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ABOUT 'ASIA' AND THE 'WEST'**

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically explores the way in which some debates about democracy in Southeast Asia have utilised notions of 'Asia' and the 'West' as specific cultural constructions underscoring the legitimacy of certain political practices and institutions. More specifically, these cultural constructions serve as legitimating devices for a style of political rule known as 'Asian democracy', versions of which have been put forward from time to time by political elites in Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia. 'Asian democracy' is said by its proponents to reflect genuine 'Asian' cultural values such as harmony, consensus and community. These are contrasted with a set of cultural values assumed to be characteristic of the 'West', namely, dissensus, conflict and individualism. Apart from pointing to the inaccuracy of these claims, it is argued that these formulations represent an inverted Orientalist discourse which is best described as Occidentalism. Problems of universalism and relativism, especially as these relate to what 'democracy' means, are also canvassed. The paper concludes with some critical reflections on 'political myths', not simply in relation to Asia, but also with respect to the United States and Australia and their recent efforts to 'engage with Asia'.

CULTURE, RELATIVISM AND DEMOCRACY: POLITICAL MYTHS ABOUT 'ASIA' AND THE 'WEST'

Stephanie Lawson

A myth's essential function is to create willing obedience.¹

Introduction

With one or two exceptions, the nature of political myth has rarely been the subject of detailed investigation in political studies. Yet myth often underlies a whole range of important beliefs and assumptions about political institutions and practices. In the West, for example, myths of white supremacy and a 'civilising mission' justified, for several centuries, a whole range of practices which many non-Westerners suspect have not altogether vanished from the political agenda. Others subscribe to the myth of the market in order to simplify, explain, and justify certain economic trends and norms. In many ways, myth is tied closely to ideas about tradition, culture, and identity. A recent media commentary noted that countries on the rise rarely care to cast their economic success in terms of some dull explanation of comparative advantage or a particular pattern of technological change, but rather through the identification of virtues unique to their particular culture: 'So the British believed that a special spirit of industry enabled them to turn the globe red and the United States saw its strength born of the rugged individualism of its pioneering spirit'. More recently, the spectacular economic successes of East Asian countries has led some to proclaim that this is due to 'the superiority of "Asian values" over those of the decadent West'.²

Myths that sustain a certain view of culture are also frequently linked to the appropriateness of any given set of political arrangements. Accordingly, myths based on cultural interpretations are often invoked to legitimate a certain political order while at the same time portraying others as lacking legitimacy because they do not appear to resonate with certain cultural 'givens'. This cultural component also allows regimes to depict internal critics as either traitors to their own 'cultures' or not 'real' members of the society. In addition, cultural myths can have a clearly instrumental political function and are often highly effective in mobilising support

* An earlier version of this paper was presented at a workshop organised by the Asia Research Centre, Murdoch University, November 1994.

¹ Francis Delaisi, *Political Myths and Economic Realities* (London, Noel Douglas, 1925), p. 18.

² 'Do Asian Values Trump the West?', *Australian*, 2 June 1994, reprinted from the *Economist*.

regardless of their substantive 'truth' content. Some of the current debates about a culturally derived Asian variant of democracy—a debate which has received additional impetus from Australia's 'engagement with Asia'—can be interpreted in this light. Against the 'self-appointed judges of "true" democracy' from the West, it is now common to hear and read about arguments put forward which draw sharp (but quite simplistic) contrasts between the achievements of 'Asian democracy' and the cultural values that support it, and some of the less attractive aspects of politics and society in the West:

Singapore opposition parties do not get equal time on television, but disadvantaged minorities do not riot, loot and burn. Malaysia detains dissidents, but children are not gunned down at school. Taiwan does not allow free speech advocating communism, but its inner-city youths do not dissipate their energies on drugs. In South Korea one can be arrested just for publicly harbouring affection for Kim Il Sung, but may walk the streets without fear of muggers.³

The message seems to be that many of the values which underscore democratic practices in the West lead to all sorts of undesirable consequences. The logic of these formulations also seems to imply that *because* opposition parties in Singapore do not get equal media time, disadvantaged minorities refrain from rioting; that *because* Malaysian dissidents are often detained, children are safe at school, and so on. It would probably be impolite to point out the source of much of Australia's illegally imported drug cargoes on which some of our inner-city youths undoubtedly expend their energies.

In one of the few discussions of the subject of political myth, it has been remarked that the widely held, but highly misleading, preconception that the term 'myth' stands for any belief that has no foundation in fact, should be disposed of in the interest of greater intellectual rigour and subtlety.⁴ There is no doubt that myths and processes of myth-making are much more complex than this preconception indicates, as the preceding discussion suggests. But the etymology of 'myth' leaves us with no doubt that its persistent meaning is related to fantasy. From the time that *mythos* was first conceptualised by the ancient Greeks to denote a fable or a fictional account of past events, it has retained its character as something 'devoid of historical truth and rational foundation'.⁵ Furthermore, resort to 'facts', or the exposure of faulty premises, is certainly useful in destroying certain other preconceptions on which some myths are based. For example, the allegedly 'scientific' basis of the myth of white supremacy—which was undoubtedly a political

³ 'As Asians Turn to Democracy, They Must First Decide What It Is', *Asiaweek*, 9 February 1994, p. 18.

⁴ Henry Tudor, *Political Myth* (London, Pall Mall, 1972), p. 13.

⁵ Delaisi, *Political Myths and Economic Realities*, p. 34. See also T.A. Sinclair, *A History of Greek Political Thought* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967), p. 57.

as well as a scientific myth—was eventually destroyed by the illumination of biological facts which showed that earlier formulations of ‘scientific racism’ were empirically wrong.

The discussion that follows is therefore directed, to some extent, to exposing the fairly tenuous bases on which some versions of ‘Asian democracy’ have been constructed and used for certain political purposes, paying particular attention to Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia, and to demonstrating that when applied to this variant of democracy, the common understanding of ‘myth’ is quite appropriate. It should also be made clear that the democratising processes that have taken place in Taiwan and South Korea, for example, are not a subject for critique in this discussion. In other words, I am not suggesting that there is only one version of democracy in Asia, nor that there are no Asian countries in which genuinely democratic politics is being practised or developing. Rather, the critique of ‘Asian democracy’ in this paper is concerned with the rhetorical flourishes that have been deployed by some Southeast Asian leaders in defence of instrumental interests. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that what often passes for democracy in the West, especially the capitalist variant, can be subjected to a number of similar criticisms. In the final part of the discussion I shall therefore pay particular attention to the extent to which the United States has claimed the interpretive high ground on democracy, thereby relegating the elements of democracy concerned with community and social justice—which are more closely associated with the Western democratic socialist tradition—to obscurity, and confusing the debate on the legitimate issues which make up the broad agenda for human rights.

Democracy

A pluralist approach

Ideas of ‘Asian democracy’ that have been propounded by some political élites in Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia usually turn on the idea of relativism, especially as this relates to culture. The basic premise from which this discussion starts, however, is that democracy cannot mean all things to all people. More specifically, although the institutional shape of democracy may take a diversity of forms, and democratic polities may differ with respect to the value assigned to the various elements of democracy, there are nonetheless limits to the kinds of regimes that can legitimately be called a ‘democracy’. This position stands in contrast to what I shall call dogmatic or rigid relativism, a point of view which implies that there are virtually no limits to what we may legitimately call a democracy. Although this seems, ironically, to be a more democratic epistemological position to adopt than one which prescribes conceptual standards and limitations, the rigid relativist position can (and does) in fact provide a protective cloak for various kinds of authoritarian

stances—as many commentators on ‘Asian democracy’ have pointed out. Furthermore, the infinite diversity of interpretations that are accorded equal legitimacy through the normative endorsement of rigid relativism is best characterised as an anarchic, rather than democratic, epistemological stance.

On the other hand, it should be stressed that the rejection of rigid relativism does not automatically entail the adoption of the opposite extreme, namely, a rigid universalism that endorses a single authoritative standard of ‘correctness’ for democracy. Clearly, this would be an equally dogmatic, and certainly undemocratic, epistemological posture in so far as it works to silence alternative views and leaves little space for the legitimate diversity that characterises democratic politics. In other words, a rigid universalism is also inherently authoritarian in its implications for political rule. The position which best supports a genuinely democratic polity is one underpinned by a pluralistic epistemological position which in turn supports a sufficiently flexible approach to understanding democracy that is neither relativist nor universalist.⁶ This position is not entirely unassailable—nor can it be if it is to serve as a democratic model. Indeed, given the fallibilism inherent in the nature of a democratic model, it must remain open to criticism. In other words, whereas both the relativist and universalist positions logically entail a certain closure of discourse—and for that reason are dogmatic—the pluralist position must always remain open—while at the same time allowing that some interpretations of democracy may be better than others.

The contextual importance of these issues for the theory and practice of democracy has been sharpened by a number of trends in international politics over the last four decades or so. Although there are certainly many notable precursors to contemporary debates in earlier eras, the period since the end of World War II is especially significant because of the greatly extended scope for controversy stimulated by such developments as decolonisation, the Cold War, the post-Cold War era of ‘democratisation’ and ethnonationalist conflict, and, above all, the rhetorical endorsement on a global scale of democracy as the most desirable form of political rule. Along with these broad developments, there has also been increasing international debate and disputation over issues concerning human rights (and whether certain categories of rights can or should be accorded priority), and the

⁶ The ‘pluralism’ emphasised here relates to the epistemological aspect of the approach to defining democracy, rather than to democracy as pluralism (although the two are related). Furthermore, the use of the term ‘pluralism’ here should not be taken to imply endorsement of certain specific schools of political thought, such as the English school of legal pluralism, or American ‘pluralist’ theories based on the work of A.F. Bentley, which have used it to describe particular (and rather narrow) approaches to understanding democracy. For a more detailed discussion of some of these points, see Stephanie Lawson, ‘Conceptual Issues in the Comparative Study of Regime Change’ *Comparative Politics*, vol. 25, no. 2, January 1993, pp. 183–205.

extent to which norms of inviolate sovereignty should be respected in cases where human rights abuses are perpetrated by repressive regimes, or where culturally-defined groups claim the apparently democratic right to self-determination—sometimes in the form of a new sovereign state. These hardly exhaust the catalogue of relevant issues, but for the purpose of the present discussion, they provide an adequate point of departure.

A further broad contextual issue concerns an important conceptual division that has emerged in contemporary debates about democracy. This is founded on the distinction that is frequently drawn between Western and non-Western cultures and the wide-ranging implications of this distinction for social and political structures in terms of their form, content, and value-base. It is from within this specific cultural context that some leading proponents of a distinctively 'Asian' version of democracy have launched their arguments. Furthermore, this stance has received implicit support from Western conservatives such as Samuel Huntington whose (in)famous 'clash of civilizations' thesis⁷ readily supports the cultural relativism on which the primary assumptions of 'Asian democracy' are based. Beyond this, it is important to note the extent to which there is actually an ideological *convergence* between conservatives from both the West and Asia (and elsewhere) that transcends the putative obstacle presented by 'culture'.⁸

As suggested above, there is no reason why democracy as a form of rule cannot assume various institutional forms, or operate in different modes to suit different contexts. It is not assumed, therefore, that Western countries have a monopoly over interpretation or practice when it comes to ultimately 'correct' forms or modes of democratic rule. Nonetheless, in accordance with the arguments outlined above, the position maintained here is that there are limits to the kinds of polities that can be called 'democratic'. I shall also argue that, in some cases, what is proposed as an 'Asian form of democracy'—usually by political élites and their supporters in a number of Southeast Asian countries—is not democratic at all and is often used quite cynically as an attempt to justify continuing authoritarian political measures. Some attention will also be paid to the question of whether this form, or its constitutive elements, may really be described as authentically or uniquely 'Asian'—an issue that is especially interesting in terms of contemporary debates about 'invented traditions'.⁹ As a background to some of the political aspects of the claims

⁷ Samuel Huntington, 'The Clash of Civilizations?', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 72, no. 3, Summer 1993, pp. 2249.

⁸ This point is also dealt with extensively in Stephanie Lawson, *Tradition Versus Democracy in the South Pacific: Fiji, Tonga and Western Samoa* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, forthcoming 1996).

⁹ Two of the earlier works dealing with this issue in the South Pacific and Africa respectively are Roger M. Keesing and Robert Tonkinson (eds), 'Reinventing Traditional Culture: The Politics of Kastom in Island Melanesia' (special issue of

made by proponents of 'Asian democracy', we shall turn next to the emergence of democracy as the (apparently) most desirable form of political rule in the contemporary era.

The universalisation of democracy

One of the ironies about relativist approaches to defining democracy is that they imply support for the normative idea of democracy as a universal good. This is reflected in the very fact of democracy's current moral prestige and the extent to which it is employed by virtually all regimes as an agent of political legitimation in contemporary international discourse—at least in a rhetorical sense. Historically, the powerful legitimacy factor that now attaches to the name 'democracy' has much to do with the outcome of World War II which saw the triumph, not only of the Allied military forces, but also of their official political ideology. Geography and other factors, however, conditioned the nature of the various responses in the wake of the war, which in turn influenced the subsequent development of foreign policy stances among the Allied countries. At a general level, it has been argued that in Europe, where the experience with fascism was a very direct one, there developed a strong antipathy to right-wing authoritarianism. In the United States, however, the relative isolation from this experience, as well as a growing obsession with communism, led to a tacit endorsement of right-wing authoritarian regimes so long as they demonstrated 'their eagerness to cooperate in an American-led world order, and their reliability as opponents of the Soviet Union'.¹⁰ In the process, the meaning of democracy was made sufficiently elastic so as to allow the United States to welcome into its circle of friends and allies 'an extraordinary variety of friendly but
¹¹ and to defend 'democracy' in such places as South Vietnam under Diem, the Philippines under Marcos and, more recently, Kuwait. At the same time, communist regimes have also insisted that their form of rule, based as it was on an ideology that purportedly accorded the great mass of ordinary people political and economic primacy, was genuinely democratic.

There is little doubt that these factors, apart from underscoring the near ubiquitous endorsement of democracy as the preferred form of political rule, have also contributed to the widespread disagreement as to what it actually means to have a 'democratic government'. It is interesting to note that the Athenians of the fifth-century BC, with whom both the term and the form of rule originated,

Mankind, vol. 13, no. 4, 1982), and Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983).

¹⁰ Lawrence Whitehead, 'International Aspects of Democratization' in Guillermo O'Donnell, Philippe Schmitter, and Lawrence Whitehead (eds), *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule* (Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), p. 39.

¹¹ Whitehead, 'International Aspects', p. 39.

understood quite clearly what they meant by it and had no difficulty in distinguishing democracy as a form of rule from monarchy, tyranny, aristocracy, or oligarchy. There was, however, much disagreement over the merits of democratic rule. Indeed, the considerable esteem in which the term 'democracy' is now held stands in contrast to centuries of disparagement by philosophers from Plato onward who, although differing widely in their political perspectives, shared an almost universal distaste for the idea of rule by the people. As suggested above, however, those who today support the basically relativistic notion that democracy is an 'essentially contested concept' do so precisely because of its strongly appraisive quality.¹²

Following the position outlined in the introduction, my argument here is that although it is certainly difficult to specify a precise set of jointly sufficient conditions for the full and actual expression of democratic political rule, let alone to identify empirically any real-world regime that lives up to all the ideals and principles of democracy in practice, it is not impossible (*contra* the relativists) to distinguish between those regimes characterised by various styles of authoritarianism and degrees of repression, and those which support more democratic, open practices. As Hewison et al. note:

It is argued by some...that democracy is a culturally relative term and indeed there is no regime that does not in some way describe itself as democratic. However, to accept this cultural relativist position is to deny any universal meaning to the word and, in the process, to indemnify the most scurrilous of dictatorships and to undermine the legitimacy of democratic and reformist oppositions.¹³

To argue adequately against the cultural relativist position requires that something be said about what democracy is—and is not. The next section therefore looks briefly at the basic elements of democracy as they are commonly presented in (Western) literature.

Defining democracy

The most basic elements of contemporary political democracy, including its formal mechanical structures and provisions as well as an indication of some of the

¹² W.B. Gallie, 'Essentially Contested Concepts', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, vol. 56, 1956, p. 184. For a more detailed discussion of the relativistic implications of Gallie's argument, see Lawson, 'Conceptual Issues in the Comparative Study of Regime Change and Democratization'.

¹³ Kevin Hewison, Richard Robison and Garry Rodan, 'Introduction: Changing Forms of State Power in Southeast Asia' in Kevin Hewison, Richard Robison and Garry Rodan (eds), *Southeast Asia in the 1990s: Authoritarianism, Democracy and Capitalism* (St Leonards, Allen & Unwin, 1993), p. 5.

principles that underlie them, have been summarised conveniently by Sørensen as follows:

- Meaningful and extensive *competition* among individuals and organised groups (especially political parties) for all effective positions of government power, at regular intervals and excluding the use of force.
- A highly inclusive level of *political participation* in the selection of leaders and policies, at least through regular and fair elections, such that no major adult group is excluded.
- A level of *civil and political liberties*—freedom of expression, freedom of the press, freedom to form and join organisations—sufficient to ensure the integrity of political competition and participation.¹⁴

This general statement of mechanisms and principles serves to identify the political and procedural aspects of democracy understood in terms of certain freedoms or liberties (namely, political and civil rights). It says very little, however, about other important aspects of democracy such as equality and community which, as foreshadowed earlier, are as important as the component of liberty and which are also integral to the Western democratic tradition (outside the United States). Some would no doubt argue that these find adequate expression through the guarantee of political and civil freedom. This is certainly true of mainstream American discourse, especially that emanating from the White House. The arguments about these issues are well worth considering, especially since they have assumed a certain prominence in recent debates concerning democracy and human rights in Asia, and we shall return to these at a later point in the discussion.

The approach taken here recognises that various regimes may measure up differently against the various criteria of democracy, and that the most useful way of analysing the extent to which the political institutions and practices of any given regime accord with democratic principles is through the concept of a continuum from more democratic to less democratic. However, this approach also has its limits. Apart from the difficulty of securing widespread agreement on the relative merits of all the democratic variables, the qualitative assessment of any regime cannot be achieved by a simple check of such constitutional provisions as elective representation, universal franchise, or the presence of a number of political parties competing for office. The mere existence of a formally democratic constitution and, in some cases, an accompanying bill of rights, is no guarantee that democracy is flourishing. As one theorist has suggested, only a modicum of insight is required to recognise that constitutional provisions such as universal adult franchise and equal

¹⁴ Georg Sørensen, *Democracy and Democratization* (Boulder, Westview Press, 1993), p. 13. See also Larry Diamond, Juan J. Linz, and Seymour Martin Lipset (eds), *Democracy in Developing Countries*, vol. 2: Africa (Boulder, Lynne Rienner, 1988), p. xvi.

voting rights, even if strictly abided by, do not serve to distinguish between a democracy and an 'elected dictatorship'.¹⁵ Singapore's government, for example, has been controlled by the People's Action Party (PAP) for well over thirty years. Although the parliament there is elected and legally 'free' political parties may compete for office—thereby satisfying some of the formal mechanisms of democratic political procedures—the PAP government has used a number of repressive devices to ensure that genuine political competition for office remains very limited, thereby ensuring its own continued electoral success.¹⁶

Another way of approaching the question of what democracy *is*, is to specify what it *is not*. For example, one democratic theorist has argued that although there are many uncertainties surrounding the term 'dictatorship', it can nonetheless be understood structurally as a non-constitutional form of rule (and therefore a structurally undemocratic form) because the rulers in these cases either make a sham of an existing constitution or write their own document empowering themselves to do virtually as they please.¹⁷ It is further proposed that an even clearer contrast can be drawn by negatively elucidating the characteristics of democracy by way of contradistinction to the principles of autocracy. Through repudiation of the autocratic principle that personalised power can be held irrevocably, democracy can be seen as a form of rule under which no-one can arrogate to him or herself unconditional and unlimited power.¹⁸ The key to qualifying and limiting the power of rulers over the ruled in a democratic system is to be found in the doctrine of constitutionalism. In its simplest formulation, this doctrine refers to limited government insofar as any government, including each and every one of its members, is as much subject to the rule of law as any other individual or group. The origins of this conception are to be found in the Greek *polis* where it developed synchronically with the notion that the legitimate exercise of political power lay not in the hands of a monarch or tyrant, an aristocracy or an oligarchy, but ultimately in those of the *demos*. In modern mass polities, where the idea of rule or power of the people has been translated into representative democracy, governments remain subject to the law of the constitution in both letter and spirit. And since democratic constitutions always provide for succession of government via a peaceful process of voting, it is clearly understood that the tenure

¹⁵ Henry B. Mayo, 'The Theory of Democracy Outlined' in Carl Cohen (ed.), *Communism, Fascism and Democracy: The Theoretical Foundations* 2nd edn (New York, Random House, 1972), p. 573.

¹⁶ See Stephanie Lawson, 'Institutionalizing Peaceful Conflict: Political Opposition and the Challenge of Democratization in Asia', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 47, no. 1, 1993, p. 24.

¹⁷ Giovanni Sartori, *The Theory of Democracy Revisited* (Chatham, NJ, Chatham House, 1987), p. 205.

¹⁸ Sartori, *The Theory of Democracy Revisited*, pp. 2067.

of any particular government in office is strictly temporary and that it may legitimately be replaced by an opposing party.

This last point is especially important in assessing the extent to which the version of ‘Asian democracy’ proposed by some Southeast Asian leaders compares to several basic requirements of contemporary democratic theory, and that is the problem of political opposition (both constitutional and non-constitutional), and legitimate succession of government. For underlying much of the debate about the virtues of this particular variant of ‘Asian democracy’, especially as explicated by holders of government power, is a marked hostility to the notion of legitimate political opposition and the idea of alternation in office. Yet the notion of free political opposition, and its assumptions about legitimate succession of government, is central to the democratic process, and its legal or constitutional institutionalisation is taken as a key distinguishing feature of democratic politics. If we refer to the three clusters of practices and principles outlined above, it is not difficult to see that these are ultimately dependent on acceptance of the legitimacy of open criticism and the entrenchment of legal political opposition. As a first step in understanding some of these issues, it is necessary to outline some of the basic features said to comprise the Asian variant of democratic rule, and how these relate to the idea of culture.

‘Asian democracy’

The cultural dimension

As we have seen, the definitive elements of ‘Asian democracy’ are frequently elucidated through a process of positively contrasting certain (allegedly) Asian values with certain (allegedly) Western values. What is produced in this process is an inverted version of ‘Orientalism’ complete with its essentialist framework, and which is best described in this context as ‘Occidentalism’. This provides the necessary basis for the assertion of a particular political identity—in this case a broad ‘Asian’ identity—which in turn serves as an important legitimating device for the particular account of ‘democracy’ that is put forward, especially to the extent that it is firmly connected to some kind of cultural base which in turn purports to lend authenticity to the model. Formulations of this kind are of course common to nationalist constructions of identity and in this respect the kind of ‘regionalism’ evident in the process of conceptualising an Asian identity and an Asian variant of democracy may be understood as an extension of the nationalist device.

Of the values proposed as constituting the ‘essence’ of Asian culture and identity and, by implication, ‘Asian democracy’, those which have received most emphasis are consensus, harmony, unity, and community. These are contrasted, favourably, with a number of values said to characterise Western polities, namely,

dissensus, conflict, disunity, and individualism. On the face of it, the former set of values appear to be quite admirable. With the possible exception of individualism, the latter of course appear to be just the opposite. As the old adage goes, however, appearances can be deceptive and on closer inspection, especially in terms of how each set of values operates in the political sphere, matters are not quite so straightforward.

Accounts of Asian democracy

There is no single authoritative account or canon of thought on what the basic constituents of 'Asian democracy' are—just as there is no single authoritative account of (Western) democracy. A general picture may nonetheless be gleaned from various statements delivered by leading proponents and commentators on 'Asian democracy'. The Southeast Asian leaders of Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia have been most outspoken about this model, and the following discussion will therefore concentrate on their arguments.

One of the earliest accounts of 'Asian democracy' is to be found in the Indonesian version of 'guided democracy', a term devised by Sukarno to describe the dictatorial regime he instituted in 1959 after a relatively chaotic period of unstable coalition governments earlier in the decade. Sukarno's regime was short-lived, but the successor regime of Soeharto's 'New Order', although purporting to represent a revolutionary change in Indonesian politics, built on much the same kind of official ideology that had underscored Sukarno's, namely, a strongly organic conception of the state. This provided the ideal basis for sanctifying conservative, authoritarian rule by denying the legitimacy of political activity outside state-controlled structures.¹⁹ Robison's analysis suggests that the Indonesian conception of organic statism emanated from two main sources, both of which incorporated distinct elements of the kind of Occidentalism described above:

One source was a type of nationalist cultural relativism in which 'Eastern' society was viewed as one characterised by ideals of harmony and consensus, while 'Western' society was considered to be based on individualism, confrontation and materialism. A second source was the political culture of the Javanese aristocratic officials...order, authority and hierarchy balanced by the mythology of aristocratic obligation as contrasted to 'Western' or 'liberal' government which was seen to be the institutionalised conflict of vested interests.²⁰

¹⁹ Richard Robison, 'Indonesia: Tensions in State and Regime' in Hewison et al. (eds), *Southeast Asia in the 1990s*, p. 42.

²⁰ Robison, 'Indonesia', p. 42. See also David Reeve, 'Sukarnoism and Indonesia's "Functional Group" State: Implementing "Indonesian Democracy"', *Review of Indonesian and Malay Affairs*, vol. 13, no. 1, pp. 53-115.

²³ then this aspect of Indonesian politics places it well outside the fold of democratic polities. The implications for democratic politics of delegitimising political organisation, and therefore opposition, outside government imposed limits are also clear enough.²⁴

A particular irony of Pancasila ideology and the version of democracy it supports, especially given that one of its principle thrusts was directed towards differentiating an 'Eastern' or 'Asian' value system from a 'Western' one in order to fortify its legitimacy for local consumption, is that many of the ideas underpinning its key value of organic statism are derived substantially from certain aspects of European political thought. The Western medieval world view, for example, is generally characterised as embodying a belief in political and social order based on hierarchy and organicism together with an emphasis on personal and particularistic

²¹ Herb Feith, 'Constitutional Democracy: How Well Did It Function?' and John Legge, *Democracy in Indonesia: 1950s and 1960s* (Clayton, Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, 1994), p.17.

²² Robison, 'Indonesia', p. 44.

²³ Yehuda Mirsky, 'Democratic Politics and its Culture', *Orbis*, vol. 37, no. 4, Fall 1993, p. 573.

²⁴ Obviously, there are limits to the toleration of political opposition in Western democracies as well, which is why democratic theorists make a clear distinction between constitutional and unconstitutional political opposition (although the latter is only incompatible with democratic practice when it assumes violent or criminal form). For a more detailed discussion of these limits and how they are delineated through the doctrine of constitutionalism, see Lawson, 'Conceptual Issues in the Comparative Study of Regime Change and Democratization'.

relations.²⁵ European ideas of organic statism survived the feudal period and later became part of the ideologies of Western conservatism and fascism. A further irony is that conservative perspectives, complete with their organicist content, were often transported from their British/European environments to the colonies via officials who applied these perspectives in interpreting local sociopolitical structures. Conservative colonial doctrine, which received some intellectual respectability from early anthropological schools of thought, and which was often endorsed by local political élites who benefited from colonial systems of indirect rule, readily became incorporated as part of local 'tradition' and assumed the qualities of timelessness, authenticity, and legitimacy.²⁶ Furthermore, the elements of feudal political thought described above, and the kind of values they support, share much in common with certain other traditions of thought found in parts of Asia. This is especially so in the case of Confucianism which has found a place in the political myth-making of one of Indonesia's closest neighbours.

Singapore is another country from which a version of 'Asian democracy' has emerged. Again, this has been constructed very clearly in opposition to 'Western values' in general, and 'Western' democracy in particular. In the case of Singapore, however, the specification of the cultural basis from which 'Asian democracy' and its values emanates has been much more precise in that it is tied directly to a Confucian heritage. In this respect, some of the cultural arguments employed by Singaporean political élites in recent years are well worth assessing in terms of the 'invention of tradition' phenomenon. In addition, Singapore provides a clear example of how the existence of formal institutions associated with democratic rule provide no guarantee that substantive democratic practices, especially in relation to freedom of political expression and opposition, are in fact operative. As Rodan points out:

[P]arliamentary elections constitute a stunted political expression—they are not the end products of broader contests over social and political power but rather the only contest. Contestation outside a narrowly defined formal politics is severely limited. But even in this sphere, the PAP sees little margin for opposition, continually arguing the importance of the 'dominant-party system'. This system is a critical element in what is effectively a one-party state.²⁷

²⁵ Michael Waltzer, *The Revolution of the Saints: A Study in the Origins of Radical Politics* (New York, Atheneum, 1974), p. 8.

²⁶ For further discussion of this phenomenon, see Elizabeth Colson, *Tradition and Contract: The Problem of Order* (London, Heinemann, 1975); and Stephanie Lawson, 'The Politics of Tradition: Problems for Political Legitimacy and Democracy in the South Pacific', *Pacific Studies*, vol. 16, no. 2, June 1993, pp. 129.

²⁷ Garry Rodan, 'Preserving the One-Party State in Singapore' in Hewison et al. (eds), *Southeast Asia*, pp. 778.

Through a variety of mechanisms, Singapore's PAP government has successfully maintained hegemony over the island state since it was first elected in 1959. This is also partially explained, however, by its impressive economic record and its ability to deliver a relatively high standard of living to a diverse population and with minimal levels of corruption. These factors are said to have instilled a significant level of 'pragmatic acquiescence' among the population.²⁸ But this acquiescence has been carefully engineered through repressive policies such as detention without trial and restrictions on various civil rights, including free speech against which there are heavy sanctions. In response to complaints by US Congresspeople about the detention of a number of activists in May 1987, the then Singaporean Minister for Home Affairs responded in the following terms:

In our short history, Singapore has repeatedly encountered subversive threats from within and without...To combat these threats to the nation, the usual procedures of court trials, which apply in Singapore to most criminal cases, have proved totally inadequate. The very secrecy of covert operations precludes garnering evidence to meet the standards of the criminal law for conviction. In many cases of racial agitation, the process of trial itself will provide further opportunity for inflammatory rabble rousing...Singapore cannot be ruled in any other way... Preventive detention is not a blemish marring our record; it is a necessary power underpinning our freedom.²⁹

In addition to these measures, the PAP has engaged actively in bolstering acquiescence through the inculcation of certain 'Asian values'. The beginnings of such a program may be traced to the foundation, in 1983, of the Institute of East Asian Philosophies (IEAP). Sponsored by the PAP, the purpose of the IEAP was 'to advance the understanding of Confucian philosophy so that it [could] be reinterpreted and adapted to the needs of present society'.³⁰ In addition, the government instituted a secondary school program of religious education and Confucian ethics. The explicit purpose of these programs was to counter the perceived trend in 'Westernisation' among the population, especially the large Chinese sector who were considered 'more susceptible to other cultural influences'.³¹ To the outsider, the idea that the Confucian heritage is entirely appropriate for Singaporean Chinese (if not for other Singaporeans) may seem obvious. After all,

²⁸ Lily Z. Rahim, 'Singapore: Consent, Coercion, and Constitutional Engineering', *Current Affairs Bulletin*, December 1993/January 1994, p. 21.

²⁹ Quoted in Yash Gai, *The Asian Perspective on Human Rights* (University of Hong Kong, unpublished manuscript, circa. 1994).

³⁰ Joseph B. Tamney, 'Confucianism and Democracy', *Asian Profile*, vol. 19, no. 5, October 1991, p. 400.

³¹ Martin Lu, *Confucianism: Its Relevance to Modern Society* (Singapore, Federal Publications, 1983), pp. 71, 85.

Confucianism *is* Chinese. But this is to fall all too easily into the errors of stereotyping, essentialism, and myth-making. It has been pointed out that Singaporean Chinese do not in fact have a particular traditional familiarity with Confucianism.³² The PAP's promotion of Confucian values among its Chinese citizenry may therefore be seen as a fairly cynical political exercise in the 'invention

By the end of the 1980s, the PAP government felt it was time to formalise a 'national ideology' for Singapore as a counter to 'the disintegrative impact of Western individualism'. Accordingly, a set of 'core Asian values', consisting of 'multiracialism, consensus, family and society before self' were identified and promulgated.³³ These values were further elaborated by one member of the IEAP team in a new theory of 'democracy' which was to be based not on (Western) ideals of free political competition between opposing parties—ideals which were explicitly repudiated—but on (Asian/Confucian) ideals of harmony and consensus. Accordingly, notions of political freedom were recast to preclude open, public competition and to endorse instead existing closed practices where any debate and criticism was conducted behind closed doors and only among members of the government.

Democracy understood in such a manner may be likened to the two sides of the same coin in government. In the Western parliamentary form it is arrived at through open debate from within and without; in an Eastern form of democracy it is arrived at through closed debate with no opposition from without. In this dual and mixed form, democracy is synthesised to become a new polity which may be called CONSENCRACY.³⁴

What is noticeably absent from this neologism is the qualifier derived from *demos*—the people. In its place we find 'consensus'. Apart from appearing in most rhetorical statements on the virtues of 'Asian democracy', consensus also comprises an important theme in ideas about organic unity and harmony (and which also flourished in the dogma of classic Western conservatism). In the contemporary context, and especially in Indonesia and Singapore, it means a high degree of conformity with the wishes of those controlling the apparatus of the state.³⁵

³² James Cotton, 'The Limits to Liberalization in Industrializing Asia: Three Views of the *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 64, no. 3, Fall 1991, p. 320.

³³ David Martin Jones and David Brown, 'Singapore and the Myth of the Liberalizing *Pacific Review*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1994, p. 83.

³⁴ Wu Teh Yao, *Politics East–Politics West* (Singapore, Pan Pacific Book Distributors, 1979), pp. 578.

³⁵ For further elaboration of this point see Lawson 'Institutionalising Peaceful Conflict'. Also, this is not to say that consensus has no place at all in democratic theory see Lawson, 'Conceptual Issues in the Comparative Study of Regime Change and

A third country in which the cause of 'Asian democracy' is now being championed is Malaysia. Again, the rhetoric of the Malaysian political élite in recent years has produced a vision of 'Asianess' that is directed clearly towards extolling the virtues inherent in existing social and political arrangements, while emphatically criticising alleged Western social and political values. In this respect Prime Minister Mahathir seems to have taken over the role of leading critic of the West from former Singaporean Prime Minister and PAP leader Lee Kuan Yew. While the West is a general target, democracy is naturally singled out for special attention. A classic statement in the now familiar genre of such criticisms is that: 'Too much democracy leads to homosexuality, moral decay, racial intolerance, economic decline and single-parent families'.³⁶ Moreover, Mahathir has claimed that: 'Values based on the spiritual, on peace of mind, and on belief in feelings loftier than desire, have no place in the Western psyche'.³⁷ At the same time Mahathir, like a number of other Asian leaders, has frequently asserted that autochthonous forms of political rule are quite obviously much more appropriate in cultural terms.³⁸

The rhetoric associated with these claims is usually directed at both internal and external audiences. For internal consumption, it operates to produce a unified, nationalistic rallying point—and it differentiates the unified 'us' from the external 'them'. This is despite the considerable internal social and cultural diversity that marks most Asian polities. For external purposes, and especially for the West, it serves as a useful defence—and sometimes an offensive defence—against criticism and prescription. One example of how these factors can come into play was the 'diplomatic incident' occasioned by the remarks of the Australian Prime Minister, Paul Keating, in November 1993 when he described his Malaysian counterpart as 'recalcitrant' for refusing to attend the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit talks in the United States. Amid threats to Australian trade links and other economic activities, it was also made clear on the Malaysian side that Keating's remark was evidence of the lack of manners and respect in Australian culture—the obvious contrast being 'Asian culture'. Mahathir's public posture throughout was one of aloofness, and the general impression cultivated by the Malaysian government was that it was the 'Malaysian people' who had been offended by the remark rather than Mahathir personally. As I have noted elsewhere, external criticism of authoritarian leaders is often interpreted in a negative and exaggerated manner, and can easily be depicted as an insult to the cultural values of the people

³⁶ Quoted in *Canberra Times*, 31 May 1993.

³⁷ Quoted in Barry Wain, 'Dr Mahathir's Prescription for Asia', *Asian Wall Street Journal*, 1243 November 1993.

³⁸ William Case, 'Semi-Democracy in Malaysia', *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 66, no. 2, 1993, p. 203.

as a whole. External criticism can thus provide the domestic regime with an ideal rhetorical weapon as well as the moral high ground from which to launch it. In this particular case Keating provided some very convenient material for an exercise in national political chauvinism on the part of the Malaysian government which effectively targeted both internal and external audiences.³⁹

Just as the 'recalcitrance incident' was finally fading away, Mahathir engaged in a heated and bitter trade dispute with Great Britain which had serious consequences for British trade and investment. This incident followed allegations in some British press reports of corrupt links between a defence contract and British aid for the construction of a Malaysian dam. This time, Mahathir became directly involved in the public debate and utilised very skilfully the historic images of British colonial racism. In a letter to London's *Financial Times*, Mahathir reaffirmed a ban on British industries being granted Malaysian government contracts, and added an inverted racist attack, reported in the Australian press as follows: 'Of course Malaysians are corrupt, Dr Mahathir wrote. "They must be, because they
⁴⁰ Linking the general issues of the incident with the broader debate on democracy and human rights, Mahathir added: 'Lies, damned lies are free. Redress isn't. This is what Western democracy and human rights is all about. If this is not moral decadence, then what is?'⁴¹

Conclusion

To return now to some more general themes, it is evident that the idea of a set of 'core Asian values' has been identified by a number of Asian political leaders as deeply embedded in local culture (extending over a conceptually homogenised Asian region), and therefore intrinsic to the very nature of 'Asian society'. It also underscores the notion of what should and must constitute the foundations of a genuinely Asian polity. As a corollary, these values should and must inform a conception of democratic government that is acceptable, viable and ultimately 'authentic' in an Asian context. This, then, is a form of relativism which basically constructs two opposing cultural models—both of which are represented as monolithic and essentially incommensurable—and accords to each a kind of political authenticity, and therefore legitimacy, linked directly to the cultural component. In addition, the mode of argument from culture hinges on a classic form of cultural determinism which, put simply, implies that people are forever encapsulated in

³⁹ See Stephanie Lawson, 'Much Ado About Recalcitrance', *Pacific Research*, vol. 7, no. 1, February 1994, pp. 212.

⁴⁰ *Financial Review*, 18 March 1994.

⁴¹ *Financial Review*, 18 March 1994.

their 'own' culture and therefore doomed to follow the dictates of the socialisation processes in which they have been immersed from infancy.

These ideas also fit in very well with cultural incommensurability theses. Put briefly, these support the view that 'cultures' are like different species with distinct boundaries, and whose essential components are not susceptible to establishing meaningful commonalities with another. They are also highly reductionist, by which is meant a conceptual exercise that effectively reduces the multiplicity of politically salient factors to a single, overriding, determining element—namely 'culture'. All this is so easily falsifiable that it seems scarcely worth making the effort to expose the errors. 'Asia', like 'the West', is a difficult enough region to define geographically let alone to cast in terms of a coherent cultural entity. Furthermore, culture itself is hardly inert—it is dynamic and creative, and is constantly changing, moving, accommodating, and syncretising. Yet the grand, monolithic, and apparently eternal constructions described above, and the polarities and stereotypes they generate, are readily accepted by so many people, both in Asia and the West, and so easily brought into play in everyday politics, that they cannot be dismissed summarily as having no consequence. In their simplicity and accessibility to unthinking minds they are indeed the stuff of myths.

The minds of political élites, however, are rarely so unsophisticated. The kind of politics that deploys cultural myths to advantage is often a carefully and strategically calculated activity which is designed, above all, to maintain an élite in power by appealing to the most readily available, as well as emotive, symbols of legitimacy. These strategies, of course, are hardly the preserve of non-Western authoritarian élites, and the nationalistic devices on which they are based will often work as well in Western democratic polities as they do in non-democratic ones. This suggests, among other things, that there are probably as many universals in politics as there are particularities, which brings us back to some of the issues raised at the beginning of the discussion on democracy.

There is not and cannot be one fixed and finally 'correct' form of democracy. To believe that such a form can be identified, prescribed, and implemented on a universal scale is to subscribe to a myth of equally erroneous (and authoritarian) proportions as some of those propounded by supporters of the relativistic and highly dubious 'Asian' variant of democracy discussed in this paper. Democracy is about many things, but it is principally about the legitimacy of the power of ordinary people to exercise some kind of control over political élites and to judge the appropriateness of policy decisions made on their behalf and that can vitally affect their lives. This is part of the moral, normative dimension of democracy that clearly has some universal implications insofar as all human beings are assumed to be equally worthy and entitled to exercise some power and control in this way. On the other hand, because of the assumptions about human diversity on which democracy

is based, there is reasonable scope and space for people to pursue their different conceptions of ‘the good’, whether this is conceived in an individualistic fashion or in a way that is more oriented towards the community, or through some balance between these.

I have earlier stressed an important point that is too often forgotten in the debate between the values of individualism on the one hand and the ideals associated with community on the other. And that is that democracy, as it developed in the West, has historically incorporated notions of community as well as of individual freedom, and this has been one of the most significant elements of Western democratic socialism. Indeed, many of the claims made by some Asian countries about the importance of social and economic rights in fact derive from the Western socialist tradition. There is no doubt, however, that the value of liberty, especially when linked almost exclusively to notions of individualism, has received excessive emphasis—especially in the United States, but also in Great Britain under a Conservative government as well as among conservatives in Australia—and at the expense of the equally important democratic values of equality and community. This has much to do with the dominance of a particular strand of liberal political ideology⁴² and the extravagant homage it has paid to market freedom and the virtues of capitalism (which, incidentally, have been embraced enthusiastically by many Asian élites regardless of the rhetorical importance attributed to collectivist values). It is testimony, too, to the domination of the United States in the international debate about democracy, democratisation and human rights, and the arrogant universalist assertion of its own version of capitalist liberal democracy which is, as Parekh has so eloquently demonstrated, just one of several variations on the democratic theme.⁴³ And as any student of the sorry story of modern American history can tell us, its own founding myths of individual freedom and enterprise are themselves founded on the blood of millions, not only of Native Americans and African slaves, but on that of ordinary immigrant working people whose lives were sacrificed in the name of individual liberty, progress, and manifest destiny.

Australians would also do well to reflect critically, if not a little cynically, on their own founding myths of egalitarianism, ‘mateship’, and giving everyone ‘a fair go’—but which did not, of course, include Aboriginal Australians or non-white immigrants, and have only been marginally inclusive of women. Furthermore, from

⁴² It would be a mistake to cast liberal ideology itself as a homogeneous body of ideas since different strands emphasise different values. For example, social liberalism rejects extreme individualism and has been strongly supportive of state intervention in matters of human welfare.

⁴³ Bhikhu Parekh, ‘The Cultural Particularity of Liberal Democracy’ in David Held (ed.), *Prospects for Democracy* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1993), pp. 156–75.

the perspective of some Asian leaders, Australia's past record hardly serves as a moral high ground from which it can legitimately criticise its Asian neighbours for failing to uphold human rights: 'Australia, the former ally of imperial Britain, the recent lieutenant of imperial America—the "deputy sheriff" in Lee Kuan Yew's unflattering terminology—possesses an unfortunate history from the perspective of those who doubt the legitimacy and sincerity of human rights activism'.⁴⁴

At the same time, Australia does have an important (although often subordinate) tradition of democratic socialism,⁴⁵ as well as social liberalism, both of which support the values associated with community and social justice and which therefore lend substance to a genuine concern with social and economic rights. Ironically, it is this tradition that is under attack from neo-liberals/conservatives in Australia who prescribe emulation of the 'Asian way' both in terms of economic restructuring as well as social and political control. For Australian conservatives, the slogan 'engagement with Asia' therefore offers a new banner under which an old agenda may be pursued. A further irony is that the success stories selected to provide the moral lesson are almost always based on individual achievements rather than on the communitarianism that purportedly characterises the 'Asian way'. A recent article, for example, selected two successful business entrepreneurs, briefly outlined their path to riches, and in the classic individualist/liberal rhetoric purveyed by Australia's New Right during its rise to prominence in the 1980s (but now somewhat muted by the spectacular crash of Alan Bond, Christopher Skase and others), concluded that:

All these people have one thing in common: the will to succeed. They didn't sit around waiting for government handouts or make-work programmes or social 'benefits' that destroy jobs in so many countries. No government tried to limit the hours they could work or the wages they could earn. No government mandated their hiring because they were the favoured ethnic group of the moment. They wanted to work. And they did.⁴⁶

Finally, a few words should be said about the present debate concerning democracy and human rights in Asia, especially with respect to the attempt to separate political and civil rights (construed as individual rights) from social and

⁴⁴ *Australian-Asian Perceptions Project, Perceiving "Human Rights"* (Working Paper No. 2, University of New South Wales, Sydney, Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia and the Asia-Australia Institute, December 1993), p. 4.

⁴⁵ Subordinated, according to some, even during times of Labor government. See Graham Maddox and Tim Battin, 'Australian Labor and the Socialist Tradition', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 26, no. 2, July 1991, pp. 181-96.

⁴⁶ *Far Eastern Economic Review*, vol. 157, no. 47, 24 November 1994, p. 43.

economic rights (construed as collective rights),⁴⁷ and their assignment to the cultural–political categories of ‘Western’ and ‘Asian’. Apart from the hypocrisy evident in this exercise—as so clearly illustrated above—it is evident that both ‘sides’ have committed the error of dissecting and separating the cluster of democratic values, which incorporates all of these rights, in order to support their own political agendas. This also effectively perpetuates the obnoxious racist myths built on the Orientalist divide and encourages equally ill-founded prognostications about civilisational ‘fault lines’ and the future bases of threats to world peace. The irony is that whereas such constructions used almost always to be the preserve of Western colonising élites, they are now being wielded skilfully by post-colonial political élites and for much the same purpose—and that is the political subordination and repression of ordinary people. Finally, by taking issue with the notion of cultural relativism and critically assessing the poverty of its explanatory value, as well as its instrumental deployment as a political tool, we may be less likely to award the benefits of ‘sensitivity to culture’ to authoritarian élites in Australia’s process of ‘engaging with Asia’.

⁴⁷ For a discussion of these issues see Ann Kent, *Between Freedom and Subsistence: China and Human Rights* (Hong Kong, Oxford University Press, 1993), esp. Chapter One.

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