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Social Quality Theory in Perspective

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The late 20th century was a period of high productivity in ideas and theories of social sciences, in particular around the themes of welfare regimes, human security, social capital, social exclusion, and globalization. Among a rich diversity of these theories, social quality theory (thereafter SQ theory) presents a new approach that touches upon very essential parts of daily circumstances in societies. This theory is operated at both ontological and epistemological levels of theorization (Beck, Maesen v.d. and Walker, 2001: 307-360), which is both descriptive and explanatory about economic, political, juridical, sociological and environmental relations in daily circumstances. It is competitive and also compensational to other social sciences, generating a new perspective of understanding of the economic, socio-political, environmental and the cultural dimensions of human existence.

For its theoretical development, the social quality theory was given birth in 1997, with its original attention dedicated to address the social dimension of state-policy making in Europe, against the neo-liberal Washington consensus, and the handmaiden position of all other public policies (Beck, Maesen v.d. and Walker, 1997; Walker, 1999). However, after a decade of development, this theory has been developed from various dimensions. As we can see from the articles in this volume, different stresses and the foci of these articles indicate various dimensions of development for SQ theories applied to particular topics. Accordingly, the merits of this theory can be understood as a normative guideline for policy-making and practice, as a scheme of reference for understanding relevant conditional structures as the basis for this guideline, and as a socio-political goal to enable people to act in a democratic way. Also, it may still provide ideological instruments for citizens to cope with increased complexities of daily circumstances, or as an empirical yardstick for assessing the value of theoretical analysis about social relationships (including economic,

juridical and sociological aspects etc).

In this theory, the very foundation is set on the definition of 'the social,' making it different from any individualistic theory (Beck, Maesen v.d. and Walker, 2001: 310-312). This stand also makes the theory be distinguished from the human security approach and many other theories. In the SQ approach, the nature of 'the social' is defined by the productive and reproductive relationships, manifested in structures, practices and conventions. The theory constitutes an interdependency between processes of human self-realization and the formation of collective identities, as recently explained in a working-paper about the complementarity of the human security discourses and the SQ-approach (Gasper et al., 2008).

As will be explained in the article by Alan Walker (in this issue), on the basis of theorizing 'the social' the SQ-architecture is constructed with three sets of main factors or mechanisms. As point of departure, the set of the four conditional factors are essential, namely socio-economic security, social cohesion, social inclusion and social empowerment. In this context, social quality indicators as the epistemological results of theorizing 'the social,' concern the measurement instruments of these conditional factors, reflecting societal processes and the consequences for communities, families and individual people (Phillips and Berman, 2001).

Despite the fact that political implications of this theory may vary for different societies — for instance to promote European policies for strengthening social cohesion or social empowerment and policies to increase social harmony for most Asian societies — the theory raised some general demands for the socio-political developments in order to address another set of the SQ-architecture, namely: the four normative factors, social justice, solidarity, equal valuation and human dignity. The question is if the transformation of the four conditional factors will really address the essence of the four normative factors? These demands would make this theory meaningful in the global context for whatever the societies, since its basic intent behind social quality initiative is of "consensus-building" (as accented by Therborn, 2001: 20).

With this motivation, changes over time will not make this need in society less urgent. For instance, a characteristic of the current financial and economic crisis will suppress but intensify the need of social integration and solidarity. Indeed, SQ may provide the theoretical framework for understanding societal problems and contradictions in addition to engaging with the policy relevant domains — a theoretical and practical lens through which academics, policy makers and practitioners can understand and conceptualize their 'lifeworlds' in addition to developing outcomes which are meaningful therein (Ward, 2006).

In this way, SQ may be linked to notions of ‘wellbeing’ (Carlisle, Henderson and Hanlon, 2009), which move on from purely subjective notions of ‘happiness,’ to what has been termed happiness-plus-meaningfulness (Seligman, Parks and Steen, 2005).

In this issue, six articles are included, which are commonly affiliated with the theoretical framework of SQ theory. Walker’s article presents the “architecture” of the SQ theory and he will elaborate one of its aspects, namely the four conditional factors and the framework of theoretical analysis. In this article, the author underscores the meaning of ‘social relationships’ as an outcome of theorizing ‘the social,’ which will encompass traditional notions of social policies and the social model. However, the central issue of this article is how to found the comparative basis of SQ studies between the European and Asian societies. As argued, the dynamics behind the development of SQ theory is to promote European policies to enhance the four conditional factors, which should be linked with the constitutional factors in order to address the four normative factors. Its ambition is to contribute to ‘acceptable’ strategies for the transformation of the Member States. But this dynamic does not exist in East Asia where an idea of “welfare society” is accented.

Thus, through a discussion made on the state’s role of welfare, the author contrasts several points of differences between European and East Asian approaches or strategies. In this connection, Walker refers to current debates on the features of East Asian social policy models with a deep insight. Some misconceptions about European and East Asian welfare models are examined, which shape a sense of cross-model comparisons. Accordingly, this article refers to a wide range of factors including social policy models, welfare ideology and cultural values. With particular reference to the country-particular socio-cultural contexts, the article tests the validity and implications of the social quality theory to explain Asian circumstances, and therefore, to expose the potential usage of social quality theory as the infrastructure to “bridge between Asia and Europe.”

Wong’s article, meanwhile, conducts a SQ study along the policy-oriented approach, or to execute “a governance perspective” of society. As maintained by the author, there is certain political need for many Asian countries, — examples of China, Thailand, Turkey, etc., — to address the ideal of social harmony. In this region, as the author argued, “the concept of social harmony reflects a deep worry about something more basic to any society — how will a society be acceptable for all people engaged?” Thus, the Asian states may use the ideology of social harmony for very different rationales from that of the European states. Therefore the cultural issues should be taken into account, which are inevitably

integrated into the state's policy-making activities. By evaluating the significance of "social harmony", the paper demonstrates how useful the SQ notion to build up the linkage between cultural context and real politics.

In order to establish the theoretical arguments for social harmony, Wong takes the Chinese case into account. His study underlines a shift from a strategy of pursuing a national goal of "four modernizations" to "growth-first" policy-orientation and recently to struggle for "building a harmonious society." The socio-political context of this transformation has been interpreted for numerous reasons, typically by the extent of development in the light of and measured by economic and social standards, as well as by its political infrastructure. Moreover, in this paper, the meaning of a state-endorsed goal of building an harmonious society is evaluated in a comprehensive way, in the contexts of cultural notions, political need, and China's developmental circumstances. Thus, this article allows readers an outlook at the value of social quality theory in asserting the stages of political development, while leading researchers to consider the lesson of East Asia for European social policy debates. In another case, Yee and Chang's article refers to the Korean context of political development. The article reveals the social transformation of Korean society from "freedom from hunger" since 1960 to "freedom from autocratic state power" of recent decades. As maintained, the processes of development and democratization are accompanied with the increased social inequality, distrust, and social conflict. Thus, the issue of "social development" becomes very essential for Koreans, which connotes a need for improving social relationships and social quality. As a consequence, the authors insist to use social capital as the basis for constructing social cohesion. Due to this usage, the social quality theory has certain political implications for maintaining social solidarity. This discussion also integrates political issues with its country-particular cultural contexts.

In this article, the authors underscore the meaningfulness of social networks in Korean society that reinforces "interpersonal trust." In their view, trust in public institutions has declined over the decades in contemporary Korea, as demonstrated by a number of survey data. One basic reason for this is the lack of transparency in the operation of political institutions, and this result in the importance of interpersonal trust. However, this feature leads to a clientele-based politic process. Therefore, the authors insist that to enhance the transparency of public institutions would be very essential for Korea's development. As regarded, to enhance the transparency of the public institution is a good measure of "societal moral resources" for cultivating general trust, which will also contribute to form effective social sanctions. Accordingly, this

work promotes an idea to strengthen social cohesion with a logic of collective action, by enhancing the trust for the public institutions, which can improve the social quality of society.

Still, Chau and Yu's article combines a theoretical discussion about the ethnocentric bias in comparative welfare studies and the discourse of social policy development in Hong Kong. The article concentrates on the "social harmony campaign" promoted by Hong Kong government in the first decade of the 21st century. This campaign embodies two basic ideas: to create a harmonious society and to foster an individual responsibility of welfare. By the state-mobilized social actions, this campaign promotes social harmony with a hope to integrate the facts of moral force, ideal community and the state policy practice. Thus, this study shows how the Hong Kong government made an effort to create moral society in order to compensate the shortcoming caused by the operation of free market. However, the authors also raise the issue about how to deal with the increased pressure from mass democracy. The surged wave of democracy in Hong Kong in the last decade contributed to the raised discontent of the general people in association with the worsening conditions of income equality. Thus, how to deal with these issues is still under debates.

While the three articles mentioned above all have a feature of integrating historical, cultural and developmental elements, Wang's and Ward and Meyer's papers go in different directions. They neither refer to the country-specific discourse of development, nor concentrated on particular societies, but on general theoretical and methodological issues. In Wang's paper, the central question comes to social indicators: can social quality indicators be designed to suit the Asian particular circumstance? Indeed, social quality indicators are the important reflectors of the conditional factors of social quality. In the European context, scholars make efforts to distinguish them from the 'quality of life' indicators and 'social indicators' in general (Siltaniemi and Kauppinen, 2005: 277-279). A system of social quality indicators are thus designed with 96 indicators in four domains and 22 sub-domains. This set of sq-indicators and their application is discussed in a double issue of the European Journal of Social Quality (Maesen v.d., 2009; Maesen v.d. and Walker, 2005).

As a consequence of this approach, we may further ask whether or not the SQ indicators used in European surveys can also be applied to Asian societies. This discussion has a clear intention to explore the possibility of establishing a system of Asian social quality indicators. Thus, Wang's article reports on their work on social quality indicators with an intention to recognize the cultural context of social quality. The method of this work is to modify the existing indicators contrived by European scholars by "an Asian view" that was exposed

by a survey made among selected Asian experts on social indicators. By this article, we can see hard effort was made by her team in struggling of data comparison in order to define Asian social quality indicators, although in so far, such work is still remains at a very preliminary stage. It is very hard to say how far this direction of work can go, or how effective this proposal can serve for its purpose. However, this effort reminds us of the very need to identify the Asian features of social quality by developing comparative studies and by facilitating social quality research from a cultural perspective.

In another work, Ward and Meyer conducted a sociological exegesis to deepen people's understanding about the normative base of SQ theory. In the early part of this work, the author refers to four quadrants in the analytic framework of social quality theory, maintaining that "[t]rust plays an important role in the social systems and institutions that make up each of the four quadrants." After reviewing these four dimensions of social quality theory, the authors deploy a "sociological exegesis" about trust, in which the authors refer to a number of sociologists and philosophers working with the topic of social trust, typically Giddens and Luhmann. The central concern of these articles is to inquire how trust to be conceptualized, how it functioned in modern society, and its meaning with regard to social inclusion, social cohesion, socio-economic security and social empowerment. In the conclusion, the authors regard social trust to be the "glue" for the operation of all social relationships at both interpersonal and systemic levels, and therefore, it plays an important role in understanding the social quality "architecture."

In all, by this issue, we have seen great potentials for the theoretical development of the SQ theory and its application. The included articles are developed in various dimensions, most of which embody a cultural sense of comparison. Thus, although in origin the birth of social quality theory has a mission to serve as the instrument for contriving European identity and to establish European economic, socio-political and environmental policies, which have social justice, solidarity, equal valuation and human dignity as its core values (Juhasz, 2006: 83; Gasper et al., 2008). Therefore, this theory now goes beyond the European sphere. In this volume, both Eastern and Western scholars display their eagerness to extend the Europe-based SQ theory to fit the East Asian context. Their work of comparisons can enrich the theoretical foundation of the social quality theory, and even more, induce some clues for scientific investigation and exploration. Thus, we are quite confident for the outcome of this development that can promote this European theory of social quality to a global level, making this theory be able to function as one of the general theories in comparative studies.

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