

Eurocentrism and Civil Society¹

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Abstract

Idealization of European forms of civil society has prevented Western comprehension of social and political development in other societies. Not so long ago, Euro-American expansionism was driven by now obsolete notions like Manifest Destiny, the White Man's Burden, and Civilizing Mission (*mission civilisatrice*). Today, more subtle but no less condescending conceptions of superiority and universal applicability fuel the West's appetite to universalize its form of "democracy" and "freedom." The scholarly establishment's exogenous understanding of civil society is a modern equivalent to antiquated racist categories that justified colonialism and genocide. The original conception of civil society was grounded in the specific historical form it took in Western Europe. A brief survey of Europe's historical development clarifies its unique character. Following a critical review of Eurocentric theories, especially focused on Jürgen Habermas and Herbert Marcuse, I explore alternative forms of civil society in Korea and the Middle East.

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Idealization of European forms of civil society has prevented Western comprehension of social and political development in other societies. To overlay Europe's specific historical formation onto the rest of the world, as Eurocentrists do, is not simply an academic or theoretical problem. Not by coincidence, in these same regions where it is often claimed that "civil society" does not exist, the West continues to wage major wars. Disastrous US wars in Asia, based upon the idea of bringing "democracy" and "freedom" to the Philippines, Korea, Vietnam and Iraq, have killed no fewer than ten million people since 1898.

Not so long ago, Euro-American expansionism was driven by now obsolete notions like Manifest Destiny, the White Man's Burden, and Civilizing Mission (*mission civilisatrice*). Today, more subtle but no less condescending conceptions of superiority and universal applicability fuel the West's appetite to universalize its form of "democracy" and "freedom." The scholarly establishment's exogenous understanding of civil society is a modern equivalent to antiquated racist categories that justified colonialism and genocide. With war looming over Iran and a new cold war probable with China, the time is long overdue to reconsider policies predicated upon global applicability of Western values.

The original conception of civil society was grounded in the specific historical form it took in Western Europe, an insight upon which Herbert Marcuse built a non-Eurocentric understanding in *Reason and Revolution*.² Rather than deploring its absence in other parts

¹ Originally presented to the International Herbert Marcuse Society, University of Salisbury, November 14, 2015. Substantially reworked thanks to encouragement and critical comments from Carol Becker, Alda Blanco, Jack Hipp, Douglas Kellner, Gooyong Kim, Paul Messersmith-Glavin, Maati Monjib, Warren Patch and AK Thompson.

² Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* (Boston: Beacon Press: 1960), hereafter *Reason and Revolution*.

of the world or seeking to export it, Marcuse noted the specificity of “bourgeois” society to European history and sharply criticized its “one-dimensional” humans. In the thoughts that follow, I question the West’s cultural superiority and indicate possible alternative forms of civil society.

If we are to create a world in which diversity is celebrated and people are truly blessed with the autonomous space to determine their own forms of governance and daily life, then we must conceptualize civil society in very different forms than its uniquely European embodiment. A brief survey of Western Europe’s historical development will help clarify its unique character. Following a critical review of Eurocentric theories, I explore forms of civil society in Korea and the Middle East.

Origins of Western European Civil Society

After the Roman Empire divided into East and West in 285 CE, two very different social systems were consolidated. Rome was overrun and sacked in 410 and 455. The city fell by the wayside and was depopulated to the point where fewer than 15,000 people lived there in 1300—even before the Black Death killed half of Europe’s urban population. In the East, the “Roman Empire” (Byzantium) continued to exist for a millennium after the sacking of Rome. With Christianity as the state religion, Constantinople was capital of a wealthy merchant empire where the emperor was both supreme military leader and in control of the church (*caesaropapism*). Although he recognized the bishops of Rome, Constantinople, Antioch, Alexandria, and Jerusalem as local religious authorities, Justinian (who ruled from 527-565) reserved for himself sovereignty over all matters of religious doctrine. He governed according to the notion of “one state, one church, and one law.”

Under Justinian, everyday life in Constantinople was tightly regulated. He consolidated Christian doctrine and Roman law while promulgating severe moral proscriptions. Gambling was outlawed. Male homosexuals had their genitals removed. Astrologers were publicly whipped and paraded on camels through the city. As Procopius tells us, “in his zeal to gather men into one Christian doctrine, he recklessly killed all who dissented.”³ Justinian abolished all dissenting forms of worship (“heresies” such as Samaritans, Montanists, Sabbatians, and Arians) and confiscated their vast wealth “beyond telling or numbering.” He empowered priests to rob even the very rich. With a firm grip on power, he sent his army to reconquer Rome in 537 and commissioned the magnificent domed church, Hagia Sophia, to commemorate revitalization of the empire.

The Byzantine reconquest of Rome was short-lived. A range of powers came to control Italy, only one of whom was the Bishop of Rome, whose elevation to “Pope” divided the Christian church in 1054, when Catholics and Orthodox mutually excommunicated each other. Although the Pope proclaimed himself to be infallible in religious matters, he was often an appendage of political power—of secular autonomous centers of military might. In Western Europe, no particular government could claim absolute authority over the church, unlike the Byzantine emperor’s control of the universal church. In 1203, Byzantium itself was devastated when the Venetian-financed fourth crusade sacked Constantinople, forever hallowing out the empire until its conquest by the Turks in 1453.

³ *Secret History of Procopius*, Translated by Richard Atwater (New York: Civici Friede Publishers, 1927) 138.

In the West, three centuries after Rome was sacked, hundreds of political entities and ethnicities were amalgamated into a confederation that became known as the Holy Roman Empire. In 800, the bishop of Rome crowned Charlemagne, a Carolingian king of the Franks, as emperor, a title that rivaled the ruler of Constantinople. Free cities, kingdoms, duchies, and principalities all enjoyed varying degrees of independence and privileges within a weakly unified state. So amorphous was its character that Voltaire famously declared that it “... was in no way holy, nor Roman, nor an empire.”⁴ In 987, the Carolingian empire fragmented, and the country of France emerged. Almost at the same time, the kingdom of England was consolidated, where in 1215, a rebellion led by nobles compelled the king to sign the Magna Carta. Revolutions in 1688 in England and 1789 in France further expanded the rights of citizens and the space for civil society. So dispersed was political power in the West that between 200 and 300 republican city-states arose in 12th Century Italy.⁵ Dozens of principalities existed in Germany when Napoleon rose to power at the beginning of the 19th century.⁶ Nation-states in both Italy and Germany were only forged in the late 19th century.

Disintegration of central authority and institutional discontinuity in Western Europe had been further propelled by Protestant Revolutions in the 16th century. Wars against entrenched Roman Catholic powers created social spaces in which individual citizens could assert their rights outside the rules of religious dogma and the power of feudalism. As German cities grew alongside aristocratic estates, any serf who could find urban sanctuary for more than a year and a day could legally be released from the bonds of feudal servitude. Newly found merchant wealth, the Renaissance, and the Enlightenment led to acceleration of technical innovations, colonial conquests, and revolutions whose combined effects thrust Europe into world leadership in the modern era.⁷

The origins of “*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*” (“bourgeois society”—which became known as civil society) can be traced to the long historical process of ever-growing autonomy of citizens from church and state. For Eurocentric theory, the West’s civil society is its sole genuine form. The particular historical outcome of Western Europe’s social development is frozen as the model that all societies must take in order for “democracy” and “freedom” to flourish. A corollary of this glorification is the elevation of European individualism to a universal model with which no other culture’s “individual” can compare.

Whether we conceptualize civil society as an arena where people pursue their own interests as individuals or as groups (as classes, interest groups, ethnicities, races, gender identities, families, or regionally-based clusters), a central defining element is that the terrain is autonomous of state power (although various individuals and groups may use governments to further their aims).

According to Jürgen Habermas’ theory of civil society, an informal “public sphere” developed in the 18th century in England, Germany and France, creating arenas distinct from political power. As capitalist markets and nation-states became ever increasing forces

⁴ Voltaire, *Essai sur l’histoire générale et sur les mœurs et l’esprit des nations*, Chapter 70 (1756).

⁵ Daniel Waley, *The Italian City-Republics* (London: Longman, 1988) xvi-xvii.

⁶ Actually, hundreds of principalities existed counting ecclesiastical ones and those of imperial knights. Alexander Grab, *Napoleon and the Transformation of Europe* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) 22.

⁷ Perhaps most importantly of all, Western Europe’s dire status as world backwater helped motivate it to grasp modern world supremacy. For discussion of the “law of retarding lead” see L.S. Stavrianos, *The Promise of the Coming Dark Age* (San Francisco: W.H. Freeman, 1976) 181-185.

of system integration, the public sphere was “structurally transformed.”⁸ In the 20th century, during the same period of time that C. Wright Mills discussed the rise of mass society and the decline of the “public,” Habermas observed that the boundary between the state and civil society had collapsed, rendering the concept of civil society problematic.

In the 21st century, NGOs created for the public good utilize “civil society” to designate their location in social geography. This radical change in the meaning of civil society is part of the structural transformation noted by Habermas. To complicate matters, governments today increasingly use NGOs to help promote nefarious state actions, such as covertly funded “color revolutions” in countries deemed hostile to the USA.⁹

From Civil Society to Life-World

Despite its structural transformation, civil society is preserved in the “life-world,” an autonomous space where “rational will-formation” free of distorted communication can lead to “collective self-determination of the public sphere.” For Habermas, rational will formation requires certain conditions, including freedom from distortions of communication, coercion, and pressure to not speak up within a shared ethical culture. Outside the capitalist market and nation-states’ dynamics of system integration, the informal sphere of everyday life in the family, voluntary organizations, and interest groups is a private domain uncontrolled by public authorities.¹⁰

Building upon his analysis, Habermas’ followers have posited a list of requirements in order for undistorted communication to be said to exist: a free press and literacy, individual rights, and avenues for communication free of coercion in sites for collective deliberation (such as cafés and salons).¹¹ For Habermas, undistorted communication must be *reasoned* between free and equal citizens. Western European privacy and the “bourgeois individual” stand in sharp contrast to Asia and the East, where he claims the autonomous individual did not develop. He considers privacy and individual rights in Germany as fundamentally different than in Asia’s densely packed cities.¹² In Habermas’s view, coffee houses and salons in 18th century Europe were central sites for new forms communication between free individuals, who built a new web of relationships into civil society. Many people have asked whether or not Asia’s teahouses might be considered similar domains.

⁸ Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1990).

⁹ See *Asia’s Unknown Uprisings: People Power in the Philippines, Burma, Tibet, China, Taiwan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Thailand and Indonesia, 1947-2009* (Oakland: PM Press, 2013) 412-419.

¹⁰ See Jack Seltzer and Sharon Crowley (editors), *Rhetorical Bodies* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999) 227. At the end of the 20th century, the CIA and National Endowment for Democracy began to fund and organize “civil society” groups to mobilize protests against governments not valued by the US. Some of the color revolutions were clearly the work of the government agencies. Covert and overt politicization of civil society is further evidence of its structural transformation. See Sarah E. Mendelson and John Glenn (editors), *The Power and Limits of NGOs: A Critical Look at Building Democracy in Eastern Europe and Eurasia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002) 5, 191-92.

¹¹ William A. Callahan, “Comparing the Discourse of Popular Politics in Korea and China: From Civil Society to Social Movements,” *Korea Journal* (Spring 1988) 281-2.

¹² See Susanne H. Rudolf and Lloyd I. Rudolf, “The Coffee House and the Ashram: Gandhi, Civil Society and Public Spheres,” in *Civil Society and Democracy*, ed. Carolyn M. Elliott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) 377-404.

For those who hold European society in high regard, the answer is “no.” The argument is made that tea house discussions may not have fostered “a certain quality of relationship.”¹³

There are two problems here: the ideal type employed by Habermas poses a pure form of civil society rather than envisioning a variety of existing forms. A more serious problem is derivation of this ideal type solely from Europe, where bourgeois society facilitated the emergence of an urban capitalist class essential to civil society. Do other parts of the world have to follow precisely in that historical development pattern in order for them to have a civil society? If so, that would exclude in advance the possibility of non-Western forms of civil society.

By reifying Western categories into universal ones, Eurocentric theory seeks to refashion what are regarded as antiquated anti-democratic social systems. If the West could learn to celebrate diversity, and not seek to impose the European model onto the rest of the world, would other cultures be left free to fashion their own autonomous norms, values and institutions? Despite the bold assertions of Francis Fukuyama and American triumphalists at the end of the Cold War, modern representative democracy, dominated by huge money and powerful interests, is neither the final form of democracy nor genuine freedom.

When imposed by military force, the brutal victimization of non-Western countries reveals the system’s dependence upon violence to create “democracy” and enforce “freedom.” Harvard University political scientist Samuel Huntington is an extreme case in point. Seeking to create the preconditions for democracy in Vietnam, he advocated “forced-draft urbanization”—massive bombing and defoliation of the countryside of Vietnam to force the rural population to migrate to cities.¹⁴ According to Huntington’s “rational” logic and misinformed history, all democracies have originated in cities; by urbanizing Vietnam he was bringing it democracy.¹⁵ Following his lead, the US waged the largest chemical warfare program in world history (euphemistically dubbed “Agent Orange”) at the cost of monumental destruction of all forms of life.

Huntington never stopped to consider existing rural culture in Vietnam as participatory and consensual. For him, it was an obstacle to American aims, all the more so since the guerrillas regularly raised more tax revenues in the countryside than did the US-created Republic of Vietnam. Even after one-third the population of southern Vietnam was forcibly relocated to “strategic hamlets,” people’s hearts and minds were never won by the US.

Habermas’ universalization of European civil society leads him to envision a “functioning global public sphere” where humanity can be said to be “advancing toward a perpetual peace.” This phrase is taken from Immanuel Kant, whom Habermas seeks to bring into the present because Kant “...could not foresee the structural transformation of this bourgeois public sphere into a semantically degenerated public sphere dominated by

¹³ William T. Rowe, “The Problem of ‘Civil Society’ in Late Imperial China.” *Modern China* 19.2 (April 1993) 139-157, quoted in Callahan, “Comparing the Discourse of Popular Politics in Korea and China: From Civil Society to Social Movements,” 287.

¹⁴ Samuel P. Huntington, “The Bases of Accommodation,” *Foreign Affairs*, 46 (4): 642–656 (July 1968).

¹⁵ For more details, see my talk, “Rethinking Samuel Huntington’s Third Wave,” Brown University, Program in Modern Greek Studies, March 24, 2010, available at <https://www.eroseffect.com/articles/huntington.pdf>

the electronic mass media and pervaded by images and virtual reality.”¹⁶ Within the universal framework of a “single representative polity,” Habermas explicitly “must reject collective rights and survival guarantees.”¹⁷ He anticipates mobilization of an “international civil society” to confront nation-states to end war, ecological devastation and poverty. For him the political public sphere can “prevent the implementation of ‘shady’ policies” through public criticism.¹⁸ He believes the League of Nations and the United Nations indicate that the World Spirit has “lurched forward.”¹⁹

Habermas’ Eurocentric bias is explicit: “Only the states of the *First World* can afford to harmonize their national interests to a certain extent with the norms that define the halfhearted cosmopolitan aspirations of the UN.”²⁰ He believes that for a perpetual peace to exist, there needs to be: “... a normative agreement concerning human rights whose interpretation of the moment is a matter of dispute between the West, on the one hand, and the Asians and Africans, on the other...”²¹ By privileging Western notions of human rights, it appears that Habermas does not include the right to life of more than ten million people killed in US war in Asia, nor the two million prisoners currently being held in the United States, many of whom suffer severely deprived and depraved conditions of life. Denied elementary guarantees of personal safety, many prisoners’ food provisions are below minimum standards established by government agencies.²²

Can the United Nations formulate the universal interests of humanity? The UN is an international confederation of militarized nation-states armed with weapons of mass destruction, which its members feel entitled to produce, sell and use against both foreign and domestic “enemies.” From 1950-1953, the UN was directly responsible for the deaths of more than four million people in the Korean War.²³ Half a century later, US Secretary of Defense Colin Powell misled the UN with “facts and conclusions based on solid evidence” about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. None were subsequently found after the UN-justified American invasion of Iraq had destroyed much of the country.²⁴ In the 19th and 20th centuries, Europe carved the world into national entities as colonial powers conquered the planet and abetted local powers to assist imperial domination. Created in the name of “progress” and “enlightenment,” today these nation-states are part of the problem facing

¹⁶ Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory* edited by Ciaran Cronin and Pablo De Greiff (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998) 176. Hereafter Inclusion.

¹⁷ Inclusion, xxxvii.

¹⁸ Inclusion, 171, 175.

¹⁹ Inclusion, 178. Surprisingly, on the next page he bemoans the fact that “The UN does not yet have its own military forces...”

²⁰ Inclusion, 184 (italics in the original).

²¹ Inclusion, 185.

²² See the recent post by Keven Rashid Johnson, *Our Deadly Bread: Coronavirus And Deadly Diet In Indiana Prisons* (2020) <http://rashidmod.com/?p=2819> (accessed June 19, 2020).

²³ Chung Dae-hwa, “Reevaluation of the Korean War: Its Genesis, Process and Conclusion,” *Social Science Journal* (Busan National University) 13, no. 21 (December 1995) 55 (in Korean); Dong-Choon Kim estimates 1.3 million South Korean soldiers and civilians killed, 2.5 million North Korean, an additional 650,000 refugees from the North who were killed in the South, and of course Chinese and American troops (*The Unending Korean War: A Social History* (Larkspur, CA: Tamal Vista Publications, 2009) 216.

²⁴ Jon Schwarz, “Lie After Lie: What Colin Powell Knew About Iraq 15 Years Ago and What He Told The U.N.,” *The Intercept*, February 6, 2018 <https://theintercept.com/2018/02/06/lie-after-lie-what-colin-powell-knew-about-iraq-fifteen-years-ago-and-what-he-told-the-un/> (accessed July 4, 2020).

humanity. A genuine perpetual peace lies outside the domains of nation-states, singly or in combinations.

From the grassroots, federations of self-governing, autonomous communities have been envisioned and created in the last fifty years. First formulated in 1970 by Black Panther leader Huey P. Newton as “Revolutionary Intercommunalism,” anarchist Murray Bookchin recast it as “Libertarian Municipalism” in 1991. More recently, Kurdish national liberation leader Abdullah Ocalan transformed the struggle of his people to become “Democratic Confederalism” rather than the creation of a nation-state.²⁵ The fact that a very similar goal was formulated by revolutionary leaders with such different ideologies reveals that the history has brought us to the point where such a form of democracy is precisely what is needed. In Rojava, Syria, implementation of post-patriarchal, secular, participatory governance is living testimony to its viability. Dismissed by Habermas as “communitarian,” such alternatives to nation-states contain the universal in their particular existence. Habermas’ universal proves to be empty except in the existence of the “World Mind.” Sensuous, living human beings first must love and respect themselves and their neighbors before being able to actualize a world of “perpetual peace.”²⁶

Habermas makes the claim that world society exists because “communication systems and markets have created a global network.”²⁷ His earlier work had supplemented Marx’s understanding of the self-formation of the human species through labor to include the dimension of communication,²⁸ yet he continues to disregard revolution (what Marx considered creation of the “class-for-itself”) as an important domain of species self-creation. Habermas’ explanation of the origins of “world society” ignores massive protest movements, such as on February 15, 2003, when more than thirty million people went into the streets around the world to oppose an Iraq war that had not yet begun. Nowhere does he mention the global uprising of 1968, the disarmament movement of the early 1980s, Asia’s string of democratic uprisings from 1986 to 1992, the regional overthrow of authoritarian regimes Eastern Europe in 1989, the alterglobalization upsurge from the Zapatistas to Seattle in 1999, and Occupy Wall Street/the Arab Spring in 2001—all of which were factors in the formation of world society—and to which we must add the uprising of 2020.²⁹

²⁵ Newton first proclaimed “revolutionary intercommunalism” on November 18, 1970 in a speech at Boston College. See David Hilliard and Donald Weise (editors), *The Huey P. Newton Reader* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2002) 160-175. Twenty-one years later, Bookchin first enunciated his very similar notion on April 3, 1991. See “On Libertarian Municipalism,” <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/murray-bookchin-libertarian-municipalism-an-overview> accessed June 19, 2020). Abdullah Ocalan, *Democratic Confederalism* (London, Cologne: Transmedia Publishing, 2011). Ocalan has also freed many Kurds from the illusion that a nation-state will lead to freedom.

²⁶ No misunderstanding: UNICEF and human rights protections are blessings to millions of people because of the excesses of corporate greed and government brutality. It is no coincidence that the international arms market exists alongside hundreds millions of starving human beings. Structural solutions to such problems, however, lie beyond the purview of a confederation of nation-states.

²⁷ Inclusion, 183.

²⁸ Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972).

²⁹ Such instances of global uprisings are what I named the “Eros Effect.” See Jason Del Gandio and AK Thompson (editors), *Spontaneous Combustion: The Eros Effect and Global Revolution* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2017).

Habermas' overly rationalistic understanding led him to postulate communication as a significant domain through which human beings emerge from our naturally conditioned social evolution and become a species-being. Following Marx, the role of labor has been widely understood as crucial in this process. Marcuse stressed the role of art in continuing to indicate the possibility of a qualitatively different society, one in which "existence would no longer be determined by the need for life-long alienated labor and leisure, human beings would no longer be subjected to the instruments of their labor, no longer dominated by the performances imposed upon them."³⁰ Viewed as another dimension of the self-formative process of humanity, revolutions can be understood as vital to negating *Naturwuchs*, the heteronomously imposed process of historical evolution that simultaneously enslaves humans under conditions not of our choosing and creates the possibility of our ultimate freedom.³¹

Unlike Herbert Marcuse, who remained closely connected with social movements throughout his life, Habermas and other members of the Frankfurt School opposed insurgent movements in key moments. During the 1960s, Max Horkheimer gave a highly publicized speech at an American army base in Germany thanking the US for liberating Germans from Nazism and comparing that effort to the US war to save Vietnam from Communism. Theodor Adorno called on the Frankfurt police to help control his classroom. After the murder in Berlin of student activist Benno Ohnesorg on June 2, 1967, the movement gathered in Hannover for his funeral. Rudi Dutschke gave an impassioned speech calling for militant resistance. Habermas dismissed Dutschke's comments as "Left Fascism." Although Habermas later retracted the comment, his affiliation with movements was thereafter never viable.

Herbert Marcuse's Understanding of Civil Society

In opposition to many of his contemporaries, Herbert Marcuse did not consider Europe a model for the rest of the world. Dialectically comprehending the relationship of freedom and slavery, of progress and domination, Marcuse, following Hegel, understood that individuals seeking to maximize their own interests in civil society led to the West's bloody quest for world domination.³² For Marcuse, European civil society contained inherently destructive dynamics that drove it to incessant expansion and conquest of new markets through global colonization. As Marcuse wrote:

Significantly enough, it is in this discussion of the police that Hegel makes some of his most pointed and far-reaching remarks about the destructive course that civil society is bound to take. And he concludes with the statement that 'by means of its own dialectic the civil society is driven beyond its own limits as a definite and self-complete society.' It must seek to open new markets to absorb the products of an increasing over-production,

³⁰ *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003) 29.

³¹ See "Nature and History," in *The Imagination of the New Left: A Global Analysis of 1968* (Boston: South End press, 1987) 224 ff.

³² Jack Goody, "Civil Society in an Extra-European Perspective," in *Civil Society: History and Possibilities*, eds., Sudipta Kaviraj and Sunil Khilnani (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 153.

and must pursue a policy of economic expansion and systematic colonization.³³

Although Hegel is often misunderstood as not having paid attention to economics, Marcuse emphasized Hegel's analysis of the "economic foundation" of civil society. Hegel recognized that the relations of civil society could never provide for perfect freedom and perfect reason owing to the particular mode of labor on which they were based. Within civil society, humans are "subject to the laws of an unmastered economy, and had to be tamed by a strong state, capable of coping with the social contradictions."³⁴ Hegel predicted that the vast wealth of society would not be able to prevent immiseration and poverty. In 1821, he foresaw that this imploding dimension of civil society would lead to economic collapse, with millions of people thrown out of work. He understood that "this society, in the excess of its wealth, is not wealthy enough...to stem excess of poverty and the creation of paupers."³⁵ As a result, Hegel believed that civil society would inevitably lead to "an authoritarian system, a change that springs from the economic foundations of that society itself, and serves to perpetuate its framework."³⁶

Hegel measured progress by human freedom. As Hegel understood it, the world was governed by reason, and history was the practical realization of the "universal mind" over time. For Hegel, progress was "the self-consciousness of freedom" that operated through the world mind, better known today as "world spirit" (*Zeitgeist*). Hegel defined three historical epochs of freedom:

1. Oriental, in which one, the despot, is free
2. Greco-Roman, in which some humans, but not slaves, are free
3. German-Christian, in which humans are free³⁷

It is precisely this "freedom" of all individuals to maximize their economic interests which becomes the cause of society dividing into billionaires alongside hundreds of millions of paupers.

Turning to the specificity demanded by Hegel's *Logic*, Marcuse insists that bourgeois society is a particular form applicable to the West:

Hegel's system is necessarily associated with a definite political philosophy and with a definite social and political order. The dialectic between civil society and the state of the Restoration is not incidental in Hegel's philosophy, nor is it just a section of his *Philosophy of Right*; its principles already operate in the conceptual structure of his system. His basic concepts are, on the other hand, but the culmination of the entire tradition of Western

³³ *Reason and Revolution*, 211. The quotation from Hegel is from *Philosophy of Right*, §246-8. Note that the Knox translation of Hegel is different than Marcuse's. See *Hegel's Philosophy of Right* translated and with notes by T.M. Knox, (London: Oxford University Press, 1967 and Clarendon reprint 1975) 151-2. For Hegel's text in German, see [https://hegel.net/hegelwerke/Hegel1821-Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts.pdf](https://hegel.net/hegelwerke/Hegel1821-Grundlinien%20der%20Philosophie%20des%20Rechts.pdf) (accessed May 11, 2020).

³⁴ *Reason and Revolution*, 164

³⁵ *Reason and Revolution*, 206; *Hegel's Philosophy of Right* §245, translated and with notes by T.M. Knox, (London: Oxford University Press, 1967 and Clarendon reprint 1975) 150.

³⁶ *Reason and Revolution*, 174.

³⁷ G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* (New York: The Colonial Press, 1899) 18.

thought. They become understandable only when interpreted within this tradition.³⁸

Unbridled individualism, the central organizing principle of European civil society, creates the need for a universal authority to constrain individual excesses. Marcuse understood that abstract generalization of particular interests is problematic. When individual interests conflict with collective rights, then the rights of the whole collide with those of the individual. Individuals' interests therefore do not correspond with what is just: "The [universal] right, however, holds the higher authority because it also represents—though in an inadequate form—the interest of the whole. The right of the whole and that of the individual do not have the same validity."³⁹ To secure the rights of the individual, the state stands outside civil society to enforce the "unselfish needs of the whole."⁴⁰

In our epoch, rationality itself has become unreasonable. Overwhelmed by constantly expanding technical and institutional powers, progress has turned into its opposite:

—instead of the state safeguarding individual rights, government violence is a key problems today. Hegel's idealized police, upholders of justice in the interests of the whole society, are today all too often murderers of innocent youth, disproportionately people of color. For years now, something like three Americans every day are killed by police.⁴¹ Deadly use of force is the reason for the global uprising of 2020 under slogans like Black Lives Matter and Defund the Police.

—instead of developing the free individual, society today produces conformity and standardization of thought. Progress is measured in material goods and the "standard of living."

—instead of greater freedom from the state, contemporary society shrinks autonomy and expands heteronomous domination. In the US and many other places, religious values are imposed upon on entire groups such as women and gays. Moslem women in France are legally prohibited from wearing their hijabs.

—instead of expanding life possibilities, the system demands we work longer hours for more years for less money, despite the economic possibility of far greater free time. In 1930, John Maynard Keynes predicted a work week of only 15 hours by 2030 because of "science and compound interest."⁴² Yet today, "making a living" through a lifetime of toil rather than living freely remains nearly everyone's preoccupation, from cradle to grave. Indeed, hundreds of millions of marginalized wretched of the earth barely have enough food or medicine. Well-fed dissident voices are increasingly denied jobs and public

³⁸ *Reason and Revolution*, 16.

³⁹ *Reason and Revolution*, 197

⁴⁰ *Reason and Revolution*, 213; Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §253.

⁴¹ In 2019, police killed 1,098 people in the US. See <https://mappingpoliceviolence.org> (accessed June 18, 2020).

⁴² Keynes, "Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren," <http://www.econ.yale.edu/smith/econ116a/keynes1.pdf> (accessed June 15, 2020).

platforms. Part-time positions proliferate with low wages, leaving fewer families with opportunities to make ends meet.

—instead of expanding academic freedom, the state has remolded it into a means to support and celebrate war criminals like Samuel Huntington. The original meaning of academic freedom was intellectual freedom from government and religious control. In our society, public intellectuals vanish, and critical thinking is devalued.

Like Karl Marx, Marcuse considered the subject of history to be sensuous human beings whose actions are determined by their own needs for freedom. By integrating Freudian psychoanalysis into his analysis, Marcuse was able to proceed far beyond Marx.⁴³ While Habermas treated the unconscious as “inner foreign territory,”⁴⁴ Marcuse clarified the role of the individual in social development:

“In the case of capitalism, the individual needs above the (unsublimated) biological level are shaped by the conditions of alienated labor, and by their recreation and compensation in leisure time and in inter-personal relations. Hegel (*Philosophy of Right*, pp. 189 ff.) speaks of the “system of needs” established by “civil society” (= *bürgerliche Gesellschaft*) into which the individual is born and which, as the concrete universal, operates through his particular needs. This system derives from the general competition of the individuals in (alienated) labor, and requires, for its functioning, an apparatus of domination.”⁴⁵

Marcuse went beyond economic benefits to discuss how colonialism also satisfies deep-rooted instinctual needs:

It seems not inappropriate to sharpen Hegel’s conception by focusing it on the repression and aggressiveness mobilized and made socially useful in this system...The brutal satisfaction of the social need for dominating and “pacifying” ever more areas of the globe (and of outer space) also satisfies deep-rooted instinctual needs of the individual – together with his material and cultural needs.⁴⁶

A well-known advocate for those marginalized from the material privileges of the world system, Marcuse’s advocacy did not arise solely from his emotional solidarity with the “wretched of the earth” but also from his intellectual comprehension of the relationship between instincts and society. As opposed to glorifying European civil society, he called for “counter-behavior” among a new subject in the advanced capitalist societies “aiming at

⁴³ *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press: 1955). While mechanistic Marxists insist on the dependence of the “superstructure” on the “economic base,” Marcuse would ask, where does psychology fit into that model?”

⁴⁴ Habermas, “On Systematically Distorted Communication,” *Inquiry*, 1970 Vol. 13: 207.

⁴⁵ Marcuse, “Cultural Revolution,” in Douglas Kellner (editor) *Towards a Critical Theory of Society* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001) 136. This is Volume 2 of Marcuse’s selected papers, and this essay had never been previously published. Emphasis and parenthesis are exactly quoted here as they appear in Kellner’s edited volume.

⁴⁶ Marcuse, Cultural Revolution, 136-137.

abolishing the conditions which gave rise to the closed mental structure."⁴⁷ He made no attempt to transpose Western models onto the entire world or to fetishize bourgeois civil society as its only form. He insisted upon the need for liberation from the very system glorified by Eurocentrists.

While bourgeois profitability and unbridled individualism became the predominant form of interaction among Europeans (and subsequently, much the rest of the world), group ties in Asia reveal complex networks of civil society that play important roles in regulating behavior. Yet for generations, an uninterrupted intellectual disparagement of Asia has accompanied popular fear of the "Yellow Menace."

Western Myths

Asian values, including survivalisms of Buddhism, Confucian, Daoism and Islam, continue to infuse moral and ethical constraints on everyday life. Instead of locating Asia's heritage of values and relations as a resource, many Western observers point to the dearth of American-style voluntary groups and conclude that there is no civil society. John Keane notes that, "in early modern usages, 'civil society' was typically contrasted with the 'Asiatic' region, in which, or so it was said, civil societies had manifestly failed to appear."⁴⁸

So greatly were Asian societies devalued that democracy has been formulated solely as a European (Greek) invention, even though research has revealed republican forms of government in ancient Sumerian cities.⁴⁹ In India, from approximately 600 to 300 BCE, city-state republics arose in the Ganges plain with elected leaders and assemblies, which gave rise to egalitarian religions such as Jainism and Buddhism.⁵⁰ Lest we forget, nonviolence was first promulgated in India, not the West, where it was imported through ongoing cultural connections.⁵¹ Commenting on Asian philosophers like Lao-tzu, Mencius and Confucius, South Korean president and Nobel prize recipient Kim Dae Jung persuasively postulated Asia's cultural traditions as possibly providing a contemporary basis for new "global democracy" to be constructed.⁵²

Evidence of civil society in Asia defined even by European standards abounds. In China between 1905 and 1949, no less than 100 disparate women's papers were published in Beijing. Chinese chambers of commerce in market towns were said to number at least two thousand in 1912, with about 200,000 merchant members, and an additional 871 associations in larger cities.⁵³ As early as the thirteenth century, Marco Polo noted charity for the poor and a high level of social solidarity in the Chinese city of Hangzhou. A more

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ John Keane, *Global Civil Society?* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 31. On the next page, Keane continues his commentary on Europeans' views: "Civil society was impossible in Muslim society."

⁴⁹ See Thorkild Jacobsen, "Primitive Democracy in Ancient Mesopotamia," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 2, no. 3 (1943) 159-172.

⁵⁰ Romila Thapar, *A History of India* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1966) 53. See Goody, "Civil Society," 156.

⁵¹ Demetrius T. Vassiliades, *The Greeks in India* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 2000) 57.

⁵² Kim Dae Jung, "Is Culture Destiny? The Myth of Asia's Anti-Democratic Values," *Foreign Affairs* 6, 189-194.

⁵³ Gordon White, Jude Howell, and Shang Xiaoyuan, "Market Reforms and the Emergent Constellation of Civil Society in China," in *Civil Society and Democracy*, ed. Carolyn M. Elliott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) 266-267.

recent account described that the poor were cared for by “private charity on the part of the rich merchants who wanted to make a name for themselves by doing good works.”⁵⁴

“Asian despotism” has long been exaggerated, while problems of crime and savage relations in the West have been minimized. In my view, many teahouses and even street corners in Asia might be considered as much a public space in which individuals can develop as the interiors of Europe’s finest cafés. The gentleness of Confucian public space, in which individuals are relatively safe from the kinds of public criminal intrusions that Westerners have long since accepted as normal, provides a safety that leads to reasoned discussions rather than to violent settlement of disputes, to social relations and individual thinking that could flower in non-capitalist contexts. So “normal” were fraud and crime in Europe that Hegel called them “unpremeditated or civil wrong [*unbefangenes oder bürgerliches Unrecht*].” He specifically considered them to be “a material part of civil society.”⁵⁵

Famously, Hegel enunciated the phrase “Oriental despotism”: “The Orientals have not attained the knowledge that Spirit—man as such—is free; and because they do not know this, they are not free. They only know that one is free . . . that One is therefore a despot, not a free man.”⁵⁶ Over the years, Hegel’s formulation has continued to be repeated, notably by his student Karl Marx, who regarded the Asiatic mode of production as despotic and unchanging.⁵⁷ He believed all societies would follow the same stages of economic development through which Europe had passed: from “primitive” communism to slave society, feudalism, and capitalism, before being able to achieve socialism and communism.

Scholars like Max Weber also chastised Far Eastern cultures for being despotic and feudal, lacking the ingredients for organizational success, and outside the grand narrative of Western civilization. Max Weber believed the West exclusively knew rational law and rational personal ethics. In 1956, Zbigniew Brzezinski wrote that in the Orient, “despotic forms of government have been the rule for thousands of years.” The following year, Karl Wittvogel published his technologically-determinist explanation of “oriental despotism,” attributing the phenomenon to central control of hydraulic systems.⁵⁸

Nor are anarchists immune from prejudice against Asians. Gentle and poetic anarchist prince Peter Kropotkin had many virtues, yet one encounters passages in *Mutual Aid* with consternation. His use of “savages” and “barbarians” is curiously antiquated. Moreover in his *Memoirs*, we find oblique, racist references to “Asiatic schemes” as well as phrases like of “an Oriental fashion, in an abominable way” and “oriental amusements were

⁵⁴ E. Balazs, “The Birth of Capitalism in China,” in E. Balazs (ed.), *Chinese Civilization and Bureaucracy: Variations on a Theme* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964).

⁵⁵ Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960) 197.

⁵⁶ G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, 18.

⁵⁷ In his last great project, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Marx’s Eurocentric model of the system considered capitalists and workers. By his own admission in a note to Engels, he could not solve the problem of expanded reproduction in volume 2. If only Marx had been more attentive to Hegel’s insight that civil society would produce colonialism, he might have found the solution. It was left to Rosa Luxemburg to introduce the third person—people outside the core of the system—and thereby complete the puzzle. She understood that capitalism was imperialist from the very beginning, that it continually needs to absorb peripheral peoples and new arenas of life into profitable relationships. Rosa Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1968).

⁵⁸ Karl Wittvogel, *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957).

looked upon with disgust.”⁵⁹ I assume that Kropotkin would have outgrown his bias, although in his own day, it was seldom questioned.

Communist policymakers in the Soviet Union similarly distrusted Asians. In 1937, under Stalin’s orders, some 200,000 Koreans living in eastern Siberia near Korea and Japan were deported to Central Asia (Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan) for fear they would support Japan, even though Koreans were waging a mighty independence struggle against Japanese occupation. In the same period of time, many Korean Communists were summarily executed for fear they might be Japanese spies.⁶⁰ Even progressives like former Czech president Vaclav Havel made racist remarks when he off-handedly equated Asia with despotism and Europe with democracy. Jürgen Habermas has also associated Asia with evil during the German “historians’ debate.”⁶¹ Ernst Nolte’s 1986 article had challenged the unique character of Nazi crimes and labeled the Holocaust an “Asiatic” deed perpetrated by Hitler and the Nazis. Nolte attributed their motives to fear of becoming potential victims of Stalin’s gulags and class murders—which he also considered “Asiatic.” In response, Habermas challenged Nolte’s conclusion denying the uniqueness of Nazism’s crimes, but he never challenged the “Asiatic” label of these crimes against humanity. Habermas’ acceptance of Nolte’s term is part of a substantial bias against Asians.⁶²

Traditional civil societies in Asia, so different from the West’s, have been great sources of strength for social movements. As Larry Diamond and others point out, “civil society has played a crucial role in building pressure for democratic transition and pushing it through to completion.”⁶⁸ Nowhere was this more apparent than in South Korea.

Korean Civil Society

Korean neighborhoods and villages created a fundamentally different civil society than that which appeared in Western European cities. Many scholars insist that Korea has no history of democracy, that civil society only appeared in the late 20th century as a result of “American democratization.” Not only do such accounts ignore US opposition to democracy in South Korea from 1945 to 1993, but such assertions minimize the courage and sacrifices endured by indigenous partisans of freedom. Long before the 20th century, Koreans enjoyed longstanding autonomous forms of consensual decision-making and often resisted the central government when they did not agree with royal decisions. In pre-modern Korea, alongside *yangban* (royal) tyranny, communal village government worked by consensus. In many localities, representatives coordinated neighborhood needs, and daily forms of cooperation patterned the tapestry of people’s lives. Folk drama reinforced

⁵⁹ Peter Kropotkin, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* (New York: Dover Publications, 1971) 76, 82, 310.

⁶⁰ Bruce Cumings, *North Korea: Another Country* (New York: New Press, 2004) 118.

⁶¹ Edward Friedman (editor), *The Politics of Democratization: Generalizing East Asian Experiences* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994) 14.

⁶² See the discussion in Jürgen Habermas, *The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and the Historians’ Debate* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990) xvii.

⁶⁸ Larry Diamond, Marc Plattner, Yun-han Chu, and Hung-mao Tien (editors), *Consolidating the Third Wave Democracies: Regional Challenges* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1997) xxx. Yet as Muthiah Alagappa notes, NGOs and civil society can also be impediments to democratization. Muthiah Alagappa (editor), *Civil Society and Political Change in Asia: Expanding and Contracting Democratic Space* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2004) 185.

group ties at the same time as it gave occasion to ridicule rulers. Beyond the power of governing authorities, shamanistic rituals invoked higher powers to sustain and empower people. Villagers autonomously shared labor with each other through a practice known as *dure* (두레).

Small-scale academies created by dissident scholars afforded space for individuals to develop their intelligence and original thinking, often in a group context that existed in opposition to established powers. These were not sites for *yangban* to study for civil service examinations and to become high-ranking government officials. Focused around particular scholars, *seowon* constituted an important source of a “reasoning public” and were places for individual self-cultivation of knowledge. Far from seats of power in well-chosen settings of natural beauty, Neo-Confucian scholars (*sarim*) venerated sages and sought to enlarge individual understanding of proper behavior. Autonomous of government control, they were part of a public sphere, or mid-level institution of civil society.⁶⁹ Rural scholars often functioned as intermediaries between state and people, and were a vital component of traditional society.⁷⁰ In the 16th century, waves of literati purges were carried out by conservative forces whose hereditary wealth and power were threatened, but it appears that these attacks strengthened *seowon* influence in the 17th century.⁷¹ By 1700, private academies, or *seowon*, are thought to have been so widespread that there were some six hundred in all—more in Korea than in all of China.

Voluntary civil groups were of tremendous importance before and during the Gwangju People’s Uprising of 1980, including the Women’s Pure Pine Tree Society, Nok Du Bookstore, Wildfire Night School, Clown Theater Group, and the Artists’ Council. During the halcyon days of liberated Gwangju, general assemblies of tens of thousands of people (on three separate occasions 100,000 or more) gathered around the circular fountain in front of the provincial capital to freely deliberate their future.⁷² While some favored immediate surrender of the weapons used to liberate the city, others vociferously defended their right to bear arms. Compromises were worked out in public. The three demands formulated at these mass rallies (punishment of top military officials responsible for the killings, compensation for the dead and injured, and an official apology) were finally won after years of struggle. The daily citizens’ assemblies, unlike the representative government of the 1871 Paris Commune, provides a vivid embodiment of Habermas’ description of undistorted communication.

One of the leading American Koreanists, Bruce Cumings, insists that civil society did not reawaken until elections of 1985.⁷³ He also does not consider the long history of

⁶⁹ JaHyun Kim Haboush, “Academies and Civil Society in Chosun Korea,” in *La société civile face à l’État: dans les traditions chinoise, japonaise, coréenne et vietnamienne* (Paris: École-française d’extrême-orient, 1994). See also John Duncan, “The Problematic Modernity of Confucianism,” in *Korean Society: Civil Society, Democracy and the State*, ed. Charles Armstrong (London: Routledge, 2002).

⁷⁰ Cho Hein, “The Historical Origin of Civil Society in Korea,” *Korea Journal* 37, no. 2 (Summer 1997).

⁷¹ Lee Sang-hae, *Seowon: The Architecture of Korea’s Private Academies* (Seoul: Hollym, 2005) 14-15.

⁷² For the numbers of people who attended general assemblies during the days of liberated Gwangju, see *Asia’s Unknown Uprisings: South Korean Social Movements in the 20th Century*, 185.

⁷³ He accused Park Chung-hee of “shutting down civil society” in 1961, a curiously static notion of civil society. Bruce Cumings, “Civil Society in West and East,” in *Korean Society: Civil Society, Democracy and the State*, edited by Charles Armstrong (London: Routledge, 2002) 23-24. Cumings went on to say that South Korea “...still falls short of either the Japanese or the American models of democracy and civil society...”

scholars' schools and counterpublics as components of civil society. Indigenous traditions like *seowon* remained invisible to the first Americans who came to Korea after the Korean War, especially government functionaries who arrived under the auspices of the U.S. State Department or Peace Corps, as did Cumings. One of their teachers was Gregory Henderson, who spent more than eighteen years in Korea or Washington as a chief architect of U.S. policy. Like many of his contemporaries, Henderson simply transposed categories developed to explain feudal Europe to Korea, where he found "a society lacking in strong institutions or voluntary associations between village and throne; a society that knows little of castle town, feudal lord and court, semi-independent merchant societies, city-states, guilds, or classes cohesive enough to be centers of independent stance and action in the polity . . . a society characterized by amorphousness or isolation in social relations."⁷⁴ Precisely those dimensions identified by Henderson as missing can be located in Korea's past, in Jang Bogo's semi-independent merchant society built by slaves who freed themselves, in the class politics of the farmers' movement (*Tonghak*) at the end of the 19th century, and in indigenous political formations such as federations and confederations.

Henderson neglected to include Confucian means of dissidence like *bibangmok* (the tree where people could hang anonymous notes of protest), *kwondang* (when students of high Confucian academies went on strike to call attention to grievances), and *sinmungo* (the drum which could be beaten to request legal action).⁷⁵ Instead he centrally located "persistence of the pattern" of the "vortex" of centripetal power sweeping everything toward the center. Although he regards this dynamic as uniquely Korean, similar centralization can be found in France, where power is vested almost exclusively in Paris. In fairness, Henderson asserted that the pattern of the vortex "in overt form can be detected in the period from 1880 to 1910; its transformation and expansion" could be traced from the late Japanese period to the Americans' first two decades.⁷⁶ Curiously, he failed to note that this was precisely the period of increasing concentration of capital and simultaneously when Koreans struggled mightily against Japanese and U.S. power, a true "vortex"—but one propelled by foreign imperial forces.

Henderson's omission is no accident. During the first years of the US military government in Korea, Americans systematically facilitated the massacre of tens of thousands of civilians on Jeju, a matrifocal island with a long tradition of self-governing villages, in which women divers' associations were a kind of living anarchism for centuries. Within days of Japan's surrender at the end of World War 2, all of the island's factories were taken over and run through workers' self-management. For nearly three years, a grassroots People's Committee ruled Jeju peacefully, even building 27 schools. In contrast to the rest of southern Korea, the island was at peace. As late as October 1947, U.S. occupation commander Governor-General John Reed Hodge told a group of visiting congressional representatives that Jeju was "a truly communal area that is peacefully

⁷⁴ Gregory Henderson, *Korea: The Politics of the Vortex* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968) 4.

⁷⁵ Chung Chai-sik, "Confucian Tradition and Nationalist Ideology in Korea," in *South Korea's Minjung Movement: The Culture and Politics of Dissidence*, ed. Kenneth Wells (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1995) 71.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

controlled by the People's Committee without much Comintern influence."⁷⁷ Under the U.S. military government, however, bloodletting in Jeju began when islanders opposed Korea's division. More than 30,000 people out of a total population of about 300,000 were killed. Some estimates place the number of people killed closer to 70,000.⁷⁸ Many more were wounded; women were systematically raped; at least 100,000 people were forcibly relocated to "protected" enclaves along the coast; and 70 percent of the islands' homes were destroyed.

Not only did he choose to ignore these harsh US measures undertaken to repress grassroots democracy, Henderson well understood that countervailing powers traditionally existed within the Korean state, specifically that a:

top council, called *hwabaek*, determined the (nonhereditary) succession to the throne and sometimes exercised a veto over the king's decisions. Reflecting the importance of each element in the central council, discussion was supposed to produce unanimity, and 'it was the custom that any single disagreement brought the termination of the discussion on the specific issue.'⁷⁹

Henderson's description of power would have made any European monarch blush with anger at the notion that any high councilor's disagreement could essentially veto top decisions. One can only wonder what Tudor monarch Henry VIII might have been compelled to do with his first five wives.

For generations before the penetration of modernity, traditional networks wielded power as much through cooperative dissidence as through competitive violence. As far back as the 15th century, several kings unsuccessfully attempted to expand the use of coins and paper currency. Despite severe punishment for refusing to do so, people quietly resisted, and the royal efforts failed. Apparently, people preferred to use grain and cloth as media of exchange and to live without banks—which they did until the 1880s.⁸⁰

Precisely this difference with the West is an essential reason why Korean everyday life continues to be so attractive to foreigners and Koreans alike. Koreans know better than most how to thrive and prosper within groups, to excel at simultaneously offering individuals praise and criticism. When they emigrate to the United States, Korean small businesses use a unique method of lending money to each other to expand operations. These civil resources are not simply financial since they derive from generations of living with trust for each other in a social system where honorable action and righteous deeds are arguably more important than profitable maximization of individual financial gain.

Confucian economic transactions were thought to be best consummated when both parties were fairly treated. Rather than each individual seeking to maximize economic gain, as in the West, both sought to find the fairest bargain. Unlike Europe where "free"

⁷⁷ Bruce Cumings, "The Question of American Responsibility for the Suppression of the Jejudo Uprising," in *For the Truth and Reparations: Jeju April 3rd of 1948 Massacre Not Forgotten*, edited by Hur Sang Soo (Seoul: BaekSan Publisher, 2001) 17–18.

⁷⁸ See Christian Institute for the Study of Justice and Development, *Lost Victory: An Overview of the Korean People's Struggle for Democracy in 1987* (Seoul: Minjungsa, 1988) 8.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁸⁰ James Palais, (Seoul: Institute for Modern Korean Studies, Yonsei University, 1998) 10, 17.

individuals principally sought profitability in commodity relationships, consideration of honor (“saving face”) and family esteem were significant mitigating factors that helped to curb the worst excesses of the West. Neither China nor Korea may have constituted a bourgeois society, yet their social formations were another type of civil society whose contours have been left largely unexplored because of Eurocentric bias.

Islamic Civil Society⁸¹

In Islamic society, the strength of group ties (*assabiyeh*) is such an important dimension that it was the main variable in Ibn Khaldun’s materialist philosophy of history, written five centuries before that of Karl Marx.⁸² Social regulation of what Hegel called “civil wrong” was thereby achieved by non-state civil constraints. The paramount influence of *assabiyeh* enforced solidarity through moral and ethical prohibitions even when state power was distant. So important is the group for Arabs that poetry is written to be performed in public rather than read privately in books.

Religious prescriptions are yet another layer of regulating behavior. Islamic duty to give to the poor is widely observed, especially during Ramadan, when fasting for 30 days serves to help people remember the less fortunate. The bonds among the community of the faithful (*ummah*) make it possible when needed to find a place to spend the night simply by asking for the hospitality of fellow believers. Individual property is not regarded with the same sacrosanct boundaries violently enforced in the West. Conservative philosopher Al Ghazali told us the story of Fath al-Mawsili, who took what he needed without asking permission from an absent brother of the faith. When the owner returned and was told what had happened, he was delighted. Compare with John Locke’s *Second Treatise* where preservation of individual property is the goal of government, the same reason Hobbes called for a *Leviathan*. Elsewhere, al Ghazali asks: “Does one of you put his hand in the pocket or purse of his brother and take what he needs without permission?” If the answer is no, “Then you are not brothers!” To be a brother in God, “you have no greater right to your pounds or pence than I have.”⁸³ The contrast with European possessive individualism could not be more acutely expressed.

Prescriptive aspects of Islamic culture have long been criticized by Europeans. Entrenched patriarchal hierarchy and oppressive of women by extreme forms of Islam are used as one justification for the West’s war in Afghanistan. Moreover, it is often said, often rightfully so, that Moslem society does not protect individual freedom of expression. Images of Mohammed were—and are—prohibited in most Islamic cultures, as is the depiction generally of the human figure. Western journalists’ “right” to caricature Mohammed in extremely pejorative contexts serves to embellish claims of European

⁸¹ With the publication of Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, that term has been used as a means to discourage non-indigenous people from analyzing these societies. Yet, Said was criticizing Western studies serving imperial interests by inventing societies that were undeveloped and unchanging—as opposed to modern and “superior” Western social formations. See Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

⁸² See my article “Individual and Group: Comparative Cultural Observations with a Focus on Ibn Khaldun,” *Journal of Biosciences* (Indian Academy of Social Sciences) 39(2), March 2014, 327-332.

⁸³ Al-Ghazali, *On the Duties of Brotherhood*, translated by Muhtar Holland (Woodstock, NY: The Overlook Press, 1976) 24.

superiority, evidenced by “freedom” to produce and market almost anything, including pornography.

Numerous counterexamples can be given to dispel the myth that intellectual freedom did not exist in Islamic society. Averroes (also known as Ibn Rushd, 1126-1198) stressed the role of science and philosophical speculation over faith, of individual reason and dialectical change over group conformity and eternal religious doctrine. Born in Cordoba, the pluralistic capital of Arab Spain where three monotheistic religions coexisted, his first 17 years were lived in a democracy. For 40 years, from 1106-1145, he tells us that Cordoba was “almost completely democratic” before it turned into a tyranny.⁸⁴ Known as “the commentator” for his extensive notes on Aristotle (“the philosopher”), Averroes challenged the cosmology of all three religions. He wrote a critique of Ptolemy and asserted that the planets rotated around the sun. As a result, he faced a ban on his works in his home city, his books were burned in public, and he suffered mobs’ insults when he appeared in public. Before he died, however, he again found praise and acceptance.⁸⁵

His books helped to invigorate scientific thought, notably influencing Galileo at Padua and laying the groundwork for the European Enlightenment. As his writing gained popularity in the West, however, a Papal edict prohibited uncensored versions in 1231, and his ideas were condemned by the bishop of Paris in 1277. Nonetheless, Thomas Aquinas quoted Averroes more than 500 times in about 1250.⁸⁶ In 1320, Dante’s *Divine Comedy* placed Averroes in the same group with Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. For centuries, Averroes’ cosmology remained anathema in Europe, so much so that in 1543, Copernicus placed his own manuscript proving heliocentrism under his deathbed so it would only be discovered when it was too late for his body to be tortured.

Compare Averroes’ life to that of Giordano Bruno, burned at the stake in Rome in 1600 for breaking with religious cosmology and doctrine, to Galileo, forced by the threat of torture to recant his beliefs in 1633. In Amsterdam, Spinoza was ostracized by his fellow Jews in 1656 (with the support of the Calvinist theologians) for his opinion that reason, not scripture, was key to truth. All these European champions of the Enlightenment were influenced by Averroes.

European censorship persisted even into the 18th century. When Frederick the Great died, his successor Friedrich Wilhelm II proclaimed censorship in 1788 and circumscribed Immanuel Kant from writing anything about Christianity. One of the great philosophers of the Enlightenment, Kant had proclaimed “Have courage to use your own reason!” Yet he obeyed the King’s order for as long as the monarch lived.⁸⁷

Concluding Comment

⁸⁴ *Averroes on Plato’s Republic*, translated by Ralph Turner (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974) 133.

⁸⁵ Paul Kurtz, “Intellectual Freedom, Rationality, and Enlightenment: The Contributions of Averroës,” in *Averroës and the Enlightenment*, edited by Mourad Wahba and Mona Abousenna (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1996) 30-32.

⁸⁶ Dominique Urvoay, *Ibn Rushd*, translated by Olivia Stewart (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1991) 27, 33.

⁸⁷ Ralph P. Hummel, *The Bureaucratic Experience: The Post-Modern Challenge: The Post-Modern Challenge* (New York: Routledge, 2007) 84.

The time is long past when Western “superiority” can be justified through such notions as the “White Man’s Burden,” “Manifest Destiny,” and “*mission civilisatrice*.” Yet, more subtle forms of bias persist, while at the same time, what was civil society in the West has turned even its promises into their opposite. The antagonistic structure of bourgeois society, in which individual selfishness drives a constant process of expanding wealth and state control, contrasts sharply with Asian societies, where group is central and stability desirable.

Looking toward the future, human beings can create better societies, more gentle and caring ones than anything that has evolved in the past, provided we first give ourselves the chance to understand each other in our own terms.

George Katsiaficas dedicated his first book (on the global imagination of 1968) to his teacher and friend, Herbert Marcuse. He is also the author of *Subversion of Politics* and *Asia’s Unknown Uprisings*. With Kathleen Cleaver, he co-edited *Liberation, Imagination and the Black Panther Party*. His web site is: <http://www.eroseffect.com>