Civil Society, Religious Affiliation and Political Participation in East Asia

Alternative sources of legitimacy, such as the ones encompassed in civil society or religion, (re-) appear and interact with classical political mechanisms in local political fields, while democracies across the world face challenges regarding representation. The growing influence of civil society in the public sphere is widely held in positive regard, while religions provoke defiant reactions, especially when Islam is at stake. The ICAS3 panel this article means to introduce builds upon examples drawn from across East Asia to show that civil society is not a 'natural' way through which contemporary societies can eventually voice peaceful political discontent, nor is religion a univocal departure from politics. The relationship between civil or religious organizations and politics is a multi-faceted one and has not been given enough attention in the analyses of the East Asian context, which often focuses on economic modernization or the developmental state.

By Juliëtte Van Wassenhove

Today, civil society is quite a fashionable notion, as attested by its wide resurgence in the academic and political worlds since the dismantlement of the communist block.[1] Bi- and multilateral agencies, never tired of emphasizing civil society's discourse and organizations part in the 1980s-1990s political transitions, have turned civil society into a tool for democracy assistance programmes. Civil society has become a box to tick on the bureaucratic checklist of the righteous path to development. This evolution is noticeable in the growing discourse on civil society, which tends to be both normative and depoliticized – casting non-governmental organizations, and associations as the incarnation of the virtuous populace.[2]

Analyses of religion have been undergoing an opposite evolution. For decades social sciences held that religious practice mainly provided for social integration and harmony. While it may have made a modest contribution to consensus building and to supplying meaning and identity for individuals, it surely had no salient political implications. Religion's part was thus played down in the study of political configurations as a long-lasting consequence of the secularization theory and of functionalist structuralism.[3] The disruptive and highly political potential of religious systems of meaning and organizations was thus underestimated. Today however, religions are no longer regarded as neutral with respect to politics. This recent backlash is due to the importance of religious input in democratization processes particularly in Eastern Europe, but also in the increasing prominence of Islamic political projects, from the 1979 Iranian Revolution onwards. The somewhat excessive attention for Islam has concealed what other religions, including non-revealed, pantheistic ones, can contribute to our understanding of contemporary changes in the relationship between society, politics, and religion.

There is thus a theoretical need to further explore political implications of the increasing normativization of the notions of civil society and religion, especially outside the European and American cradle of modernity. The upcoming panel is unique in the way that it presents papers by young researchers (completing or having just completed their PhDs) working on these problems in East Asian situations. The panellists all shared the experience that the obverse point our fields imposed on us was the renegotiation of political participation, phrased in terms of civil society or religious affiliation.

In China for instance, state-society relations can be seen historically as the relationship between the official state religion and local cult associations – a relationship characterized by cooptation, mutual penetration, and repression of 'heterodox' cults. This model has been challenged with the relative opening of the public space and economic transformation. The possibility of speaking of a civil society in the Chinese situation will be debated in two papers, one paper assessing the extent to which political power and social organization in China remains defined in religious terms; the other documenting the growing public involvement among entrepreneurs, based on the case of the Zhejiang province.

Simultaneously, Cambodian Buddhism is being reinvented and used as a form of cultural capital for the re-creation of community and politics, after the violence of the Khmer Rouge era. In the Malay Muslim world, religion also appears instrumental in voicing discontent as well as shared ideals, in the context of claims for Reformasi (reform) in Malaysia and Indonesia. Though different both in their movements' sociology and projects, Malaysian and Indonesian Islamists are concerned with countering and/or co-opting concepts such as 'democracy', 'human rights' or 'civil society', by Islamizing them. As they increasingly influence the public debate, Malay Islamists sketch out cross-border discursive genealogies and a regional theory of Islamic political participation, as will be discussed in the fourth and fifth contributions. ❮

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1 Extensively documented by Andrew Arato and Jean L. Cohen, *Civil Society and Political Theory*, Cambridge (Mass.), London: MIT Press (Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought) (1992).
2 Thomas Carothers and Marina Ottaway (ed.), *Funding Virtue. Civil Society and Democracy Promotion*, Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (2000).
3 Marcel Gauchet, *Le Désenchantement du monde. Une histoire politique de la religion*, Paris: Gallimard (NRF) (1985); Talcott Parsons, *The Social System*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul (1951).

Public Health Care Strategies and Socio-Genetic Marginalization

The increased public and political concern about developments of new genetic technologies has led to an increased scrutiny of the role played by medical experts and public health authorities in their introduction into the health care system. Public discussion, recommendations of professional organizations, legislation, and reliable technological assessment are relied upon to prevent any adverse effects on society. It is also important to organize discussions on an international level. The aim of this ICAS3 panel, confined to developments in China, Japan, India, and Taiwan, is to make a contribution to that effect.

By Margaret Sleeboom

The point of departure is the concept of socio-genetic marginalization in Asia. It draws attention to the consequences of the practice of relating the social to the (assumed) genetic make-up of people, even when the relevance of such a connection is doubtful. After all, it is from the cultural (including the spiritual), socio-economic, and political context that we derive the sources that endow our interpretations of genetic information with meaning. The concept of socio-genetic marginalization, first of all, refers to the isolation of social groups and individuals as a consequence of discrimination on the basis of genetic information. With this in mind, my paper discusses the vulnerable position of ethnic groups in China, India, and Taiwan, when facing decisions about revealing their genetic identity by contributing genetic samples to researchers, often under pressure or in exchange for promises of health care. Socio-genetic marginalization also refers to the 'special' position of socio-genetic risk groups that have to deal with the psychological burden of the knowledge, feelings of social ineptitude, and a sense of financial uncertainty. Drawing on a large multi-sited ethnographic research project, exploring infertility and medically-assisted conception in India's five major cities, Aditya Bharadwai (Cardiff University, Wales) examines how a biological inability to reproduce not only disrupts reprogenetic futures of the infertile but also results in bio-social marginalization. Finally, the socio-genetic marginalization also indicates forms of socio-economic marginalization when, for instance, health care becomes too costly for the socio-economically disadvantaged.

The development of priorities and practices of screening and testing for congenital diseases in different societies varies. A central question is, what are the health care needs and interests of different population groups with regards to genetic testing, and how are they reflected in health care policies? The health care strategies, priorities, and socio-psychological (de-)merits, and the economic rationale of preventive screening, will be central issues of debate. In this context, Jyotsna Gupta (Leiden University Medical Centre, the Netherlands) questions the practice in India of diverting vast sums of public sector health funds to studying the burden of genetic disease. A major part of perinatal morbidity and mortality, as well as infant mortality, may be ascribed to undernourishment and malnutrition of both mother and child, and a lack of antenatal and postnatal services. Her paper offers ideas for alternative health care strategies that lie in the sphere of public policy-making and education.

The public debate on genomics must go beyond the mere dissemination of knowledge. Some suggestions on how to organize the debate seem to be unworkable in the short-term. Thus, we cannot expect to realize the ideals of public empowerment, client competency, and democratic decision-making concerning the development and application of new genetic technologies in time to be effective, especially not on a global scale. To illustrate this point, Jing-Bao Nie (University of Otago, New Zealand) discusses the Chinese eugenics project, which relies on ideologies such as social Darwinism, biological determinism, statism, and scientism for its execution, and is reductionist in addressing complex social problems. Nie considers the possible damaging effects of these ideologies, such as the further marginalization of the vulnerable, genetic victimization of the innocent, and the encouragement of authoritarian state policies and technocracy.

To start with, a more feasible target would be to aim at a better understanding of the consideration of issues amongst different interest groups. In this spirit, Tsai Duujian (National Yang Ming University, Taiwan) explores the interactions between these groups, as well as the interaction between such groups and the Taiwanese Government. He proposes a concept of participatory democracy that may avoid potential conflicts between technological development and humanistic interest, and could coordinate industry, medical societies, and patient groups in working collectively to shape genomic policy. Kaori Muto's paper (Shinshu University, Japan) explores the concept of genetic citizenship in her study of Japanese families with Huntington's Disease. The notion of genetic citizenship will gain importance, as genomics will be increasingly socialized through developments in molecular epidemiology. This will require new strategies of public health care. ❮

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