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**POSTMATERIAL DEVELOPMENT: THE SEARCH FOR
A NEW ASIAN MODEL***SONGOK HAN THORNTON
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Conventional wisdom has it that the Asian “miracle” was fueled by a strictly defined set of “Asian values.” On closer examination, those values turn out to be more Western than Asian. The “miracle,” moreover, often achieved economic development at the expense of political underdevelopment and ecological destruction. The resulting “Asian model” eschewed a wide range of nonmaterial goals, such as communal integrity and environmental balance, which were deeply embedded in Asian traditions. It took the Asian Crash to puncture that model, casting doubt on the working assumptions of three decades of full-throttle economism. Before the Crash, democratic values were often dismissed - along with human rights, gender rights, and environmental protection - as luxuries to be deferred until after development was complete. Some iconoclasts, such as Amartya Sen, strongly refuted that modernist formula, but it was the Crash that provided the smoking gun to place postmaterialism on the Asian political map. The result is not only a more sustainable model of development, but a more inclusive view of Asian values.

Key Words: Postmaterialism, Economism, Asian Values, Asian Model, Asian Crash

INTRODUCTION: THE CRASH AS QUESTION MARK

This study takes the Asian Crash of 1997 as a critical window on current globalization. So too it affords a revisionist perspective on the so-called “Asian miracle,” whose politics have too often been conceived as an inevitable product of endemic Asian values. Even the economic side of that “miracle” is ripe for demythologization.

In large part the myth of the miracle was a product of Cold War exigency. Even though the US preached the dogma of the free market, geopolitical considerations made it turn a blind eye on the radical departure of Asian NICs (newly industrialized countries) from free market ideology. As the Cold War wound down, however, Washington began redefining its agenda. Asian economies were pressed to adopt neoliberal programs of privatization and deregulation (Bello, 2001: 13, 10). This restructuring effort

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reached its apogee during the Clinton administration, when financial interests became the dominant force behind US policy. That paved the way for a massive influx of foreign direct investment (FDI) to Rim economies. Net private capital inflows to Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, South Korea and the Philippines jumped from \$37.9 billion in 1994 to \$79.2 billion in 1995, and finally to \$97.1 billion in 1996 (Bello, 2001: 140). It was this systemic excess, rather than Asian “crony capitalism” or any “lack of transparency” — as the official IMF interpretation contended (IMF, 2000) — which sparked the Crash.

If Asian values did not “cause” the Crash, then their role in the making of the preceding “miracle” is also called into question. From Krugman’s (1994: 70) perspective, the “miracle” can best be explained in terms of material inputs such as surplus labor and capital. This not only punctures the “miraculous” image of the Asian takeoff, but also its dependence on cultural exceptionalism (Krugman, 1999: 33). “Asian values” turn out to be an invented tradition that in many ways is more Western than Asian. The “miracle,” moreover, purchased economic growth in the hard currency of political underdevelopment and ecological holocaust.

As Amartya Sen points out, however, the Asian model did offer a degree of “protective security” insofar as it promoted full employment and a relatively wide distribution of economic gains. In better times, this model appeared to unite the best of two worlds: the dynamism of American capitalism with the social security of European social democracy. However, the fact remains that Asian developmentalism jettisoned a wide range of non-material goals, most notably those of environmental health and sustainability. In short, the “miracle” did not come cheaply.

It would be unfair, of course, to pin the onus of raw economism on this region without noting the equally catastrophic environmental irresponsibility of Western and Soviet developmentalism in their takeoff phases. What set Asian planners apart was the opportunity they had to reap the advantage of late-comer development: the chance to learn from a vast array of Western mistakes. Ideas on this subject were percolating as early as the 1950s (Sen, 1999: 290),¹ and were very much “in the air” by the 1970s — the seeds of postmaterialism having been spread by the counterculture of the 1960s. But even in the absence of these second thoughts from the West, nonmaterial social concerns were anything but new to Asian thought. Only a distinctly Westernized version of “Asian values” could categorically ignore such con-

¹ Amartya Sen cites the arguments of W. A. Lewis (1955) and Peter Bauer (1957, 1971) that the principal objective of economic development was to increase the range of human choice.

cerns.

Unfortunately, the ideology behind these ersatz Asian values was closed to critical examination once the engine of double-digit growth was churning. The region's new affluence ensured the legitimacy of those regimes that happened to ride this developmental wave, as if there was no choice. It took the Asian Crash to break that spurious determinism, putting a question mark on the working assumptions of three decades of full-throttle, no-questions-asked economism. All of Asia would feel the political aftershocks of the Crash, as the cardinal tenets of Asian developmentalism came under investigation. However, in Korea and Taiwan, where a democratic transformation was already in progress by the late 1980s, the postmaterial question would carry less political weight than in Southeast Asia, where radical passions led to the overthrow of Suharto in Indonesia and threatened all authoritarian regimes.

TOWARD AN ASIAN POSTMATERIALISM

Perhaps the best prototype for pan-Asian revisionism is Amartya Sen's *Development as Freedom* (1999: 15), which reverses the standard priorities of economic and political development and especially challenges Lee Kuan Yew's insistence that harsh political systems are necessary for Asian growth. Before the Crash, democratic values were often dismissed — along with human rights, gender rights, and environmental protection — as luxuries to be deferred until *after* development was complete. Many reversed that logic after the Crash. Now it was authoritarianism, and the crony capitalism which it spawns, that came to be seen as the main obstacles to development. At first that criticism was used to drive a wedge between Western and Eastern capitalism, but after Enron and a multitude of similar revelations concerning crony capitalism in the West, that myth was shattered (Mydans, 2003). This opened the door for a more general postmaterial critique, equally applicable to the East and West.

Unfortunately, Sen has tended to ignore the ecological side of that critique, which is a prime concern of postmaterial development (Kapur, 1999).² What is needed is a merger of Sen's democratism with the kind of environmental consciousness that has been propounded by a host of Indian writers such as Vandana Shiva and Arundhati Roy. Bello (2001: 91-5) likewise grounds his development model on sustainability. This synthesis might

² Recently, though, Sen has begun to rectify this environmental deficiency. See his "Why We Should Preserve the Spotted Owl." *The London Review of Book* 26(3), February 5, 2004.

have seemed utopian in years past, but after the Crash it carries much political weight.

While opening the door for a postmaterial turn to (or rather return to) Asian values, the Crash also invites the retrieval of earlier Asian development. It is often forgotten that the "Asian model" of the 1960s and early 1970s gave priority to both economic growth *and* equity (Donnelly, 1989: 307). This model accords with the thrust of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) meeting of 1972, which endorsed balanced growth *and* the reduction of inequality as prime developmental concerns. This egalitarian factor was subverted by the raw economism of so-called "miracle" growth. For an institutional insider such as Stiglitz (2002: 241) to endorse this traditional Asian concern was still considered radical at the end of the twentieth century, thanks in part to the ethical hiatus that the "Asian values" model enforced.

Like that "miracle," the Crash had far reaching political and economic consequences. It not only challenged the hard hit governments on the Rim, but also the global system as a whole. While stimulating fresh debate over the Asian development model, it resurrected older issues, such as "dependency theory." Before the Asian takeoff, many Latin American and African countries had been on par with their Asian counterparts. South Korea and Ghana, for example, were at roughly the same level of development in the early 1960s (Huntington, 2000: xiii). But three decades later, the "Asian miracle" had left most developing economies behind. It did so, moreover, in the name of an authoritarian ethos that would have been considered reactionary even by the standards of early twentieth century corporatism.

While the double-digit growth of Pacific Rim economies discredited "dependency" theory, it revived faith in capitalist development worldwide. Thus, power elites in the West were pleased to strike a globalist bargain with "Asian values" by legitimating growth *at all costs* (Thornton, 2002: 12). In Indonesia, for example, those costs were distinctly illiberal. Western-educated technocrats allied themselves with the Army to anchor Suharto's New Order militarily. This techno-military regime, strongly anti-communist and pro-development (Anwar, 1994: 279), undertook to de-politicize Indonesia in the manner of Singapore's even more sweeping anti-politics. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Singaporean politics had been remarkably open and democratic (Khong, 1995: 109). By smothering this tradition, Lee Kuan Yew's technocrats went too far, even for their own good. The result has been such a dearth of interest in politics among Singaporean youth that it is hard to recruit fresh talent for the People's Action Party (PAP). Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong has been forced to raise salaries to attract even marginally

qualified political functionaries (Saywell, 2000).

Singapore nonetheless passes for the jewel in the crown of Asian globalization. This is possible because, as Jan Aart Scholte (2001: 14) observes, current globalization has sidestepped democracy in favor of the “free market” as “the be-all and end-all politics.” The antithesis of PAP’s priorities is located in Sen’s equally “Asian” freedom-as-development model. Sen and other developmental revisionists think it is time to balance free market economism with an unyielding concern for “local cultures, ecology, and social issues such as health and education (Kapur, 1999).” For Sen (1999: 37), political liberties have an “instrumental” as well as “intrinsic” value.

CRISIS OF SUSTAINABILITY

Sen’s position can fairly be called “postmodern,” insofar as modernist development theory has been grounded on raw economism. This postmodern turn, which Nussbaum (2000) takes even farther than Sen, is well exemplified by the UN’s *Human Development Report*, which assesses nations “not just by their GNP, but also their achievements in areas such as health, education, gender equality, and political liberty” (Kapur, 1999). Judged by this standard, globalization must be assessed by social and environmental criteria, and not just by economic growth. Especially, it cannot be measured simply by short-term growth, where environmental degradation and social disruption hardly register.

While a sustainable model of development is not averse to growth, it sets limits based on social and environmental impact (Luke, 1999: 136-7).³ The resulting paradigm shift is better termed “postmaterial” than postmodern, for postmodernism has been closely associated with a “hermeneutics of suspicion,” whose net effect is social and political inertia. Postmaterialism, by contrast, does more than interrogate existing global power structures. It offers a viable *alternative*, such as the program broached in the Rio Declaration at the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), where emphasis was given to intergenerational equity (Sands, 1995: 58). It was here that sustainable development took the fore as the high road to progress. Sadly, the next decade saw little such progress. A pall of failed aspirations hung over the World Summit on Sustainable Development at Johannesburg in August 2002.

³ This is the approach set forth by the 1987 report, *Our Common Future* (Brundtland, 1987), of the World Commission on Environment and Development, known as the Brundtland Commission, led by Gro Brundtland.

Worse still, the basic premise of sustainable development — the co-existence of economic and ecological progress — was coming unhinged at Johannesburg, as the ‘South’ departed from the Rio script on socio-ecological complementarity. Led by South Africa, the ‘South’ wanted to turn the conference into an ordinary “development” summit, putting the environment on a back burner (Sachs, 2002). This is not to say that the South’s perspective should simply be shelved. Most people in the South see the key problem as their lack of control over their own natural resources (Doyle and McEachern, 1998: 75). That vantage complements sustainability insofar as absentee ownership encourages unlimited environmental exploitation.

It must be recognized, however, that local and equitable ownership can also be exploitative where short-term economism is the rule. “Short-termism” (to coin a phrase) is the force behind slash-and-burn agriculture, which is no less destructive than massive agro-corporatism. Short-termism of either form is a blueprint for disaster, for both trash the environment that people must inhabit. Profits, along with the classes that reap them, are highly mobile, but most people are not. The general population is left behind to suffer the ecological consequences.

Postmaterialism represents, first and foremost, a departure from the uni-dimensional focus on economic growth that has characterized globalization in general and East Asian development in particular. By no means has this failed paradigm lost its appeal with power elites after the Crash. Korea and Japan are typical in their fixation with top-down “reform.” Postmaterialism, by contrast, is a bottom-up phenomenon insofar as it is born out of political resistance. This resistance does not always issue from the left, or even from the “life politics” that for Callinicos (2001: 118) can only mean anti-capitalist politics. Rather, it issues from the broad oppositionalism that was vented in the anti-WTO demonstrations of November 1999, in Seattle.

Postmaterial values not only move beyond the conventional Left and Right, but also beyond the “problem-solving” orientation that characterizes the “Third Way,” as fashioned by Anthony Giddens and Tony Blair. This revaluation is not content simply to reform neoliberalism (Elliott, 1998: 245). It takes aim at the root malady which early environmentalism failed to confront: the culturally-embedded waste of global capitalism (Benton and Redclift, 1994: 14, 25). Only a full “life-style” critique, whereby human and natural relations are sustainably interwoven (Benton and Redclift, 1994: 16), can work at the root level. This critique counters the technologism that is central to global finance as it is to the social sciences (on the former see Elliott, 1998: 246; on the latter see Benton and Redclift, 1994: 2).

THE ASIAN APPROPRIATION OF WESTERN TECHNOLOGISM

It is here that the question of “Asian values” enters the debate, for Asian societies once lived in relative harmony with nature. Lynn White, Jr. argues that our global environmental crisis is mainly the product of the Judeo-Christian religious tradition, which puts god above nature, and casts man in god’s image. This justifies unlimited abuse of nature in the name of development (Dryzek, 1997: 161; Zimmerman, 1994: 45). The Asian appropriation of Western technologism reshaped cultural norms in that image, affecting ordinary life as surely as it did production techniques.

This did not so much de-Asianize the East as reconfigure the power relations of Asian society. Commercial values were not new to the East, but had been strictly subordinate to non-material orientations such as Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. Pye (2000: 248-9) reminds us that throughout the Confucian cultural sphere, the merchant stood “near the bottom of the social scale, below even the peasant.” Social elites, such as Korean yangban aristocrats, disdained commercial and industrial activity (Macdonald, 1996: 195). The rapid influx of Western techno-capitalism did not extirpate these traditional values, but simply inverted their status relative to commercial values. These inverted priorities appropriated the name of “Asian values” during the “miracle” years of double-digit growth. Thus non-material values lost their social standing while material, accumulative values gripped government policy as never before.

Asian postmaterialism can embrace what E. F. Schumacher terms “Buddhist economics,” whereby individuals seek to “maximize well-being at a minimum level of consumption” (Dryzek, 1997: 161); or it can draw upon Gandhian philosophy, as proposed by the Swedish Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation (Carmen, 1996: 30-1). Either way, it amounts to the restoration of a deeper and broader range of Asian values to the sphere of social and political decision-making. That is its conservative side. Its progressive side lies in its openness to political reform whereby traditional authoritarianism is supplanted by postmaterial goals such as democracy, social equity, and ecological sustainability.

GRASSROOTS ALTERNATIVES AND NGO TRANSLOCALISM

To adopt these goals is to recognize the fallacy of “TINA”: the notion that “there is no alternative” to globalization in its current form. Even the so-called Third Way, which purports to be reformist, accepts the basic postu-

lates of TINA. As formulated by Giddens (1998), the Third Way does little to combat the root injustice of globalization that Bello (2001) and Stiglitz (2002) document. Given that deterministic premise, meager reforms look appealing. At least they are an improvement over such dismal alternatives as ethnic cleansing, militant neonationalism, and global terrorism. Far from posing a real threat to globalization, these horrors actually serve as a foil for its legitimacy, just as unreformed globalization serves as a foil for the so-called Third Way. The Third Way passes itself off as the best moral counterforce available *within the globalist paradigm*. That may well be true; but the point is that there are alternative paradigms.

Even after the Asian financial crisis, Callinicos (2001: 105) notes that the Third Way saw no need for a serious reexamination of globalization. As Anderson states, the Third Way is but an ideological shell for neoliberalism (Callinicos, 2001: 109). Any genuine corrective for the “First Way” excesses must come to terms with the failure not only of post-crisis IMFism, but also the glaring defects of pre-crisis developmentalism. In short, it must confront the structural inadequacies of global capitalism. This means raising the Third Way critique to a postmaterial plane.

This postmaterial turn need not be anti-developmental. Drawing upon data from 43 developing countries, Inglehart (1997) posits a postmaterial development model based upon value changes that stem from economic growth. These include a declining emphasis on economism as well as declining respect for political and techno-scientific authority (Inglehart, 1997: 39). Sen goes farther, in that his concept of “poverty as capability deprivation” does not rest on *prior* economic development. Rather, it argues for *concurrent* material and postmaterial means and ends. His prime example is the Indian state of Kerala, whose economic underdevelopment – as compared with richer states such as Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh – is offset by its more egalitarian distribution of education, health care and land reform (Sen, 1999: 91).

The egalitarian approach to development, however, entails a grassroots plane of action that makes broad cooperation difficult. Some form of communication and mediation is necessary. Fortunately, one translocal source is already at hand in NGOs, which have the advantage of being non-statist as well as non-corporate. Hertz (2001) holds that the surrender of government power to giant corporations is the deadliest threat facing democracy today. However, the reverse case is no better: the domination of corporations by government. Neither is conducive to democracy. The corporate-government partnership (regardless of which partner holds sway) represents a top-down structure of domination vis-à-vis “people power.”

Inglehart's mode of postmaterialism does not escape this subversion. His suggestion that affluence alone will rectify this democratic defect is still trapped in the basic assumptions of modernist and neoliberal development models. The Asian Pacific experience proves that wealth is just as likely to buttress reactionary regimes as to contain them, much less uproot them. A more direct route to democratic development must be found. It is no accident, therefore, that current Korean activism on behalf of civil society, environmentalism, and other postmaterial causes is almost entirely grassroots in nature.

This has been its strength, in that it could not be easily co-opted; but it has also been its weakness, in that coordinated opposition was hard to sustain. NGOs can be part of the eco-political solution (Doyle and McEachern, 1998: 85-6),⁴ since they are relatively free from traditional political and social constraints, but they can also create a new obstacle in that they are simply too diverse in size and orientation (Elliott, 1998: 135). Much as global environmental organizations are forging coalitions such as the IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources) (Hajer, 1995: 277), Korean NGOs are working to overcome this shortcoming through umbrella coalitions or website affiliations such as the DNSM (Democracy and Social Movements).⁵ Likewise the Japan Tropical Forest Action Network (JATAN) now links not only Japanese NGOs, but also a global network of environmentally active organizations (Princen and Finger, 1994: 3).

As the JATAN example suggests, INGOs (international NGOs) can be a vital link between local, regional and global concerns. Conservation must have a local focus (Selman, 1996: 3-4), but the region provides an increasingly important context for environmental issues. Nothing illustrates this better than the 1994 and 1997 forest fires in Indonesia, which challenged the "ASEAN way" of principled non-interference. The haze had originated from deliberate agro-industrial arson. Soon it blanketed not only Indonesia but Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore, parts of Thailand and the southern Philippines, impacting the entire regional economy as well as public health and the environment. While tourist revenues plummeted, some seventy million people sought treatment for respiratory problems, asthma, and eye and skin irritations (McNally, 1998). When a 1995 "Co-operation Plan on Trans-

⁴ Thomas Princen and Matthias Finger hold that the present environmental crisis demands not only economic and technological responsibility, but a new form of politics. Since nation-states are part of the ecological problem, effective reform must take place "beyond and below the nation-state level."

⁵ Dozens of the most active Korean NGOs are listed on the DNSM website at www.demos.or.kr/eng/ngos.html.

Boundary Pollution” failed to prevent the next haze, another “Regional Haze Action Plan” was ratified in 1997 (Ramcharan, 2000: 68-9). Clearly, there must be local, regional, and global cooperation (Swanson and Johnston, 1999: 204), and interventionist strategies must be considered when voluntary cooperation fails.

This transformation at the “macro” level, however, is matched by a “micro” revolution in developmental thinking. Escobar challenges existing developmental discourse by foregrounding new social movements (NSM) as the nuclei of an alternative discourse “to (rather than *of*) development” (Crush, 1995: 20). NSM discourses are postmodern in their “polyvalent, local, dispersed and fragmented” characteristics (Crush, 1995: 20). This imparts a grassroots and “Southern” element onto an otherwise “Northern” discourse on sustainable development (Adams, 1995: 88).

CONCLUSION: A NEW ASIAN MODEL

Ultimately the tension is not between “Southern” and “Northern” approaches, but radical and technocentrist ones. The latter lays stress on the “rational” use of the environment (Adams, 1995: 89-90), which can easily serve the interest of existing power structures; whereas environmental radicalism is rooted in eco-socialist values (Adams, 1995: 93). Radicals hold that poverty and injustice will endure so long as an orthodox urban-industrial vision of human purpose prevails (Adams, 1995: 94). This radical/technocratic dichotomy is at the heart of Ferry’s (1995: xxiv) distinction between a “deep ecology,” which is bio-centric or eco-centric, and a “shallow ecology” which is basically anthropocentrist.

Although the greatest barrier to deep ecology is culture, this can also be a source of strength. Stone (1993: 240) seeks a cultural corrective in the holistic and environmentally balanced values of Buddhism, and many Islamic scholars have recently called attention to a similar ecological sensitivity in the Koran.⁶ Too often the West equates progress with “supermarket packaging, big cars, pesticide harvests, take-out meals with their throw-away plates, hair sprays, and mountains of nonbiodegradable trash (Stone, 1993: 241).” It is a grotesque irony that this trashing of both culture and the environment is now adopted by Asian elites as the core objective of modernization, which they take to be consistent with “Asian values.” The green alter-

⁶ In May of 1998 the Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions hosted a conference on “Islam and Ecology.” For an overview of these proceedings and numerous useful abstracts, see www.hds.harvard.edu/cswr/ecology/islam.htm.

native draws upon an alliance between traditionalists, postmaterialists, and marginalized citizens (Adams, 1995: 94-5). So too this paradigm mandates a global/local and North/South alliance for social and environmental security (Renner, 1997: 136-8).

The World Social Summit of 1995 recognized that “poverty, unemployment and social disintegration are closely linked to issues of peace and security” (Renner, 1997: 142). We may add that all of these are ultimately tied to environmental sustainability. There has long been a need for closer working relations between environmental and economic concerns (Lee and Kirkpatrick, 2000: 1); but there has been no smoking gun of modernist bankruptcy to counter the so-called “Asian miracle.” The Asian Crash provided that crucial opportunity to retire modernist and neoliberal development models in favor of a more holistic approach.

By no accident, this postmaterial turn leads us to a more inclusive view of Asian values as well. This is consistent with Anwar Ibrahim’s vision of an Asian Renaissance that sheds the prejudices of East and West alike.⁷ Going beyond the raw economism of so-called “Asian values,” Anwar looks to the diversity of Asian culture as “a powerful counter movement to the tendency toward homogenization, the kind of cultural reductionism that goes along with globalization” (quoted in Milne and Mauzy, 1999: 145). The new Asian model, as the developmental wing of the Asian Renaissance, springs from that same process of resistance. If there is a postmaterial alternative to globalist ideology, this will be one of its major sources. Its very existence puts “globalization on trial” by testifying that another development paradigm is possible.

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⁷ Anwar Ibrahim, Malaysia’s Deputy Prime Minister under Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, was sacked on September 2, 1998 and arrested on September 20. Later he was sentenced to fifteen years in prison on what are clearly bogus charges. During his long engagement with Mahathir’s UMNO Party, Anwar compromised his progressive ideals in the hope (presumably) of advancing reform from within the nation’s power structure. Skeptics believe that his break with Mahathir came when he set about advancing himself by way of a new globalist power structure. His supporters, however, hold that his post-September 1998 reinvention as the icon of Reformasi activism marks the return to his true colors. Before UMNO co-opted him in 1982, he had been the leader of the Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM) reform movement, and his admirers see his July 1997 showdown with Mahathir as a personal renaissance. In any case this last phase of his career is emblematic of the “Asian Renaissance” which takes him (rightly or wrongly) as its standard bearer. Whatever may be said of Anwar himself, the Asian Renaissance is a force to be reckoned with in the 21st century.

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