



## THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY AND LIBERAL-RATIONAL GLOBAL CULTURE IN ASIA

Understanding democratization requires acknowledging the world-polity theorists' important insight that modern states acquire their identities *partly* through socialization to the constitutive norms of a liberal-rational global culture. But world-polity theory should be revised to account for the fact that not all global cultures are liberal-rational, and that among those stressing democratic values, some are more radical than others. Among the liberal-rational variants, there is, at any given time, at least a mainstream and an oppositional global culture. Even finer distinctions are possible.

More importantly, world-polity theory should be revised to note that states vary in their propensity to *accept* socialization. China's aversion to decentering within world society and history impedes socialization to the contemporary norm of democratic governance. The CCP accepts much of mainstream liberal-rational global culture, particularly those elements useful for increasing comprehensive national power. But it rejects elements, especially in the global oppositional culture, valuing democracy. CCP leaders and intellectuals believe that cultures serve states; hence, any "global" culture must actually be serving an international power pole, most likely the United States. China can borrow from other states' (including "global") culture selectively, but the CCP rejects reconstitution from abroad at the level of identity. It perceives democratization as likely to lead to this result by weakening the state and turning China into a cultural "stooge" (*fuyong*) of the United States. Resistance—and, ultimately, amassing sufficient comprehensive national power to recenter China—requires upholding "the people's democratic dictatorship."

In contrast, a lack of concern about decentering in Thailand and Taiwan combines with the perception that liberal-rational global culture is universally valid to facilitate state socialization and, since the 1970s, democratization. Siamese of the nineteenth century became convinced that the global culture's rationalism was consistent with pure Siamese Buddhism. Their felicitous resolution of the *tiyong* dilemma established the precondition for later Thai elites not only to accept reconstitution by liberal-rational global culture, but even to seek it proactively.

The distinctively Taiwanese identity only started taking shape in the 1920s, well after liberal-rational global culture had already begun disseminating widely. Taiwan thus never faced a *tiyong* crisis, and has always been predisposed to accept identity reconstitution at the direction of external forces. When Chinese hegemony began crumbling on the island in the 1970s, Taiwanese nationalism blossomed. Its historical "lateness" helped ensure that resistance to liberal-rational global culture would be minimal, as did the need to refashion Taiwan into a "model country" so that it could survive as an autonomous entity.

Thai, Taiwanese, and Chinese identities could change. In particular, as people in China continue to expand their cultural and intellectual horizons, they might pressure the CCP into redefining the democratization *problematique* in ways that finesse decentering. Increasingly in future years, the CCP's highest ranks will likely fill with people educated in the West. They might soften their resistance to decentering or accept "sharing Subjecthood" with the West as the architects of modern world history. After all, there is no denying China's stunning contributions to contemporary human civilization.<sup>1</sup>

At present, however, the trend seems the opposite. The CCP under Hu Jintao has strengthened authoritarian control and proclaimed its commitment to building an alternative new nondemocratic political civilization. Party leaders and intellectuals assert the validity of "world plurality" over (in English School terminology) the liberal "solidarism" of world-polity and democratic-peace theory. The CCP demands the annexation of democratic Taiwan and seeks to extend its influence throughout Asia, the South Pacific, and Africa. If it succeeds in establishing an alternative new political civilization, authoritarian but wealthy, people in Taiwan, Thailand, and other Asian countries might begin to question democracy's universal validity. The possibility would appear to be especially strong in the case of Thailand because of Thaksin Shinawatra's popularity from 2001 to 2005 and the tradition of looking abroad to the great powers for models of governance.

The deeper problem is that, in the *longue duree* of world history, democracy may be *abnormal*. Political scientist S. E. Finer concludes his

three-volume masterwork on “The History of Government Since Ancient Times” by noting the paucity of democratic governments in the past:

The Forum [i.e., democratic] polity is comparatively rare in the history of government, where the Palace [authoritarian] polity and its variants are overwhelmingly the most common type. Only in the last two centuries has the Forum polity become widespread. Before then its appearance is, on the whole, limited to the Greek *poleis*, the Roman Republic, and the medieval European city-states. Furthermore, most of them for most of the time exhibited the worst pathological features of this kind of polity. For rhetoric read demagogy, for persuasion read corruption, pressure, intimidation, and falsification of the vote. For meetings and assemblies, read tumult and riot. For mature deliberation through a set of revising institutions, read instead self-division, inconstancy, slowness, and legislative and administrative stultification. And for elections read factional plots and intrigues. These features were the ones characteristically associated with the Forum polity down to very recent times. They were what gave the term “Republic” a bad name, but made “Democracy” an object of sheer horror.<sup>2</sup>

Democratization specialists and world-polity theorists sometimes imply that democracy is normal and that all countries are embarked upon “the road” to a democratic future. But Finer’s conclusions suggest the opposite. Viewed from the long span of history, back to ancient times, authoritarian governance is normal to human society. The short modern period esteeming democracy *may* be exceptional, unlikely, and, therefore, transitory.

There are other reasons to question the security of democracy’s future in Asia (and elsewhere). New computer- and telecommunications-driven transformations to the ecology of globe-level human interaction threaten to undermine liberal-rational global culture’s integrity. Advances in surveillance and control technologies provide authoritarian governments and democracies enticed by their functionality with easy-to-use tools for monitoring populations and constraining their activities. Within this context, democracy can prevail in Asia against those disdaining it as a pointless impediment to power and plenty only if concerned actors exercise agency to nurture and defend it.

### Global Culture Versus the Network Society

The basic assumption of world-polity theory is that ideational (soft) power ultimately triumphs over material power. The diffusion of liberal-rational global culture from its West European birthplace to the rest of the world did initially require European military and economic supremacy, a material-power advantage that owed an enormous debt to East and Southeast Asia and the Islamic world. But at some undefined point during

(probably) the twentieth century, global culture transcended the countries that created it and achieved a transnational status. Afterward, not even the leading Western states could escape its constitutive power. International NGOs (INGOs) became the most important actors socializing states, and they continue today faithfully to implement global culture's constitutive norms. World-polity theory does not consider the possibility of a rising state accumulating sufficient material power to challenge global culture's hegemony and one day overturn it. But this is the potential challenge posed by authoritarian China's rise.

What is the relationship between ideational and material power? What will be the fate of liberal-rational global culture and democracy in Asia? To try to answer these questions, it is useful briefly to review two seminal contributions to contemporary sociological theory: Michael Mann's *The Sources of Social Power* (1986) and Manuel Castells' *The Rise of the Network Society* (1996).

### *Michael Mann on Power and Interstices*

In *The Sources of Social Power*, Mann presents world society as constituted neither by a hegemonic global culture nor the CCP's asserted autonomous power poles.<sup>3</sup> Instead, Mann sees the world as constituted by "multiple overlapping and intersecting networks of power," which may or may not covary positively in any particular time-space juncture. Human needs and desires can be satisfied collectively using four kinds of power resource: ideology, economy, violence (military force), and politics. Using each resource generates an organized power network, such as religion for ideology, the market for economic production and exchange, military and police forces for violence, and the state for politics.

Power can be further subdivided along two dimensions: whether it is *authoritative* or *diffused*, and whether it is *intensive* or *extensive* (see Table 2). Authoritative power is consciously willed by groups and institutions and is characterized by explicit commands and conscious obedience. Diffused power is exerted through relatively spontaneous, unconscious, decentered processes exemplifying power relations not explicitly commanded. Within the second dimension, intensive power is concentrated, coercive, and highly mobilized, thoroughly penetrating the lives of those under its influence. Extensive power affects large numbers of people over a vast geographical expanse but cannot easily mobilize positive commitments or significantly penetrate the lives of those affected.

The development of what Mann terms "enabling facilities" has resulted in authoritative and diffused power becoming more extensive over time—while also, in some ways, increasing the efficacy of intensive power

TABLE 2  
Mann's Power Categories

	Authoritative	Diffused
Intensive	Army command structure Organized religion	A general strike INGO activism
Extensive	Militaristic empire	Market exchange Language Social norms Global culture

SOURCE: Adapted from Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power, Vol. 1: A History of Power from the Beginning to AD 1760* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 1–33.

applications. In earlier centuries, steady improvements in communication, transportation, weapons, and related technologies made it logistically feasible to create successively larger land- and sea-based empires. The ancient Roman, Chinese, Persian, and other empires were, Mann contends, loosely governed federated structures. Only in the past two centuries have truly extensive applications of authoritative power appeared.

Other kinds of enabling facilities extended the reach of diffused forms of power. Mann cites as examples the spread of literacy in shared languages, coinage, financial institutions, law codes, and national consciousnesses. Here is the category in which liberal-rational global culture would appear (though Mann does not discuss the concept). Originally backed by the authoritative power of European and later US military and economic empires, global culture eventually took the form of a diffused/extensive power, similar to language or social norms.

But Mann would presumably be skeptical that any global culture could maintain its diffused/extensive power to socialize world elites forever. To Mann, history does not end. Constantly restless and creative human beings always think of new and more effective ways to use ideology, production and exchange, violence, and politics to satisfy their needs and wants. Importantly, in those zones not “covered” by current institutions—zones which Mann terms “interstices”—restless and creative humans “tunnel.” The result of their efforts is significant change in the institutional expression of one or another source of social power. Subsequently, pressure to bring the other institutions into alignment should spawn additional social changes. The development and diffusion of enabling facilities ensures that these processes reach over increasingly larger geographic expanses.

The CCP's resistance to world decentering suggests liberal-rational global culture is still not completely global in reach, and may never become truly global. The Party accepts socialization to this culture only to the extent it is useful for increasing comprehensive national strength.

When socialization occurs anyway, and people in China show signs of becoming “polluted” by liberalism, the Party punishes them. Dissatisfied with the structure of global politics, the CCP and its intellectual supporters seek to tunnel through the interstices made possible by the liberal-rational global culture’s incomplete hegemony (an ideological source of power) and the US military’s incomplete hegemony (violence) to change the system, recentering China. The first steps would be to force Japan to acknowledge Chinese preeminence in East and Southeast Asia and to coerce Taiwan into annexation. Securing veto rights over key foreign and domestic policy decisions in Central Asia, Southeast Asia, Australia, and New Zealand might be next. Depending on how ambitious the CCP becomes, recentering could extend to disrupting the recent Asia-Pacific democratization trend and impeding efforts to improve democratic quality in the region.

### *Manuel Castells on the “Network Society”*

Other developments threatening the integrity of liberal-rational global culture might undermine democracy in Asia. Castells’ theory assumes three ideal-typical ways of organizing the human race: (1) hierarchically, (2) in sovereign-autonomous units, and (3) in a multinodal network.<sup>4</sup> With the proviso that Castells’ models are ideal-types, the ancient Roman and Chinese empires can be considered examples of hierarchical organization, as their autocratic leaders sought to rule most of the entire known civilized world (to the extent feasible). A less obvious example would be the contemporary world—if the world-polity theorists are correct. Though materially, the human race might be divided into sovereign-autonomous units, or into networks, world-polity theorists would argue that, culturally, it is unified. People everywhere are “subjects” of global culture, because it informs the identities of all significant actors.

Despite Realism’s former dominance in the study of IR, the world has never been organized into truly sovereign-autonomous units (the second ideal type). Transborder trade and communications flows have always compromised state autonomy, and dependence on powerful foreign states combined with an inability to exercise complete domination at home inevitably limited sovereignty. Some states—the powerful, the continental, the insular—were “more sovereign-autonomous” than others; but even these states frequently perceived advantages to pooling sovereignty on some issues and sacrificing it on others. Yet the CCP’s determined resistance to the constitutive norm of democratic governance suggests that although economic power may be transnational, ideational power is not necessarily. Sovereign-autonomy or something approximate

to it *might* still be valid in the realm of culture and identity, given a sufficiently committed state such as China's armed with advanced enabling facilities.

The third ideal-typical way of organizing humanity is in multinodal networks. Castells develops a "network society" model in which power is neither structured hierarchically nor distributed neatly among independent states. It is, instead, dispersed widely among interconnected and ephemeral "nodes."

[Nodes] are stock exchange markets, and their ancillary advanced service centers, in the network of global financial flows. They are national councils of ministers. . . . They are street gangs and money-laundering financial institutions in the network of drug traffic. . . . They are television systems, entertainment studios, computer graphics milieus, news teams, and mobile devices generating, transmitting, and receiving signals in the global network of the new media at the roots of cultural expression and public opinion.<sup>5</sup>

Castells shares with Mann the conviction that sources of social power do not always covary positively, structuring situations rigidly. But Castells goes beyond Mann to argue that power can be radically ephemeral and transient, frustrating the efforts of state leaders and other elites to control events. Most of Castells' examples are taken from the world of international business and finance, but his logic applies equally well to other realms of activity. The United States is incapable of preventing the flow of dangerous drugs across its borders, despite prodigious interdiction and suppression efforts by several government agencies. To Castells, facts such as these add up to serious challenges to the hierarchical and sovereign-autonomous unit models of globe-wide human organization.

Theories positing the domination of a hegemon (the United States or broader West) are far too crude to capture the subtleties of networked reality, since hegemons frequently find it impossible to achieve their goals. Theories positing sovereign-autonomous units exaggerate the power of national governments even inside their own territories. States and state agencies, parliaments, and individual leaders can influence transnational events as components of nodes, but almost never act in an effective way autonomously—except on those rare occasions when they self-consciously commit maximum effort to a coherent course of action. To Castells, state power is normally a background or conditioning variable in decision-making situations but not necessarily the most important one. Almost all states are now densely crosscut by transnational networks; none is genuinely autonomous. The concept of sovereignty is highly problematic.

Castells sees power in the international system as being everywhere and yet nowhere, here today on this issue and in this node, gone tomorrow or shifted to another node. To be sure, key actors find themselves regularly taking part in the activities of several different nodes and tend to institutionalize their participation. Nodes interconnect at “switches,” and here significant power can be applied—as when “financial flows take control of media empires that influence politics.”<sup>6</sup> But no actor participates in the operations of all or even most nodes, and none is capable of asserting hierarchical control over the giant worldwide network (“the Net”) which the nodes comprise. Network logic trumps the efforts of any individual or group to exert “international agential power”<sup>7</sup> over the contours of the system.

If Castells’ model of emerging world society is accurate, the fate of liberal-rational global culture becomes problematic. To the world-polity theorists, global culture is effectively “out there”: a hermeneutical force structuring the mindsets and actions of everyone “inside.” But to Castells, culture itself is *inside the Net* of human exchange and therefore structured by network logic. The liberal-rational global culture can only prevail if the actors who contribute most significantly to cultural construction, through the Net, decide in their dispersed settings to promote this particular kind of culture and value system. There is no “power center” in Castells’ model that can ensure a global culture’s continued hegemony. There is no master socialization mechanism to ensure that contributors to cultural construction will have internalized liberal-rational values. Images and information flowing through the Net will not necessarily be consistent with liberal, democratic, and rationalistic values. Global culture *might* prevail, because its institutionalization affords excellent advantages over competing hegemonic projects entering the network ecology age. But Castells is impressed by the cultural reactions against globalization manifest in new identity movements. Some of these movements reject liberal-rational values. Like the CCP—but often more radically—they associate global culture with Western power.<sup>8</sup>

World-polity theorists view culture as “closed,” but Castells views it as open-ended with possibilities—though not *all* possibilities—since by implication he considers it unlikely that, given network logic, a single culture could establish ideational hegemony worldwide. Castells would reject the assertion that INGOs all function to socialize states into a hegemonic liberal-rational global culture. *Some* INGOs socialize some states in this way, but others have completely different agendas, and contribute radically different values to a global cultural *mélange*.

One of the INGO activists interviewed in Thailand agreed with Castells. She said: “I don’t think global culture is closed at all. There



are many parallel universes existing at the moment, and the dominant culture is carried only by a small elite.” Moreover, “just because it’s hegemonic doesn’t mean it’s reality. What’s actually going on in the world at any given moment—day-to-day, in every place, by all kinds of people—isn’t usually what’s visible to most of us from what we see in the media, and isn’t necessarily affected by that kind of global culture.”<sup>9</sup> Network logic might subvert liberal-rational global culture. Through their mobilization efforts, INGOs “can make things visible that were invisible” and, in the process, restructure the culture. What results may not necessarily be consistent with liberal-rational principles.

INGOs of all orientations use the Internet and other new communications technologies to corrode state sovereignty and undermine hierarchy. But technology strengthens states as well as citizens. Potentially it strengthens states more than citizens because states are usually better organized and have access to more resources. New surveillance, monitoring, and control technologies make it increasingly easy and affordable for states to track citizens’ movements and preemptively neutralize those who might become “threatening.”<sup>10</sup> The US government, while purporting to promote democracy, uses these technologies to monitor citizens’ (and foreigners’) behavior at home and to wage wars abroad. INGOs could use some of these technologies to pursue democracy. But in a country such as China, they are far too weak to offer a credible defense of civil society should the state commit to crushing it.

In sum, there is no current global trend or tendency that inspires confidence in the inevitability of democracy’s triumph worldwide, or in assertions that all countries are embarked upon “the road” to a democratic future. Technology empowers but also undercuts; economic development helps, but not if citizens sacrifice liberties willingly in exchange for material plenty (or excess). Asian democracy, like democracy elsewhere, can only survive and flourish if it is nurtured self-consciously and in clear-eyed awareness of the numerous threats to destroy it. The CCP blocks democratization for one-fifth the human race and might empower putative autocrats elsewhere in Asia. With China rising and the CCP committed to establishing a new authoritarian political civilization, Asian democracy faces a challenging future. Worldwide, democracy is comparatively rare historically, while authoritarianism is normal. For the liberal-rational global culture to prevail in this context, concerned agents must act.