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**DOES THE WEST NEED THE EAST?**

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## DOES THE WEST NEED THE EAST?

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Does the West need the East? The question presumes a certain problem with Western thinking and acting, a deprivation of sort that perhaps the East can satisfy. That many westerners are turning to the East does not seem to be simply a fascination for something exotic, something different, because this fascination is coupled with a serious attempt to come to understand the East that entails on the part of the westerner a humility, a "dying to one's self." What is there in the traditional eastern cultures that is valuable to the West? But can the East of today which is more and more westernized really provide the needs of the West? Or is it not the case that what is happening in the East today precisely manifests the problematic of the West? Would this not suggest perhaps a common human dilemma that needs the integration of both perspectives?

This paper attempts to answer these questions with the aid of Jurgen Habermas's critical theory. Although Habermas addresses his sociological philosophy to western societies, his interpretation of Max Weber's thought seems to be applicable to eastern societies as well.

### Western Rationality

It is often said that science arose from the West and not from the East. This is not to say that the East did not have any discoveries in science. Long before the West, China had already

invented the mariner's compass, the gunpowder, vaccination, and the taximeter, but the Chinese did not develop these. And it was not until the nineteenth century that a marked difference in technological advancement is evident between the West and the East. Science and technology are not the monopoly of the West nor should the term "scientific" be limited simply to Western standards, for how do we account for the recent interest in Chinese and Indian traditional medicine (e.g. acupuncture, yoga)? The research into these areas may yield results that prove a different standard for being scientific. But it is only in the West that science had a development, an evolution, whereas in the East science had only to repeat itself. Western culture then is predominantly scientific, but what is it in the western mind that propels it for scientific and technological development?

Western cultures and societies admit of several paradigms of nature: the cosmological from the Greek introduction of physis or physical nature; the theological from the Latin notion of natura or nature; the systemic-mechanistic from the French la nature or the system of nature as a machine; and the systemic-organic from the German die Natur or the system of nature as an organism.

The Greeks looked at nature as an ordered unfolding whole, a cosmos, that can therefore be revealed to reason as logos and to which Aristotle gave the name of physis. Christian thought, though rooted in the Hebrew tradition, adapted this paradigm of the Greeks together with their sense of the limited and proportional but introduced the notion of finite. Nature was finite, created out of nothing by an infinite God. To conceive

of nature as finite and therefore dependent on a creator, however, is also to posit the immanence of God in it, a sense of mystery and depth. Man as a creature par excellence of God created in His image and likeness is called upon to probe into the depths of nature with his reason. The third paradigm continued this effort of the theological; nature can best be probed into by conceiving it as machine, a whole made up of parts that can be measured mathematically. The rise of the biological sciences later made the systemic-mechanistic model inadequate, and so a second version tried to look at nature as an organism that includes all forms of life.

What can be gleaned from the above brief description of the four paradigms of nature in Western thought is an attitude towards nature that is both theoretical and systematic. The theoretical attitude looks at nature from a distance, an object apart from man. Man though himself a part of nature can by his rationality transcend nature to conceptualize and analyze it. The systematic attitude views nature as an ordered whole made up of parts, each part being related to the whole and to each other. Both theoretical and systematic point to a kind of rationality that differentiates, analyzes in terms of a logic that is linear, that is to say, in progressive steps, each one building upon the previous one.

Western science is built upon this kind of rationality, and it is not surprising that from a theoretical and systematic attitude a technological attitude follows. The technological attitude attempts to master nature, to grasp its inner workings so as to

control and utilize it for man's ends. Nature is subject to the apprehension and taming by man.

What can be seen in western culture is thus the development of science into technology. The Greek classical constellation of theoria, praxis, techne has been transformed into a concept of theory to ground scientific discoveries and a notion of practical that has meant the technical. Theory meant for the Greeks the contemplation of immutable objects of the episteme, and practical meant the ethical and political action in the life of the polis. The technical was reserved for the crafts that must conformed to the natural. Now theory is reduced to scientific theory and praxis to the technical. Habermas attributes this reduction to the rise of positivism and to the continual adherence to the Enlightenment's emphasis on reason.<sup>2</sup> Positivism insists on the separation of facts and values; an objective study of natural and social phenomena must avoid value considerations. This is in line with the Enlightenment's abhorrence of ignorance, dogmatism and superstition.

What has happened in western societies is the absolutization<sup>3</sup> and ideologization of the scientific technological rationality. Science and technology have assumed the status of absolute values, dominating and repressing the other spheres of life. This phenomenon can best be understood if placed in the framework of Habermas's notion of the basic three human interests--the technical, the practical,<sup>4</sup> and the emancipatory.

The technical interest refers to man's drive for instrumental action to master and control nature. Instrumental action here is purposive-rational, a means-end rationality whose

aim is the exploitation of the world. The empirical-analytical sciences correspond to this interest.

The practical interest refers to man's symbolic interaction in cultural tradition(s), to man's necessity for interpersonal communication, whether horizontally, among members of a particular culture or society, or vertically between societal groups of different cultures. While technical interest is born from the necessity of man to work in order to survive in a material world, practical or communicative interest answers an equally important need to relate intersubjectively in ordinary language communication. Interaction here is governed by binding consensual norms, based on mutual understanding of intentions and secured by general recognition of obligation. The historical-hermeneutic sciences or social sciences correspond to this interest.

The emancipatory interest criticizes the ideological tendencies of the first two interests, and as such the sciences that correspond to this sphere are the critical sciences, philosophy and psychoanalysis. Ideology here is understood in its negative sense, as a distortion of reality and its consequent dogmatism and domination. Emancipatory interest seeks to unmask the forces of domination, dogmatism, and repression lying behind the reproduction of labor and the institutionally-secured forms of general and public communication. It wants to break the barriers to open communication among social groups and persons, raising self-consciousness to the level of critique. A society must first interpret what it considers as life, and this must likewise be evaluated in accordance with the ideas of the good

life or the criterion of what a society intends for itself as the good life. This entails an open communication, for the notion of the ideal is not something fixed nor conventional but based on the symbolic interaction (practical interest) and material exchange with nature (technical interest).<sup>5</sup>

Both technical and practical interests can have ideological tendencies, "a tendency to submit reality to dreams," to develop an escapist isolationism which is virtually schizophrenic, a distortion into an inverted image, a systematic domination.<sup>6</sup> This is because labor (technical interest) and language (practical interest) are very much intertwined with power.

But for Habermas, the dominant ideology of our time in the West is the ideology of science and technology. Technology as the "scientifically rationalized control of objectified processes"<sup>7</sup> has indeed satisfied the material needs of society, but it has also given rise to what Gabriel Marcel calls "technocracy". In technocracy, the person is reduced to an efficient mechanical tool, if not a number or a stage of production. Relationships of man and fellowman cease to be interpersonal and become functional; one is identified and objectified by his function in society. Instead of bringing human fulfilment, work becomes monotonous and depersonalizes man. Means become ends in themselves: while the industrial system must become, remain functional, and be further enhanced, the individual person is subjected to the enormous apparatus of production and distribution. The subsystem of instrumental action has now become a system itself, entering and dominating the sphere of communicative action such that the person is used

and manipulated to keep the technological system going. This repression of the person can disappear from the consciousness of the populace by a kind of legitimation of the domination--"the constantly increasing production of nature which keeps individuals...living in increasing comfort." <sup>8</sup> The domination of nature by technology has led to the domination of man by man, of man by nature as can be shown in the ecological ills such as pollution and the imbalances of nature.

Even the ideological tendency of the practical sphere can be the result of the domination of technology on all spheres of culture. Here, the state legitimates itself on the basis of its management in material reproduction, resorting to a diffused mass loyalty by keeping the citizens oriented to career, leisure, and consumption. A formal democracy is instituted in the form of periodic plebiscites to give a semblance of legitimacy. In the international scene, the ideological tendency of this sphere takes the form of neo-colonialism, the dominant culture maintaining its influence on a former colony on the basis of its own technical economic interests. The creation of man has become his own god.

This totalization and ideologization of scientific technological rationality in the West has resulted in a crisis of sort expressed in various terms by many western philosophers: "alienation," "loss of meaning," "forgetfulness of being," "the death of God," etc. Given this crisis of western culture, what can the East have to offer?



## Eastern Traditional Values

Although the East is gifted with a variety of cultures, we can acknowledge some common aspects and tendencies that may be referred to as values if only to emphasize their embeddedness in oriental cultures before the advent of western rationalism.

First is the value of integration and cohesion versus differentiation and cleavage. The orientals value a holistic, total attitude towards anything. In the East, politics, economics, and religion are one. Thinking, feeling, speaking, and doing are one and ought to be integrated. This value for the holistic accounts for the often repeated characteristic of the Asian mind as intuitive and synthetic. In intuitive thinking, the subject approaches the object as a totality and has an immediate grasp of the object; the subject and the object are one.

It is of no surprise then that Lily Abegg prefers the term "envelopment" rather than "development" when speaking of the Asian soul:

Thought based on envelopment first sees the whole, and the parts only subsequently find their place in this whole. In this kind of thinking every part belonging to the whole, the whole being already comprehended, must quite automatically have its place or its function in it. It is not necessary to analyze the details, for they are indeed already seen in their interrelationship. The parts are allocated their respective places without analysis. It is thought of a synthetic kind.

The second value is the value of the natural and the organic, similar to what Weber's calls the cosmocentric attitude that characterizes the oriental religions. Nature for the oriental has its own rhythm of birth, growth and decay, where each has its own time, giving rise to the transitory nature of things. Nature as all-encompassing is held sacred and not to be subjugated. This regard for the natural and organic accounts for the cyclic motion of time for the orientals, giving the impression of an eternal rotation of past, present and future. In behavior, punctuality is not to be expected of a traditional Asian for he would work or be at leisure depending on what is natural.<sup>11</sup> With regard to issues, the oriental can roughly tell you what the issue is but he rarely knows exactly what it is.

True to the feeling for the whole and the respect for the natural and organic, the oriental is patient, tolerant and humble. Patience, tolerance, and humility are values that pertain to seeing an affair or event from all sides, and seeing it as part of the process of nature, biding one's time, letting things ride.<sup>12</sup>

Death and life are viewed as natural and inevitable, but what is of utmost importance is that they be impregnated with meaning. There must be something or someone that one lives and dies for. The orientals have always concerned themselves with problems of meaning rather than facts and reasoning.

This brings us to the third value: the concern and quest for human perfection, a humanism of a sort distinct from the Renaissance humanism. The striving for human perfection is

readily seen in the Confucian ideal of the ch'un tze or the gentleman, in the Taoist quest for inner tranquility, in the Buddhist aspiration for buddahood, the cessation of desires, in the Hindu's mastery of oneself. Different ways lead to the same destination: the attainment of maturity of the personality in an organic process, unforced but natural.<sup>13</sup> A sign of this maturity is a genuine simplicity of lifestyle, a life "from the centre," unconstrained and unsullied by passion.<sup>14</sup> What matters is not so much the development of abilities and skills--although the perfection of these can help in the development of the personality and society--but the unfolding of the self, the purity of the soul. Work and skills count "only as an emanation of personality."<sup>15</sup> To work hard for a thing in such a manner as to neglect the maturing of self is ridiculous and immoral. A good painter or carpenter is good because he is at the same time a harmonious personality.

Much of oriental learning is therefore a striving after perfection, not originality--a lot of imitation of previous models, the repetition and reliving of great thoughts. The most important source of instruction for the oriental is man, not the textbook, and the teacher or "sensei" (in Chinese, literally meaning "one born earlier") provides the latest link between the old master and the pupil.<sup>16</sup>

This oriental humanism, however, is quite different from the humanism of the Renaissance, for it is at the core communitarian. The value of the community runs through most, if not all, oriental cultures. Man is never isolated but forms a community with the living and the dead. For the Asian, "the true concept

of human greatness does not lie in individual distinction, but in adapting oneself to the community, and in such a capacity as to realize the most perfect form of such a community.<sup>17</sup> The communitarian spirit gives rise to a sense of interdependence. Freedom is seen in the light of responsibility and expectation.

Fourth, the oriental emphasis on the family is the origin and symbol of this interdependence. The family is the source of security and, at the same time, forms an organic unity of the past, present, and future. The network of relationships in the family symbolizes the spirit of interdependence in the larger society, providing the individual member a sense of security. Moreover, it is not simply a means for the biological perpetuation of the human species but the seat of creative transmission of what is held as valuable and normative. This transmission of familial and societal values provides the oriental with a sense of immortality.

In this regard, the legal has always played a minor or secondary role in oriental behavior. What is more influential is the moral code emanating from the authoritative power of the head of the family. There is no power per se, and laws are abstract unless they spring from the concrete figure of the authority. The head of the family makes the decisions but he is accustomed to summon the family council, including the women.<sup>18</sup> An oriental "will scarcely ever rely exclusively on his own judgment when making an important decision; he will always consult his family and his friends beforehand."<sup>19</sup>

This brings us to the fifth value: the spirit of

authoritative democracy. The respect for authority is strong in the Asian spirit; the politeness accorded to the superior verges on the ritual and the ordinary. Confucius, for instance, compares the ruler to the wind and the populace to the grass that follows wherever the wind blows. But this authoritarianism is coupled with an eastern democratic sense. Authority is a trust given to him who is in power so he can bestow benefit upon the community. Democracy understood in the oriental sense is not formal but material: it is based on the dignity of the other, no matter what his position in society may be. Man is equal to his fellowman not because of what he has but because of what he is. When a ruler ceases to be concerned with the common good, he loses the mandate of Heaven, which is tantamount to the mandate of the people. The history of ancient China is replete with revolutions, but seldom has it been a change of a type of government as a change of despotic rulers.

All the above oriental values can be summed up in the spirit of undifferentiating harmony. The oriental ideal of sagehood is the ideal of being-at-one with the world, with nature, fellowman and God. It is then not surprising that in the East religion has played the civilizing factor of humanity, for such is the original meaning and task of religion--to bind, to integrate oneself with what transcends the self, be it nature, the family, community or society, or the Absolute.

Could this not perhaps what the West is looking for in the East? An inner coherence in a culture where "the interesting has replaced the lasting, the controversial the true, the assertive the substantial?"

But in the process of modernization and westernization of the East, has not rationalization affected and absorbed these traditional oriental values?

### The Encounter of Rationalism and Eastern Cultures

Habermas agrees with Max Weber that the rationality that defines modernity is a purposive or means-ends rationality whose aim is the mastery of the world. The progress of western societies is the ascendancy of purposive rationality, of technique and calculation, of organization and administration, in the final analysis, of the triumph of bureacracy.<sup>21</sup> Purposive rationality does dissolve traditional superstitions, prejudices and errors but does not really replace traditional worldviews with anything that could fulfill the functions of giving meaning and unity to life. Weber then did not believe modernization could ever come to oriental societies because of their deeply embedded religious worldviews.

We know now that Weber's prediction of the impossibility of the modernization of eastern societies is proven wrong. But from the reformulation of Habermas, he could have been right in another sense--the rationalization of oriental societies is impossible without it also being ideological. By "ideological" we mean here a systematic domination and repression verging on the pathological, a distortion of reality, resulting in escapism and alienation. We see this happening in terms of the five oriental values mentioned above.

The total holistic attitude of the lifeworld of oriental societies is gradually disintegrating, becoming fragmentary and pluralistic. Increasingly, the economic and political systems, have become so complex that they have penetrated deeper into the communicative sphere of the life-world, subordinating it to systemic imperatives, creating roles of employee and consumer, citizen and client of the state. The moral-practical elements of the lifeworld are driven out of the private and public spheres, and "everyday life is increasingly "monetarized" and "bureaucratized."<sup>22</sup> This has also led to a kind of cultural impoverishment: the professionalization demanded of modernization has separated the development of cultures from the communicative structures of everyday life. Traditional art is relegated to the museum and the theatre on special occasions, resulting in the drying up of nature-like traditions. Thus a cleavage exists between the processes of mutual understanding in everyday life<sup>23</sup> and the cultural resources.

Likewise with the oriental cosmocentric view of nature. In its place, we have an instrumentalistic view of the material universe, the artificial and interventional becoming the natural thing to do to grow and progress. Nature is manipulated so much to serve material ends without respect for its internal rhythm, giving rise to problems of ecological disbalance, and a growing disparity of urban and rural cultures. On the level of interaction, whereas before mutual understanding and expectation was covered in advance by traditional religious norms, now the medium is that of money and position. The rat race for money and

power has dominated the oriental cities. The market system has penetrated the domain of communicative interactions such that interrelationships have become functional and fragmentary, meaning lost in the maze of efficiency.

And yet, the subconscious search for meaning surfaces in the alarming rate of suicide in many of our urbanized Asian cities.

The value of communitarian self-realization is being subverted and made subservient to the competitive mastery of things. Witness the proliferation in learning institutions of courses aimed at achieving skills and the large number of students enrolling in them rather than in the liberal arts. Learning has become a tool to land a well-paying job. What more, the students want instant shortcut results and find the study of their classical texts irrelevant. What is new must be good, and so the youth must keep up with the latest in fashion, gadgets and music, imitating western models.

At the root of this competitive mastery of things is of course a western humanism whose roots in capitalism is the ethic of individualism. We see this happening in the modernization of China today--and in many developing countries of Asia too--where communitarian humanism is gradually being replaced by individualistic humanism. From individualism to the assertion of my rights over others rather than my obligations, the step is not far.

The individualism of purposive rationalism has not spared the value of the family from its tentacles. The family too has become individualistic and possessive. Now, it is my family



versus the others, with the economic and political security as the prime motive for competition. Witness the phenomenon of "cronyism" in many Asian countries.

Purposive rationalism has also questioned the validity of authority based on traditional religious worldviews, and in its place has introduced a formal type of democracy. Formally democratic institutions and procedures ensure both a diffused mass loyalty and a requisite independence of administrative decision-making from the specific interest of the citizens. In other words, the public realm is structurally depolitized, its function reduced to periodic plebiscites. As organized rationality spreads, the cultural traditions are undermined and weakened, and conflicts arise between those who stand for progress and those (the cultural minorities, for instance) who want to preserve their identity.

Given the intrusion of western purposive rationalism into oriental cultures, the conflicts and problems that arise are not simply in the areas of material reproduction, of social justice, but also of cultural reproduction, of the kind of life that integrates and keeps their identity as a people.

#### A Common Need for both West and East

If the West needs the East, will it find what it is looking for, now that the East is not what it used to be? And will it be possible for the East to go back to its original spirit of undifferentiating harmony with the universe? It would seem that

both the West and the East need a different kind of rationalization, different from the purposive action of the technical interest, a rationalization of communicative (symbolic) action of the practical interest, or what Habermas calls the rationalization of the life-world.

For Habermas the rationalization of the life-world involves, first of all, a "linguistification of the sacred." The sacred here refers to the religious root of tradition, and the linguistification of the sacred means the rationalization of worldviews. Because the moral authority of social norms has its roots in the sacred (Emile Durkheim), rationalization of the life-world entails rationalization of worldviews. In linguistifying the sacred, "the authority of tradition is increasingly open to discursive questioning; the range of applicability of norms expands while the latitude for reasoned justification increases."<sup>24</sup> Here "the 'pre-judgmental power' of the life-world progressively diminishes, in the sense that communicative actors increasingly owe their mutual understanding to their own interpretive accomplishments, to their own yes/no positions on critizable validity claims."<sup>25</sup> In other words, the dogmatism of norms from religion that once was accepted without question is now reflected upon, criticized, applied by the participants of a particular culture to their historical situation in dialogical understanding.

For instance, the Golden Rule is one moral principle that is found in almost all world religions. As rooted in religious belief, it is accepted without question. To linguistify the Golden Rule means to reinterpret this in the light of modern day

realities, where greater access to communication exists side by side with inequalities of the benefits and burden of production. Kant's categorical imperative (I ought to act in such a way that my relative maxim can be made into a universal law of nature) is a rationalized version of the Golden Rule for his time. Perhaps for our time, the socialized version of Habermas can serve as a rationalization of the Golden Rule: I put forth a rightness claim which can be validated insofar as it is generalizable, that is to say, anyone who enters into dialogue with me can agree that it is good for humanity.

Thus, the rationalization of the life-world calls for an enlightened criticism of traditional culture in the face of modernization. "The neglect of criticism and the mere affirmation and preservation of the past would be tantamount to annihilating one's own culture."<sup>26</sup> Such a critique would include necessarily a critique of ideology, for a regime or movement aspiring for power tends to legitimize itself by appealing to values unearthed from one's culture. A critique of ideology is an act of distancing oneself from one's culture, a self-criticism that leads to open communication.

Open communication is necessary to bridge the gap between the rich and the poor, the intellectual elite and the masses, the authority and the citizenry, the developed nation and the developing country. Culture, unlike material reproduction, cannot be administered, and so the rationalization proper to the life-world is the "expansion of the areas in which action is coordinated by way of communicatively achieved agreement."<sup>27</sup>

This entails the removal of restrictions on communication so that it becomes free from domination. Institutions have to be developed that would set limits to material reproduction and subordinate it to decisions arrived at in an unconstrained communication. Such institutions would protect the private and public spheres from the functionalistic and objectifying effects of scientific and technological advancement, provide feedback relations between a differentiated modern culture and a culturally and spiritually impoverished everyday practice. Moral issues of general interest can then be submitted for public discussion and decided on the basis of discursively achieved agreement.

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The rationality of the life-world is an expanded role of rationality aimed at reaching understanding and coordination. It is really in essence a substantive or participatory kind of democracy similar to the Greek polis, the origin after all of western culture, but with the difference that those who enter into dialogue are free citizens of the world and have a claim as to how life should be lived. Needless to say, participation in practical moral discourse is the only other way out of violence.

In the rationalization of the life-world, the West and the East need each other, for only by communicating openly to each other can the original harmony with nature that has traversed to conflicts and confrontation be transformed into a consensus with nature as the medium, that we all belong to one planet earth. Only by understanding each other in dialogue can both West and East realize that they need a common attitude: "an attitude in which existing is more than taking, acting more than making,

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meaning more than function," an attitude of being rather than  
of having. This only the religious in man, whether occidental or  
oriental, can provide.

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