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After Liberalism: What if Confucianism Becomes the Hegemonic Ethic of the Twenty-first Century?

by Richard Madsen

Although the international system is often characterized as fundamentally anarchic—a shifting balance of power among interest-maximizing states—underlying any stable international regime is a framework of international institutions: treaties, agreements, covenants based on a common language of international discourse and on some minimal consensus on norms of legitimate international conduct. This web of international institutions usually purports to be based on universal values. In reality, of course, the values are those central to the societies that dominate the international institutions. Currently, this means that the world’s international institutions are dominated by the West, which is still led by the United States.

This web of institutions is currently called the “community of nations.” The ultimate task of diplomacy is seen to be the integration of wayward societies into this community of nations. As President Clinton said in announcing his decision to normalize relations with Vietnam, “By helping to bring Vietnam into the community of nations, normalization also serves our interest in working for a free and peaceful Vietnam in a stable and peaceful Asia.” Such rhetoric assumes that the central values are “our” values, irrespective of the values of the nation being integrated into the community. Central to the political cultures of Western nations, led by the United States, which currently dominate the international community, is the notion that these nations are founded on contracts between rights-bearing citizens, and that this contractarian way of life is the basis for their moral superiority.

Until recently, the main rhetorical strategy used by weaker, non-Western countries against the West was the accusation of hypocrisy. For instance, third world revolutionaries borrowed the Western language of self-determination and human rights to attack Western colonialism. In doing so, however, they implicitly conceded that values central to a Western sense of moral superiority were indeed universal. More recently, East Asian societies (and Middle Eastern, Islamic societies as well) have begun to attack the very notion of human rights central to Western political thought. China, for example, initially reacted to American attempts to pressure it to correct human rights abuses by denying that such abuses took place. Then, when the evidence of the abuses was too obvious, China took refuge in the prerogatives of national sovereignty. But this rhetorical strategy conceded that China should be on the defensive about failing to live up to internationally accepted norms. Within the past four years, the Chinese government has taken the

offensive. It is trying (with some success) to lead a movement among Asian and Middle Eastern countries to get international institutions to change their very definition of human rights to one that emphasizes the need of societies to maintain social order for the sake of prosperity for all.

For the time being, they have not completely succeeded. At the UN Conference on Human Rights held in Vienna in 1993, representatives from the leading Western nations overcame a bold challenge from a coalition led by China-including Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, and Pakistan-to change the language of the UN resolutions in such a way as to emphasize the subordination of individual civil and political rights to the need for law and order. Beijing's bid to host the Olympics in the year 2000, although strongly supported by all Asian countries and by most of the developing world, was narrowly defeated by a majority of Western countries, partially on the grounds that China was guilty of serious human rights abuses. But as the economic and political power of East Asia increases, we can assume that East Asian countries will be in a position to force changes in the norms about human rights advocated by international institutions. In fact, Japan, China, and the East Asian newly industrializing countries will probably be able to change international norms on a whole host of issues, such as trade and international security.

The East Asian nations by no means constitute a straightforward united front. The region is riven with economic, political, and ideological rivalries-as is the West. But the terms of debate among East Asian societies are somewhat different from those of the West. A shift may be underway as profound as that of the seventeenth century, when the hegemony of Catholic Spain and Austria gave way to that of a Protestant, and eventually increasingly secularized, Northern Europe (which was initially multipolar but later came to be dominated by a hegemonic Britain). Before this happened, the standards for success in acquiring global wealth and power were set by a culture that embodied aristocratic values, employed patrimonial modes of organization to control its empire, utilized mercantilistic policies to ensure its economic dominance, and justified the whole enterprise with a religion and philosophy that sacralized hierarchy and emphasized the primacy of faith over reason.

Afterward, what we now recognize as Western liberal culture gradually came to set the standards for global enterprise. It was a culture that embodied bourgeois values, employed bureaucratic modes of organization, utilized free trade to tie its economic regimes together, and justified its institutions with a religion that emphasized the equality of every individual before God and a philosophy that asserted the primacy of reason as the basis for understanding worldly affairs. Up to the present time, societies that could not accept this culture were on the defensive. Those societies that remained bound to the Spanish tradition lagged economically and politically behind those of Northern Europe and North America, and the world's leading scholars (coming from the leading universities in the hegemonic North) argued that this was at least in part because they lacked the values essential for modernization.

The power of Northern European liberal hegemony is manifest in the extent to which it is taken for granted. It has been casually, self-evidently identified with modernity itself. As

the philosopher George Parkin Grant has written in his *English Speaking Justice* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1985, p. 48), “Members of classes are likely to consider their shared conceptions of political goodness to be self-evident when their rule is not seriously questioned at home, and when they are successfully extending their empires around the world.” What is changing now is this taken-for-grantedness. Western liberalism may well survive, but it is no longer immune from serious self-questioning. Philosophers and social scientists are now compelled to debate its premises and to search for its underlying foundations. To a significant degree, this is occurring because other non-liberal societies, like the East Asian countries, seem to be proving that modernization is *not* identical with Western liberalism. There are other, perhaps even more powerful, ways to become modern, which may indeed challenge the economic and political hegemony of the West.

From Western Liberalism to Asian Communitarianism

To understand what is at stake, let me articulate briefly the principles of Western liberalism and show how these contrast with East Asian principles of political and economic organization and social philosophy.

The first principle is that of *individualism*. The individual is prior to society. Each individual is morally autonomous, free to choose his or her own life goals, and to pursue these in any way the individual wants, so long as he or she does not interfere with another’s pursuit of goals. Societies come into existence only because of voluntary contracts of individuals trying to pursue more effectively their individual goals.

A second assumption is *rationalism*. The individuals who constitute societies are rational agents. The rationality they possess is primarily instrumental—the capacity to calculate the most effective means to achieve their ends. The way to establish public order is to increase, through a secular scientific education, the capacity of each individual for this kind of rational action. That way, each individual will see that he or she needs to follow similar procedures.

The rational individual will recognize the need to organize the pursuit of his or her goals through entering into contracts. Thus *contractualism* is the third principal assumption of liberalism. Stable social relations are formed because individual parties enter into agreements to provide mutual benefits. Aggregated, all of these micro-level contracts constitute the social contract that is the basis of society itself.

Legitimate contracts must be based on voluntary, rational choice—the ability of the individual to choose what is best for him or herself from the widest set of alternatives, without having any alternative arbitrarily excluded. In other words, choice must be based—the fourth principal assumption of liberalism—on *universalistic* rather than *particularistic* criteria.

Government, according to these assumptions, should maximize the capacity of individuals to achieve their private goals. It should provide the basic security necessary for this pursuit, and it should establish the procedures necessary to make the pursuit orderly, but otherwise

it should interfere as little as possible. When governments impose limitations on some of the freedoms of individuals for the sake of maximizing the overall possible freedom, these choices must be legitimated through democratic procedures, which are based on the aggregation of individuals' choices through voting.

These are the principles that govern relations between individuals and society in a liberal nation state. Scholars and statesmen working within the liberal tradition assume that the path to a peaceful and just global community is an expansion of these principles to the world order: the world system is made up of a set of nation states that are like individuals writ large, sovereign and self-determining. These nations enter into contractual relations with one another based on their perception of self-interest. A healthy world economy depends on the capacity of such nations to trade freely among each other in an unfettered open market. A healthy world political system entails the ability of such nations to make free contractual agreements—"open covenants, openly arrived at." Norms governing international trade and international security should ideally be established by an international deliberating body like the United Nations. (Realistically, they are established and backed up by the power and for the interests of the most powerful nations.)

These liberal assumptions are beginning to be called into question within the West because they correspond less and less to the experience of people anywhere in the modern world. As self-doubt deepens, East Asian societies are providing alternative models of the successful pursuit of wealth and power—models that challenge and may supplant those of the faltering West. For all of their differences, people in East Asia seem to share certain half-articulated, taken-for-granted general assumptions about how to pursue a good life, how the individual relates to society, and how societies should pursue wealth and power. The first of these assumptions is that society is *prior to the individual*—that individuals cannot have any substantial identity apart from social relationships, especially familial but also (broadly conceived) political relationships. Although there would be enormous controversy over what this means in practice, Asians share a vaguely defined sense that the interests of society as a whole can, and sometimes should, take precedence over individuals' private interests.

A second assumption has to do with the nature of *reason*. The Confucian tradition stresses the rationality of humans, but it lays great emphasis on a moral rationality—not technical reason but the kind of reason that enables one to understand the rightness of the moral duties connected with one's role in society. In societies as different as Japan, China, and Malaysia, it is assumed that education should inculcate moral values rather than simply teach techniques. Although the specific content of those values may differ from society to society, it is assumed that the best and the brightest graduates of the educational system should be generalists with a firm grasp of the responsibilities that go with leadership rather than specialized technical experts.

Social relationships, it is widely assumed, are ultimately based not simply on voluntary contracts between individuals, but upon *responsibilities* toward the society as a whole. People need to share not merely common procedures to pursue their own private self-fulfillment, but common public goals, and a common commitment to the social

relationships that anchor their individual identities. It is one of the government's more important responsibilities to create this consensus. The state is a paternalistic educator, not just a neutral referee. The government-as long as it is doing its job correctly and has not become corrupt-is a guardian of a moral order that makes citizenship possible.

Since East Asian societies have not had the capacity to play a truly global role for most of this century, it is less clear how Asian scholars and diplomats will translate the above principles for a good national society into global norms for international conduct. The attempt by China to mobilize other East Asian nations in an effort to change international human rights standards gives one indication. As their wealth and power increases, Asian regimes will try to insist that individual rights are less important than the right of whole societies to maintain order as the foundation for economic prosperity. Like Kishore Mahbubani, Singapore's Deputy Secretary of Foreign Affairs, they may argue that the West is foolishly destroying the foundations of its wealth and prosperity because of its obsession with "the idea of individual freedom."

Western social theory predicts that authoritarian societies will be less productive than ones that emphasize individual freedoms, because modern technologies require the kind of creativity and initiative that can only flourish in a free society. If authoritarian Asian societies continue their advances in productivity, they may force the theorists to modify their ideas. They may also push Western societies to modify the bases of their social contracts. Asian societies keep wages relatively low by suppressing the capacity of workers to organize into independent labor unions. They provide limited social welfare benefits, expecting intact, mutually loyal families to take care of members in need. Thus labor costs are low in comparison with most Western countries. In the name of keeping pace with "international competition," Western countries like the United States are breaking the power of labor unions, dismantling much of their welfare states, and "getting tough on crime" by suppressing previously accepted liberties. They are beginning to let Asian forms of social organization set the world standard for labor practices.

Besides changing the international moral balance between rights and responsibilities, and individual and society, the Asian societies are shifting the balance between particularism and universalism. Businesses award contracts not simply on the basis of universalistic, open competitive bidding, but because of long-standing particularistic relationships, sometimes based on near or distant kinship. Consumers, too, often base their buying decisions on long-standing loyalty, rather than simply on price. The result is the myriad of informal barriers to open trade that so upsets American business interests. The Japanese, especially, are weaving these patterns into regional trading blocs.

If the United States and Western Europe were to become largely shut out of this latter day version of a "Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere," they might have to concentrate their economic energies in their own regions, thus building on an expanded NAFTA in the Americas and the EEU in Europe. Expectations about what constitutes a good international economic system would change from a single open market to a regionalized world economy.

Changes in this economic “substructure” might generate changes in cultural-ideological superstructure. Economists might start to recast theories that assume that economic life everywhere follows a single set of universal laws. They might “discover” more contextualized economic principles. This would accelerate the move toward various forms of cultural relativism that has already begun in the other social sciences. The centrality of universalistic, instrumental rationality in education might change, as the philosophy of Western scientific education no longer set the standard for modern education throughout the world.

Cultural Consequences for the West

If the economic and then political hegemony of the East Asian region led within the next fifty years to some such changes in the norms and standards that governed global institutions, what would be the cultural consequences for Western societies? The United States would be the most affected, because for the second half of the twentieth century it accepted the burden of being the civilizational leader, the “powerhouse of the ideals of Freedom and Justice.” Undoubtedly there would be profound loss of confidence and the cacophonous, confused social debate of societies faced by unprecedented social situations. For precedents, we would have to look outside the modern West to the experience of Asian or Middle Eastern societies suddenly faced with the intrusion of the West in the nineteenth century-or perhaps to the experience of Spain when hegemony shifted to northern Europe in the seventeenth century.

Out of the confusion would emerge several kinds of reactions. Initially, perhaps, the most pervasive reaction might be a kind of fundamentalism. One part of the Spanish response to its loss of hegemony was the institutionalization of a rigid, dogmatic Counter-Reformation Catholicism. Similarly, in China in the 1870s there was a movement on the part of elites to return to the fundamentals of Confucianism.

Perhaps in the West we are seeing the beginnings of a similar reaction in religious fundamentalism and also what one might call political fundamentalism-for instance, the militia movement in the United States, with its celebration of an idealized eighteenth-century individualistic republicanism, its xenophobia and potentially its militarism. Such movements might become even more prevalent as the gnawing realization set in that American political culture really had lost the ability to set the standards for the rest of the world. As the historical record suggests, this kind of fundamentalism eventually is self-defeating. It leaves the society that embraces it isolated from the most dynamic sources of wealth and power in the world and causes it to lag further and further behind-which may even lead to economic crisis or military defeat.

Another kind of reaction is abject imitation of the new hegemonic culture. One sees signs of this in the United States not only in superficial adaptations of organizational methods, such as “quality circles” in industry, but also in calls to dismantle the welfare state, reduce ethnic diversity, and weaken organized labor. The problem with abject imitation is that it usually is self-defeating too, because the imitating society does not have the underlying habits that can make the foreign forms work. Thus, when countries in Latin America that

are heirs to the Spanish colonial heritage have tried to adopt Anglo-American forms of government and economic organization, they have often continued to lag behind their powerful neighbor to the north. They simply cannot make use of the foreign organizational forms as well as the foreigners can. Thus, I would predict that if the United States tried to adopt the authoritarian forms of labor organization that work so well in Japan or Singapore, the result would increase confusion and conflict in American society rather than increasing productivity.

A final kind of reaction would be one of synthesis: an updating of one's cultural norms that takes account of insights learned from others as well as the deepest meaning of one's own culture. Thus, in the 1960s, in Spain and the other Catholic countries of Europe, the "aggiornamento" brought about by the Second Vatican Council enabled the Catholic Church to cast off some of the trappings of Counter-Reformation dogmatism. In Spain, this cultural transformation was a key factor in what Victor Perez-Diaz has called *The Return of Civil Society: The Emergence of Democratic Spain* (Harvard University Press, 1993). Some cultures take longer than others to carry out these updates. Japan did so relatively quickly in the Meiji restoration of the 1860s. Other Asian societies have taken much longer. Usually, the resort to this kind of updating takes place only after fundamentalism and abject imitation have failed—300 years in the case of Spain. One would hope that liberal Western democracies might reinvent themselves somewhat more quickly.

RICHARD MADSEN is professor of sociology at the University of California, San Diego, and one of the United States's best known specialists on modern Chinese society. Madsen's work has been distinguished by his interest in what he calls "moral anthropology." He is coauthor, together with Robert Bellah, William Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven Tipton, of the award-winning book *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in America* (University of California Press, 1985). Among his other works are *Chen Village* (coauthored with Anita Chan and Jonathan Unger) (University of California Press, 1984), *Morality and Power in a Chinese Village* (University of California Press, 1984), and *China and the American Dream: A Moral Inquiry* (University of California Press, 1995).
