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Models of Economic Development from a World-Systems Perspective

Moving Beyond Universalism

Edvige Bilotti

The object of this essay is to examine the construction of contemporary models of economic development, particularly the ones that were based on the perception of East Asian successes, to scrutinize their pretensions of universal applicability, and to understand processes of economic change in their complexity and global relatedness through a systemic long-term, large-scale perspective.

In the 1980s, endless articles were written in the Western press about the coming dominance of Japan. This theme died down in the 1990s, but it was replaced in the years after 2000 with a series of similarly constructed arguments in articles about the possible coming dominance of China. Today there “seems little question that all of East Asia has made enormous progress as centers of capital accumulation, advanced technology, and rising productivity” (Wallerstein, 2005: 1) with absolute figures moving upward steadily. Also relative figures, even more significantly, show that the economic strength of United States, *grosso modo* since the 1970s, has declined relative to both East Asia and western Europe (Wallerstein, 2005).¹

The dynamism of East Asia has allowed the shift in the central locus of capital accumulation from West to East. This “unprecedented shift” has reversed the drain of wealth from East and South East Asia to Europe and North America that had been occurring since the eighteenth century.

¹ See especially Arrighi (2007) and his analysis of the intertwining dialectic of U.S. decline and China’s ascent. At the center of Arrighi’s *Adam Smith in Beijing* is the argument that probabilities have increased that we are witnessing the formation of an “East Asian-centered world-market society,” rivaling the historical “capitalist world-economy” (Abbeloos, 2011).

The rise of Japan in the 1960s followed by South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong in the 1970s and then the rapid growth of China after 1980 later accompanied by industrialization spurts in Indonesia, India, Vietnam, Thailand and Malaysia during the 1990s, has altered the center of gravity of capitalist development, although it has not done so smoothly (the East and South-East Asian financial crisis of 1997–1998 saw wealth flow briefly but strongly back towards Wall Street and the European and Japanese banks). Economic hegemony seems to be moving towards some constellation of powers in East Asia. If crises are moments of radical reconfigurations in capitalist development, the fact that the United States is having to deficit finance its way out of its financial difficulties on such a huge scale and that the deficits are largely being covered by those countries with saved surpluses—Japan, China, South Korea, Taiwan and the Gulf states—suggests this may be the moment for such a shift to be consolidated (Harvey, 2009).

In the second edition of *The Long Twentieth Century*, Giovanni Arrighi (2010) theoretically constructs each hegemonic transition (Ibero-Genoese, Dutch, British, U.S.) that has periodically punctuated the evolution of the world-system and speculates about China's possible hegemonic destiny. In the postscript he states that “an East Asian-centered world market society appears today a far more likely outcome of present transformations of the global political economy than it did fifteen years ago. . . . China has emerged as an increasingly credible alternative to US leadership in the US region and beyond” (Arrighi, 2010; see also Gulick, 2011). The East Asian economic transformation which started this shift has given rise to heated discussions and to a proliferation of theories that have tried to explain such success, which appeared extraordinary when compared to the crises of policies of development in other peripheral areas and to the rates of growth which were often negative in the rest of the world.

These theories can be enumerated according to three main threads: neo-liberalistic (or neoliberal), state-centric (or statist) and cultural. The neo-liberalistic interpretation ascribes the Asiatic dynamism to the export-oriented policies based on the “free” market; the state-centric interpretation traces the process of “late development” back to the basic role of the “developmental state”

and of a clever economic bureaucracy whose technical competences decide the most appropriate strategies; the cultural interpretation explains Asia's economic success in terms of the Confucian system of values, entailing an adhesion to social rules and requiring specific forms of devotion and sacrifice.²

Although these paradigms have made undeniable contributions to debates on economic change, each of them tends to extricate, and abstract from a complex historic context, a single "factor" as the main explanatory variable and to reduce the complexity of observed processes to such a variable. Due to their pretensions to universality, they have accordingly proposed a model valid through time and space, restrictively built on a single aspect of the process, and based on the hypothesis that it is always possible to explain a complex reality through the knowledge of some of its elementary elements. This reductionist approach implies that any phenomenon can be dissociated from "the accidents that do not substantially alter its nature and evolution" (Cini, 1994: 25) and, having been reduced to the essential, the representation of the complex phenomenon examined becomes simple and its evolution predictable. The mechanistic reduction of East Asian dynamism to knowledge of isolated parts like export-led industrialization, state action or the common heritage of Confucianism, describes only a part of the historic reality. Considering only a part of the problem, it prevents an adequate understanding of the reality in all its complexity, that instead calls on the analyst to "articulate what is divided and make complex what is simple" (Morin, 2001: 16). These three ahistorical and reductionist models fail because they are constructed on the same methodological and epistemological assumptions of the universalism and generalizability attached to the conclusions of reductionist approaches—that is, on the simplification of complex processes to come up with, as from the end of the nineteenth century, necessary, universal, deterministic and prescriptive laws.

The neo-liberalistic, statist and cultural perspectives are partial and spoilt by a "fallacy of ahistorical disaggregation" (Cumings, 1987: 46). That is, whatever component of the overall process they address, they miss the "structural and short-term unity and integrity" (Arrighi, Ikeda & Irwan, 1993: 49). They are not historically contextualized nor related to those processes flowing

² For a detailed analysis of this literature, see Bilotti (1997, ch. 2).

from larger historical systems of East-Southeast Asian regions and of the capitalist world-economy. But the dismissed analysis of these elements, which are constituent and organically integral parts of the system, is extremely important because the development of East Asia has taken place not only for its intrinsic characteristics but mainly because of its particular location, spatially and temporally, in the modern world-system that made development possible in that geographic area and not elsewhere.

It is the modern world-system understood as a capitalistic world-economy that is a single historical, economic, and social system, constantly changing, but within continually recognizable basic structures, in which many production processes are integrated. It is organized around an axial division of the labor (or core-periphery tension) that allows an incessant accumulation of capital. The integrated processes of production are connected to an inter-state system composed of so-called sovereign states. Both the states and the other social participants (nations, ethnic groups, families) are entities created and recreated by world-system processes in constantly changing forms.

Keeping aloof from a vision, one-sided and de-historicized, of a world reducible to its components, a rethinking of the conventional literature in a world-historical approach is presented in these pages. It shows that: i) the peculiarities of the extraordinary economic dynamism of East Asia challenge the patterns of development of a universal kind like those suggested by neoliberalistic, state-centric, and cultural theoreticians; ii) the experience of Asiatic countries cannot be generalized as it is an exception of upward mobility in the "oligarchic" hierarchy of wealth of the world-economy, which is basically stable, and which has taken place thanks to the unique combination of circumstances to be explained in terms of systemic and regional processes.³ In other words, in accordance with Maria Giovanna Musso, this article demonstrates that

none of the "miracles" of development, not even those that occurred in countries of recent industrialization, like Taiwan or South Korea, can be understood without referring to "long durée" phenomena and to the existence of heterogeneous factors combined together in different proportions.

³ On the debate about the applicability of the East Asia "pattern," see Cline (1982), Ranis (1985), Hsiao (1988), and Tai (1989).

In this way, the “cruciality” of the development factors, of the preliminary conditions for the take off turned out to be the outcome of a simplistic extrapolation. Its analytic and predictive structure ends up as a pattern with auto-referential, abstract value, detached from the factual conditions of the realization of the process. Rather than a confirmation of the exportability of capitalism, the case of the NICs is a confirmation of its “possibility” in certain areas and under certain conditions, in variable formulas both in its composition of the elements and in the timeframe of its affirmation (Musso, 1996: 145, translation—EB).

In other words, the inadequacy, the limits, the intrinsic contradictions of these patterns, call for an alternative reading that casts light on the geopolitical and historical specificities in relation to global and regional, structural, and conjunctural processes.

THE NEOLIBERAL MODEL, PAX AMERICANA, AND THE GEOPOLITICS OF THE COLD WAR

The neoliberal interpretation of East Asian development gained popularity at the end of the 1970s and became especially influential in the 1980s as the countries of the region emerged as prime examples of successful economic development.⁴ In the 1970s and 1980s, as the world-economy was going through a Kondratieff B-phase,⁵ the East Asian region emerged as its most dynamic center and the rate of growth of the GNP per capita has been the fastest in the world for more than three decades.⁶

Neoliberal economists exploited the dichotomy between the successful cases of outward-oriented, “free market-based” development of East Asian countries, and the observed failure of the

⁴ The countries that first adopted this strategy of growth in the mid-1960s were Taiwan and Korea. Their success convinced the World Bank that export-oriented industrialization (EOI) was the wave of the future (Bello, 2009).

⁵ Kondratieff cycles consist of a period of economic growth followed by a period of economic stagnation. On the average, each cycle lasts 40 to 60 years (Kondratieff, 1979). Wallerstein (1984b) defines the period of growth as “A-phase” and the period of contraction as “B-phase;” each is interpreted as an intrinsic and necessary part of the process of capitalist development (Shannon, 1989: 116–19).

⁶ See Arrighi (1994: 340), Hoogvelt (1997: 202), Arrighi, Ikeda & Irwan (1993: 43), Hui (1995: 2).

inward-looking and “state-regimented” import-substitution industrialization (ISI) of Latin American countries (Onis, 1995: 103). The dichotomy appeared to be confirmed by the developments of the 1980s, when Latin America suffered a severe debt crisis while East Asian NICs, despite recession, managed to sustain their phenomenal growth rates. East Asia’s success was then seen as the result of sound policy choices with the implication that export-led growth could be replicated world-wide (Balassa, 1981).

Attributing extraordinary rates of economic growth to an outward-oriented policy driven by market incentives and a strong private sector, the neoliberal theory challenged the structuralist approach mainly on two levels. First, extensive state intervention to promote import-substitution industrialization, they argued, had generated inefficient industries requiring permanent subsidies for their survival with little prospect of achieving competitiveness in world markets. Second, state intervention tended also to encourage “rent seeking,” which diverted entrepreneurial energies from productive activities to lobbying for allocation of government subsidies and protection (Bhagwati, 1978). The ideology of neoliberal globalization was

the very old idea that the governments of the world should get out of the way of large, efficient enterprises in their efforts to prevail in the world market and that all governments should permit these corporations freely to cross every frontier with their goods and their capital. All governments should also minimize all kinds of social welfare. These old ideas had always been cyclically in fashion. In the 1980s, they were proposed as a counterview to the equally old Keynesian views that had been prevailing in most countries around the world (Wallerstein, 2008: 1).

According to neoliberals, the success of the Asian NICs “relied extensively on private markets” (Friedman & Friedman, 1980), and free trade regimes (Little, 1979; 1982), and state intervention has been largely absent (Chen, 1979). Based on these beliefs, the neoliberal model suggested strict implementation of export-oriented policies.⁷

⁷ See World Bank (1983; 1987; 1991; 1993), Balassa (1981), Hughes (1988), Chen (1979) Little (1979; 1982), Friedman (1980).

But such generalization can be misleading if the specific context is not taken into account. In order to comprehend why Asian “successes” were possible in the second half of the twentieth century and not before, one should take into consideration the special conditions shaping the region and created by the Cold War and the U.S. hegemonic project as well as the Korean and Vietnam wars.⁸ After the Army of the People’s Republic of China emancipated continental China from the Japanese and American-backed Nationalist Party of China (*Kuomintang*), the United States was basically left with Japan, a part of the Korean peninsula, and Taiwan as footholds for the containment of Communist expansion in the region. In 1954, Eisenhower emphasized that the loss of Indochina “would force Japan to turn toward China and Manchuria, or towards the Communist areas in order to live” with “incalculable” consequences for the “free world” (Wiley, 1970: 14). Under the Pax Americana, “it was decided early on that, with China ‘lost’ to the other camp, a thoroughly reformed and demilitarized Japan would be the crucial ally in both the cold war and the reorganization of the capitalist regional order in the Western Pacific.” Since then the functional role in America’s scheme of things would be that of junior partner in the region (Aseniero, 1996: 178). In order to have a strong ally in the Pacific, the Americans were forced by circumstances to reconstruct the Japanese economy, as they were doing in western Europe. The United States put in place a “triangular program” linking its economies to that of Japan, and East and Southeast Asian states, whereby its aid to Asian-Pacific states enabled them to import Japanese products. At the same time, these Asian states were given preferential access to the American market. Given Japan’s need to overcome the constraints of its narrow home market and limited raw material supply, the United States helped its industrial reconstruction by linking its economy to those of East and Southeast Asia (McMichael, 1987: 65–66; Halliday & McCormack, 1973: 14–15). The explosive growth of Japanese exports to the wealthy U.S. market “was a critical ingredient in the simultaneous take-off of Japan’s great leap forward in world-scale processes of capital accumulation” (Arrighi, 1994a: 341).

Also the wars in Korea in the early 1950s and Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s provided enormous business opportunities for

⁸ See Hugh Jo (2011) on American Cold War policy and on the unity of his efforts to tackle postwar challenges across the world-system.

Japan to finance rapid expansion in production capacity. When the Korean War broke out, Japan was suffering from a taxing economic situation, and American war-procurement orders lifted its economy out of recession and helped to put its feet on the path of rapid economic growth. Several industries received a much needed boost, especially the nascent automobile industry, which was saved by orders for military trucks. Later in the 1960s, continuous U.S. military engagement in Indo-China benefited the Japanese economy as well as the economies of other East Asian countries.

During the Vietnam War the electronics industry of the Asian NICs reaped the benefits of producing military radios and radars sold to the U.S. army. Moreover, a tourist industry started in Hong Kong for soldiers on leave and the economy in Taiwan was given a boost by the purchase of agricultural and industrial commodities by the United States. As for South Korea, the United States not only equipped its soldiers deployed in Vietnam but also modernized its military through new loans and aid.⁹ “U.S. economic and military aid to these client-states was of such magnitude and importance to their survival and long-term development that it was a veritable Marshall Plan exclusively for two” (Aseniero, 1996: 179). Last but not least, the United States, as the new hegemon of the world-system, pushed, as Great Britain had in the nineteenth century, for liberalism in commercial transactions through the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and bilateral negotiations. World trade expanded faster than world production until the middle of the 1970s (Ikeda, 1996: 43), and East Asian countries benefited tremendously from it. Thus, the special concessions, i.e., access to U.S. markets, procurement during the Korean and Vietnam wars, and U.S. aid (granted primarily to Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan) were instrumental in promoting their economic development (So & Chiu, 1995: 168–96).

In sum, the phenomenal upgrading of the Japanese economy, which became the main factor of the industrial expansion and economic integration of the entire East Asian region, was made possible by the “magnanimous” trade regime of Pax Americana post-1945 (Arrighi, 1994b: 10; Ozawa, 1993: 130–31).

The U.S. policies shaping the East Asian region saw a slight change in the 1960s.

⁹ On the issue of U.S. military assistance to developing countries, see Halliday (1980).

“In the 1950s, the US had promoted the separate integration of Japan and its former colonies within its own networks of trade, power, and patronage. In the 1960s, under the impact of tightening financial constraints, it began promoting their mutual integration in regional trade networks centered on Japan” (Arrighi, 1994a: 340). Even after such changes in policy and the humiliating military defeat which marked the beginning of its hegemonic decline, the United States remained the chief market for the region.

Therefore, the success of export-oriented industrialization, which favored deep changes in the economic structure of East Asian countries, needs to be placed in its historical and geopolitical context. In addition to their underplaying of the conditions that allowed success based on export-oriented policy, the neoclassical economists’ argument falls short of an explanation because the markets of Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, as those of other countries, have been and still remain far from “free.”

The capitalist world-economy has always been characterized by partial free trade, the partial free flow of the factors of production, and by only partially free enterprise. “It is the constant political intrusions into the market, the pervasive monopolies and oligopolies, the frequent restrictions on the flow of the factors of production (labor, commodities and capital), the continuing existence of non-wage labor” that have permitted the “unending accumulation of capital” and its concentration in a few hands and in a few centers (Wallerstein, 1991: 60). As the state-centric approach shows, there existed heavy government interventions that were instrumental for the restructuring of East Asian economies. The state-led developmentalist project succeeded in “catapulting” the economies of some East Asian NICs into the “heartland of the reconstructed global capitalist system” because of their state apparatuses’ relative autonomy from the civil society, and because of a unique post-War configuration of geostrategic forces, as well as their historical legacies (Hoogvelt, 1997: 241).

Thus, to overcome the limits of the “free trade” paradigm, many scholars have stressed the role of the state in catalyzing the Asian dynamism, acting as entrepreneurs and in close cooperation with industrial groups.

THE STATE-CENTRIC MODEL AND THE DYNAMICS OF THE MODERN WORLD-SYSTEM

The state-centric perspective emerged in the 1980s in writings on Asia as a counter critique of the neoclassical reinterpretation of the East Asian experience. It reformulated state-centered theories, under attack by the neoclassical school, reaffirming the validity of the state as a key agent of development. In varying degrees, it constitutes a reiteration of the old principles of the development paradigm dominating the “golden age” of the 1950s and 1960s shaped by the Keynesian consensus, understood as a widespread belief that only the state—and not the market—could start a process of economic development. The statist analysis makes a new methodological attempt to find, through a more empirical analysis inductively building on concrete cases, a more successful combination of policies which enable less advanced countries to move up in the hierarchy of wealth.

This state-centric perspective refutes the neoliberal vision and claims that the economic success in the region and the process of “late development” are largely due to the fundamental role of the state in directing the forces of the internal and global market toward national objectives and adopting sound policies.¹⁰ If on one hand it makes the important contribution of demystifying the neoliberal approach’s negative view of state action, on the other hand, the statist paradigm moves to the opposite extreme by overstating the role of the state and by assuming that state behavior can always be efficacious. Although the “capitalist developmental state” might have played a strategic role in the industrialization of certain East Asian countries, their experience should be analyzed in relation to specific conditions and cannot be easily generalized.

One of the limits of the state model lies in the hidden assumption of intentionality of development as a constant. In fact, it is illusory to assert that it does not account for changes over time and space, as is illusory the hypothesis of reproducibility of development because, as Nicos Mouzelis (1994) has demonstrated, the developmental state in most third world countries constitutes an exception more than the rule. This is because the commitment to development does not always constitute the state’s priority. More-

¹⁰ See Johnson (1982), Amsden (1989), Wade (1990), Haggard & Cheng (1987), Evans, Rueschemeyer & Skocpol (1985).

over, “underdevelopment” is more the norm than “development,” and not all countries can simultaneously move up. In Immanuel Wallerstein’s words, the “key factor to note is that within a capitalist world-economy, *all* states cannot ‘develop’ simultaneously by definition, since the system functions by virtue of having unequal core and peripheral regions” (Wallerstein, 1979: 60–61; emphasis in the original). Singular and unrepeatable experiences of specific countries (such as Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan), on which the model has been constructed, represent “anomalous” cases which cannot be generalized.

Another limitation of the statist paradigm is to treat the state as the unit of analysis and to underestimate the inter-connections among states and within the structure of the inter-state system in which they are organized. As Wallerstein argues, states exist in relation to other states and non-state institutions. In particular, “states impose on each other—not only the strong on the weak, but the strong on the strong—limitations on their modes of political (and therefore military) behavior, and even more strikingly limitations on their ability to affect the law of value underlying capitalism” (Wallerstein, 1980: 748). Rather than taking the state as a self-determining unit of analysis and analyzing it only in terms of “foreign” trade, transborder labor movements, and investment flows, we should consider states as “being constituted and continually reconstituted by the relations between and among them. By shifting the focus of attention to temporal and spatial changes in the patterning of multiple, interconnected relational networks, the trajectories of individual states should be interpreted as integral parts of an ongoing restructuring of a singular, capitalist world-economy” (Palat, 1993: 6).

It must be underlined that the most successful Asian states have proved to be “peculiar” (Arrighi, 1995: 9–11). In different ways they are all “quasi-states.” South Korea is divided from its northern half, Taiwan is separated from mainland China, and Hong Kong and Singapore are city-states. Only Japan is a nation-state even if it was “semisovereign” because of U.S. military protection. “The leading agencies of the formation and expansion of the capitalist world-system appear to have been organizations that are either something less (city-states and quasi-states) or something more (quasi-empire) or something different (business diasporas and other trans-territorial capitalist organizations) than nation-states”

(Arrighi, 1995: 33). Karel van Wolferen has gone even further, arguing that Japan is a “stateless nation” with “elusive” governmental power (1990: 25–49). Even under the Tokugawa and Meiji, she argues, states have neither been strong nor authoritarian. The imperial presence provided a powerful symbol of unity and a source of legitimacy, but not a center of authority and political force. The state apparatus became a site to “negotiate” among different segments of society, including factions within the elite. Contrary to several writers’ conclusion that centralized power and capitalistic success are “causally interrelated” (see especially Amsden, 1989; Gerschenkron, 1962), industrialization in Japan has been achieved through a strategy of “decentralized political control” (Hamilton, 1996: 332–33). In this economic ascent, geopolitical relations and alliances of business and governmental organizations have been crucial variables which cannot be undervalued.

The single-state-based universalist model fails to recognize the regional geopolitical dynamic and the hegemonic and geopolitical role of the United States, that by using huge amounts of aid and giving access to its markets, imposed certain policies to convert Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan to capitalist developmental states. At the same time, the United States negotiated with West European core states to have Japan accepted as a member of the allied front against Communism, and forced Southeast Asian states to restore political and economic relationships with Japan.

Between 1945 and 1950, Japan was under the control of the United States mainly through the Supreme Commander for Allied Powers (SCAP) headed by General Douglas MacArthur. The primary objective of the SCAP was to restructure Japan’s political and economic institutions such that it would not become a threat to American hegemonic rule. The SCAP ordered the Japanese government to implement three major reforms: dissolution of *Zaibatsu* enterprise groups to reduce their monopoly power and to stimulate competitiveness; land reform that gave tenant farmers the ownership of the land they cultivated at a nominal cost; and reform of industrial relations to improve working conditions. These reforms imposed by the United States during its occupation increased the power of the bureaucracy vis-à-vis Japanese politicians and corporate leaders, thus strengthening the state role (So & Chiu, 1995: 162–72).

Also, as Hagen Koo (1993) remarks, it is not possible to understand the formation of the developmental state in South Korea and Taiwan apart from the Japanese colonial legacy. After the cession of Taiwan to Japan according to the Treaty of Shimonoseki in 1895 that ended the Sino-Japanese war and the formal annexation of Korea in 1910 (Korea having been declared a Japanese protectorate after the defeat of Russia in 1905), Japan turned its colonies into markets for its manufacturing industries and suppliers of raw materials. However, Japanese imperialism differed from the Western pattern in several ways. It imposed a repressive government which started major industrialization programs (So & Chiu, 1995: 83–111; Ho, 1978: 32). For example, Taiwan was cultivated by the Japanese as an exporter of agricultural goods to the rest of the empire. As a result, the rural infrastructure was more highly developed. In Korea, along with the imposition of a cruel regime, Tokyo introduced a modern administration, monetary system, railway network, and education (Harris, 1986: 47, 33). Under Japanese influence the Korean state was transformed “from a relatively corrupt and ineffective social institution into a highly authoritarian, penetrating organization, capable of simultaneously controlling and transforming the Korean society” (Kolhi, 1994: 1270). Moreover, “Japan is among the very few imperial powers to have located modern heavy industry in its colonies: steel, hydroelectric facilities in Korea and Manchuria, and automobile production for a time in the latter” (Cumings, 1987: 55–56). It brought industry to the colonies rather than bringing colonial labor to the imperial center.¹¹

As Gary Hamilton notices, many writers observe that East Asian states are authoritarian and suggest that “authoritarianism” can push societies toward economic policy goals.¹² These states “use strong-arm tactics to eliminate internal opposition and do not always obey the constitutionally prescribed procedures for maintaining and transferring power” (1996: 329). However, the existence of an authoritarian and committed state does not necessarily imply rapid economic growth. For instance, in Latin America as well as in East Asia, the state has tended to be authoritarian and actively involved in economic affairs, though with markedly different re-

¹¹ On this point, besides Cumings (1987), see Crane (1982: 55–56) and Ho (1984: 352–55).

¹² On this issue, see Amsden (1989), Gold (1986), Evans (1987), Deyo (1987), and Winckler & Greenhalgh (1988).

sults (Gereffi, 1989). To explain such differences, it is necessary to bring into the analysis the large-scale geopolitical and historical processes of the modern world-system as a relational setting within which national and regional specificities have to be placed. The explanation of East Asian development in terms of the developmental state requires a careful examination of when and how such states emerged, and under what conditions—constraints and possibilities—and how such states have operated since then in relation to the others. The alleged “successful” state policies were often prepared by an agency from without, as in the American case. Indeed, the assumption of independent and sovereign states completely breaks down when the history of East-Southeast Asia is carefully examined.

THE CULTURAL MODEL AND THE ASIAN REGION

The approach which explains East Asian economic success in cultural terms was developed in the 1980s. Earlier versions had already emerged at the end of the 1950s and underscored the role of religion in Japan’s modernization (Bellah, 1957). More recent approaches attempt to extend the impact of culture, rooted largely in Confucianism, on patterns of economic development in other Asian NICs as well.

According to this perspective, East Asian economic success is explained by the Confucian value system, which emphasizes the role of hard work (to satisfy family and community expectations), of loyalty and respect toward authority, of subordination of personal interests to national good, and the importance of education.¹³ Gilbert Rozman uses “the concept of Confucian values to refer to a complex of attitudes and guides to behavior” (1991: 7–16) that, in the first millennium A.D., spread from China throughout the region. This set of attitudes and of “appropriate” rules of conduct for each social category prescribes family patterns, educational practices, and attitudes toward the state that emphasize collective responsibility and hierarchical social control. These norms attempt to achieve “harmonious human relations” within institu-

¹³ See Kahn (1979), Morishima (1982), Oshima (1987), Berger & Hsiao (1988), Pye (1988), Tai (1989), Redding (1990), Rozman (1992), and Tu et al. (1996).

tions (Kahn, 1979: 121) and a harmonious universe based on a hierarchical order.

The limits of such a model immediately become clear because, being all-inclusive, the category of culture seems too broad and lacking in specific articulations. In fact, it does not explain why economic development has taken place only recently in societies where the Confucian tradition has existed for two and half millennia, or why others with the same culture in a close geographical area have not developed similar values conducive to capital accumulation.

Essentializing Confucianism makes it difficult to account for changes over time or within the region. Studies relying on such a view assume that the East Asian region is culturally homogeneous. They do not take into account the fact that Confucianism, while possessing a core of shared values, has been practiced in different societies in different ways (Hartfield, 1989: 107). For example, in Taiwan and Korea, Taoism and Buddhism are as significant as Confucianism (besides a strong Christian minority in South Korea) (Gereffi, 1989), and this has influenced the way in which Confucian values have been practiced. Cultural and religious beliefs and practices have continuously changed according to different local realities and are defined in relation to several factors. Culture does not exist in itself. Rather, it is defined by ethnic groups living together, in relation to each other or in relation, among other things, to the process of state formation and patterns of economic development.

In other words, one of the problems with the cultural perspective, here underlined, is that it tends to assume the existence of a cultural essence presented as comprehensive and unchangeable in time and space. Statements attributing the economic success of East Asia to Confucian values run close to cultural determinism and are often tautological, in that observed facts are re-proposed in a different way with little explanatory power (Lau, 1986). The same is also true of the opposite view, which attributes the lack of economic dynamism to cultural tradition. Many scholars, from Max Weber to the intellectuals involved in the May Fourth Movement, blamed Confucianism for having caused China's backwardness (Wong, 1996). In the classical modernization view, a society that moves into "modernity" has to get rid of its "traditional" cultural elements (So, 1990). But cultural values were considered an

obstacle not only in the 1960s, when this view was more understandable because it reflected its time and the faith of most people in modernization. Even more recently, Chung argued that many of the Confucian traditions once caused the economic stagnation of Korea because the “prevailing social values restricted creativity to the exhortation of official doctrines and discouraged individuals from seeking change or innovation” (1989: 154). As Alex Irwan states, the complexity of a culture and its relations with economic and political configurations are changing all the time, and show or hide some cultural characteristics at different moments so that researchers can always trace cultural values which seem to favor or hamper capital accumulation (1995: 91–92).

The myth of development, referable to Confucian values, is also challenged by the instrumentalization of Confucian ethics by the state and by enterprises to remodel society for their own advantage. In fact, Japanese Confucianism started as a cultural ideology serving the political needs of the Tokugawa Shogunate (*Bakufu*), and it appears to have also been used flexibly for other purposes, including social control of households/families, based on the ageism and sexism typical of Confucianism. As time went on, Japanese Confucianism increasingly diverged from its origin as a politicized cultural ideology and became a collection of social and ethical codes in support of certain kinds of social action (Hwang, 1979: 18). During the period of imperialist mobilization in the nineteenth century, the Japanese state marshaled Confucian values, such as loyalty to the emperor, to legitimate its aggressive policy and solicit the commitment of the ordinary Japanese. In the 1930s government policy deliberately sought to revive Confucian values, which were “sucked into the vortex of domestic and continental ultranationalism in the 1930s as one strand in the ideological justification of Japan’s superior mission” (Collcut, 1991: 152).

In a similar fashion Confucian culture has been adopted in the area of economic activities. Heads of enterprises, from the Meiji period to the present, enjoy Confucian patriarchal authority in their business management and new employees are indoctrinated to regard their workplace as a family in which they behave according to Confucian codes of etiquette. Business culture, based on vertical relationships, expects members to observe the Confucian behavioral codes that emphasize patriarchal authority and differences in age, kinship status, and sex (Kwang-ok, 1996: 221). In Japanese

enterprises corporate paternalism exercises a very effective system of social control over workers and privileges only those employees who stay faithful to the same company.

In asserting the lack of a causal connection between cultural values and economic success, Irwan (1995: 128–133) shows that feelings of trust and business commitment do not necessarily require the existence of traditional ties based on family or specific cultural values. Hamashita (1994, 1997), Irwan (1995), Arrighi, Hamshita and Selden (1996), insisting on the importance of the regional system of East Asia and on its *longue durée* to explain Japan's industrialization, shift the center of their analysis to the legacy of the regional Sinocentric tribute trade system. This system, which was centered in China, connected vast areas and many countries stretching from Northeast, Southeast, and Central Asia for at least a millennium before the nineteenth-century challenge of Western powers. It was characterized by the relationship between China and the "tribute-paying" polities such as Japan, Korea, the Ryukyu Islands, Vietnam, and Laos, among others. This system also involved other "satellite tribute relations with each other and constituted links in a continuous chain" (Hamashita, 1994: 92). The other fundamental feature of the system was its "symbiosis" with a complex network of commercial trade relations. Even when the tributary trade system began to weaken, the interstitial communities continued to constitute a powerful "connector" of the East Asian regional economy (Arrighi, 1995: 6) which, among other factors, favored development.¹⁴

Po-keung Hui (1995) points out the complementarity between the Chinese networks and the Japanese multilayered subcontracting system which allowed the expansion of the "miracle" from its Nippon core to the entire region (Arrighi, Ikeda & Irwan, 1993). The Japanese subcontracting system is constituted by a decentralized structure of productive activities which is "highly stratified into multiple layers" of subcontractors. In this hierarchical structure, under the control of big corporations, have been integrated small family enterprises which constitute the primary unit in the organization of labor. In this sense, Japanese development has followed a trajectory different from the Western one, which demystifies the traditional image of development (Bilotti, 2002: 116–17).

¹⁴ On East Asian regionalism, see Selden (2009) and Beeson (2009).

In contrast to the organization of activities that are vertically integrated, which is typical of American transnational enterprises, competitiveness of Asian enterprises has depended on their capacity to expand regionally to exploit cheap labor through Chinese commercial networks. These networks are based only partially on specific cultural identities and should be analyzed in a broader context to avoid the essentializing trap of the cultural values model.

BEYOND UNIVERSALISM—THE END OF CERTAINTIES

As Gunnar Myrdal maintained, in a complex and interdependent system like the historical social system of the capitalist world-economy, problems should be examined not separately but in their mutual connections. A vision of the world as a complex system forces us to change our way of interpreting what happens around us, to change our way of consistently organizing the concepts at the basis of such a vision in a “connecting plot” that precludes even the most tenuous of future certainties during periods of transition, such as the present (see Hopkins & Wallerstein et al., 1996).

This change requires giving up the idea that there exists a point of view from which we can reach the “truth,” and accepting that no “objective” instruments or methods that are universally valid exist. There is simply no “handbook for the use of the universe.” What we can do is represent and connect phenomena, within an interpretative framework coherent with a way of looking at a changing world and consonant with thinking about its future in our time. We must forego the idea of a reductionist approach. As Marcello Cini writes, “without the light of a holistic point of view that can place the object in its context and project the description of the totality onto the single parts, we risk being left in the dark” (1994: 294). It has to be stressed though that the global approach should not ignore the specificities of local realities; the trick lies in combining the two. That is to say, excluding one of the two ways of interpreting reality “brings two complementary naiveties: the ‘scientists’ who look at the tree and get lost in the forest, and the ‘globalists’ who stay out of the forest and will never be able to tell a fir from a bush” (Cini, 1994: 295). In other words, we need to reject the epistemological antinomy between idiographic particularists (according to whom each historical event is unique and can be understood only in its

concreteness) and nomothetic universalists (for them each social situation can be analyzed in terms of universal laws), and follow instead the *via media* of the analysis of the processes governing specific historical systems constituting a world.

Analysts once believed, at least implicitly, that we were living in a universe of certainties and that it was enough to discover its operating laws or central tendencies to foresee and realize a better future. Instead, we find ourselves in a world that has lost the “paradise” of certainties offered by reductive approaches. We now face a world that requires the wisdom and ability to confront with imagination and creativity the present situation of uncertainty. Today, as we think about the developmental trajectories of, say, China or India, we need to keep in mind the problems analysts inherit along with the neoliberal, statist, and cultural models. Development, if anything, is an aspect of historical capitalism as a whole and our models need to take into consideration creativity and freedom, and their impact at the world level, where the seeds of meaningful possibilities and new opportunities will be found in this time of (indeed secular) depression—of “transition crisis” and transformation.

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