences that would undermine "deliberative authoritarianism"—a point also mentioned by the proponent of this idea. In other words, it could, for better or for worse, spill over into other realms in such a way as to induce substantive political change. This is why I imagine Professor Deng Zhenglai of Fundan University made a cautionary remark at the beginning of the workshop stating how unhelpful and counterproductive it would be to talk about "deliberative politics" in China without paying sufficient attention to specificities of contexts. Secondly, recourse to Confucianism would not necessarily lead to social harmony, less perhaps to Confucian democracy or virtuous politics. All too often, historical research on Confucianism is confounded with its political usage—traditions being reinvented to suit whatever purposes held by different actors. And just as in Europe the Christian religion served to legitimize all kinds of political systems (ranging from theocracy to constitutionalism), Confucianism could simply turn into an ideological instrument for political strife. Thus, it would perhaps be more constructive to separate a genuinely academic inquiry of how Confucianism has historically developed, and how it has been interpreted and adopted in East Asia—particularly before the advent of modernity—from the practical political consideration of how Confucianism could be usefully employed to deal with certain contemporary problems (a point also underlined by historians of Confucian thought at the workshop). This distinction would certainly be desirable for the soundness of the former, and perhaps (though there is no guarantee) for the efficaciousness of the latter.

Moreover, if the aim is to create some discourse that would assist in maintaining or reestablishing social harmony or virtuous politics or politics for the people (even if not by the people), it would seem more helpful to look historically as well as presently as to how virtue and power relate theoretically and practically. Experience shows that admirable ideals do not always produce desired effects. Historically, it is fair to say, Confucian style virtue was more often than not observed in the breach. Of course, total absence of virtue would cause moral and political chaos, but too much reliance on virtue could produce the contrary effects by lacking vigilance against power abuse. Another lesson of history is that concentrated power has the tendency to corrupt even in the hands of the virtuous. The liberal democratic solution is to rely as little as possible on virtue (though a minimum level is required) and try to limit power by institutionalizing separation as well as checks and balances. China, of course, may wish to seek a different path, but be that as it may, it would still need to work out an appropriate method for combining virtue with power. To this end,

one may be able to learn something (to give just one example) from how trust has historically been established and how it transformed in times of dynamic social change. And perhaps in this broader context, the question concerning the practical applicability of Confucianism in politics could be better understood.

In a similar vein, I personally think it would be interesting and meaningful to trace the historical trajectories of discourses that contributed (or failed to contribute) to the establishment of trust not only among people constituting a nation but also among different nations in East Asia—that is, to go back before the "Western impact" to identify important normative factors that characterized East Asian ways of conducting "domestic politics" as well as "international relations". Once again Confucianism could become an important topic of research, but instead of focusing solely on how its interpretation and adaptation developed over the course of time within each nation (for instance, in China, Korea and Japan), subsequently to be compared with an aim to identify similarities and differences, it would perhaps be equally meaningful to place Confucianism within a broad framework of discourse that served to establish trust, focusing on the interactive processes of these nations rather than treating them individually. In addition, one should also analyze how such traditional ideas and practices underwent radical transformation after the "Western impact" and how a deluge of concepts and theories imported from the West were subsequently reinterpreted and remodeled to deal with very different problems and realities that came to characterize modernity in the East Asian region. All this may seem like a hopelessly demanding task, but if successful, it would hopefully contribute to a better understanding of the East Asian modes of consensus-building, communication, negotiations and political imagination or theorization (an important point for the development of comparative political theory), and may also serve to inform non-Asian scholars (perhaps even political actors) who seek to understand how dialogue between the East and the West could be meaningfully conducted in the future[3].

All this cannot be achieved overnight. It may even take "generations of research" (to quote from a participant to the workshop talking about how formidable a task it would be to cultivate the field of comparative political theory). But I am hoping that the above issue will be addressed as one of the topics at the Tokyo workshop next year.

Notes

[1] For the project description of EAPL, see
http://www.ethics.utoronto.ca/index.php?id=6&iid=11

[2] Alexis de Tocqueville, *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution*, in *Oeuvres*, t. 3, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 2004) pp. 196-204; Hiroshi Watanabe, "Ancien Régime and Meiji Revolution," in *Tocqueville and Democracy Today*, ed. by Reiji Matsumoto et. al (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press) p. 239; Kiyokazu Washida, "When 'citizens' become 'Citizens'," *As-*

teion, 72 (May 2010) p. 12.

[3] For some cautionary remarks concerning intercultural dialogue, see Ken Tsutsumibayashi, "Fusion of horizons or confusion of horizons? Intercultural dialogue and its risks," *Global Governance*, 11-1 (January-March 2005) pp. 103-114.