
Theory

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An Informal Ethnography of the Conference Experience

The Research Committee on Sociological Theory's (RC16) interim conferences are held at the halfway point between ISA World Congresses, providing an informal, intimate and intense experience that combines intellectual work, socializing, and learning about a host country and city. In 2000, this 'mid-term' conference was held in Cambridge, UK, and in 2004, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. At the 2006 World Congress in Durban, South Africa, the RC16 Board decided to hold our 2008 mid-term event in Pusan, South Korea. This would be the first RC16 conference to be held in Asia, thus fostering stronger ties in that region and with our colleagues in the Korean Sociological Association and the Korean Society for Social Theory. Given that the 2002 World Congress was held in

Brisbane, Australia, and the 2010 one will be in Gothenburg, Sweden, RC16 will have held five successive events on different continents: Oceania, South America, Africa, Asia, and Europe. Our Research Committee could thus arguably claim the mantle of the most global of all of the ISA RCs, although we still anxiously await an organizing bid from our rather sparse Antarctic membership.

Pusan, which is alternatively spelled “Busan”, is South Korea's second-largest city, with population of about 4 million people and a location along the Southeastern coast of the Korean peninsula, approximately 300 kilometers from Seoul. Conference participants came from South Korea itself and around the globe: Australia, Brazil, Canada, England, France, Hong Kong, Italy, Japan, Singapore, Taiwan and the United States. Those coming from outside of the Asia-Pacific region traveled great distances; the endurance record surely goes to Elisa Reis, former RC16 Chair, who flew for twelve hours from Rio to Paris and then for another twelve to Pusan, giving her a door-to-door time of roughly 30 hours.

The conference was superbly organized at the local level by Professor Seung-Kuk Kim (Pusan National University, South Korea), supported by an active committee of Korean sociologists – amongst whom we should single out Professor Suk-Man Hwang (Changwon National University, South Korea) for his tireless and unflinching cheerful efforts at hosting us. Conference participants were also impressed by the hard work of graduate students from the Department of Sociology at Pusan National University, who met jet-lagged visitors at the airport, worked as casual chauffeurs, and fixed various problems as they arose. The conference sessions were held in a large and well-equipped auditorium at Pusan National University, which was established in 1946 and whose attractive campus climbs along the side of a mountain about 20 kilometers from the city centre. Spread across three days, the conference included morning plenary

sessions organized along three themes (multiple modernities, global civil society, and technology and the information society), along with four regular sessions held in the afternoons. Leading figures in the Korean sociological community acted as commentators during the plenary sessions, and thereby fostered greater dialogue among members of RC16 and of the Korean Sociological Association.

Since details of the intellectual content of each of the conference sessions is provided in the reports that follow in this newsletter, we would like to take this opportunity to briefly report on the social and cultural life of the event itself – both for those who could not attend, and as a reminiscence for those who did.

Undoubtedly, the most notable such feature of the conference was the unfailing hospitality of our hosts, something that was particularly visible during mealtimes. Participants were treated to lavish, delicious banquets by former, current and future presidents of the Korean Sociological Association and the Korean Society for Social Theory, as well as by other important figures in the discipline in South Korea, thus allowing us to sample excellent Korean food as we partook in casual conversation with new and old friends. Other activities taking place during or after meals included a display of *pansori* (traditional Korean story-telling with folk singing and instrument playing), *norebang* (the Korean version of karaoke), and learning about rituals of demeanor regarding the pouring of drinks (and their consumption, of course!). By the end of the conference, participants were exhausted yet elated, having gained a new appreciation for Korean cuisine and, by extension, Korean culture itself.

Our extra-curricular activities also involved a boat tour of Pusan Harbour. After a delayed start to our tour due to various difficulties associated with high seas, we boarded the boat and were told to put on life jackets and sit down on the cabin's floor while the boat left the dock. The first twenty minutes were a bit harrowing, as

we rolled in the swell without seeing much of the scenery. Eventually, however, we passed a headland and entered the gigantic harbour itself, which was dotted with islands and surrounded by mountains and recently-built apartment towers. The Korean export economy was on full display at the port of Pusan, which contained huge container vessels, a massive number of cranes, and also half-completed ships rising up in the dry docks. Disembarking at Pusan's world-famous Jagalchi Fish Market, we walked around the stalls displaying a bewildering variety of sea creatures, only some of which were recognizable to non-Korean eyes.

On the final day of the conference, our hosts kindly organized a coach tour of Gyeongju, the ancient capital of Korean under the Silla Dynasty and one of the country's most important historical sites. Guided by Professor Suk-Man Hwang, we marveled at the aesthetic achievements of classical Korean civilization as we toured UNESCO World Heritage-listed temples, shrines and burial mounds set in a beautiful landscape of trees and mountains. That evening, upon our return to Pusan, the more adventurous (or imprudent) among us enjoyed a multi-course feast of *bok* (or *fugu* in Japanese), the deadly blowfish whose flesh must be carefully prepared by an expert chef. We are glad to report that all who partook of this meal survived with no ill effects, thus ensuring that RC16 will continue to function in the upcoming years.

To relax, participants took advantage of the fact that the Hotel Nongshim, where many of us stayed, was attached to the largest hot spring facility in Asia. Spa-like bathing areas for men and women featured a bewildering array of pools at various temperatures, some bubbling, filled with spectacular colours, or equipped with pummeling waterfalls. Many participants also sampled the saunas, gymnasium and vigorous massages offered on-site – just what was needed to soothe tired bodies and minds.

Our discussions with participants during the conference confirmed our own impressions: all were deeply grateful for the exceptional displays of hospitality and generosity by our hosts, impressed by the rapid pace of economic, technical and social change in the country, and far more aware of South Korea as a society with a distinct and remarkable culture worthy of further appreciation and sociological analysis.

We would like to close with expressions of gratitude, firstly to Professor Seung-Kuk Kim, the local organizing committee, and their graduate students for their dedication and hard work. The sponsorship and intellectual and social fellowship of members of the Korean Sociological Association and the Korean Society for Social Theory was also much appreciated, many of them traveling across South Korea to deliver papers, attend our sessions and chair them, as well as host banquets and give keynote speeches. And we would be remiss if we did not mention the College of Social Sciences of Pusan National University and the City of Pusan, which provided logistical and financial support that assisted with the completion of a remarkably successful event.

Philip Smith
Fuyuki Kurasawa
(Co-Chairs of RC16)

Session Report: Democracy and Civil Society

The session on “Democracy and Civil Society”, which was chaired by Suk Man Hwang from Changwon National University in South Korea, included papers by Gianpaolo Baiocchi (Brown University, USA), Craig Browne (University of Sydney, Australia), and Elisa Reis (Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil). Entitled “Democracy as Discipline, Friction, and Translation: Global Civil Society and the Politics of Diffusion”, Baiocchi's presentation began by offering a critique of the metaphor of diffusion to explain how democratic ideas travel globally.

Often found in modernization theory, diffusion implies that democracy is intrinsically liberal in orientation and that it always travels from the global North to spread outward to the rest of the world in a narrative of political evolution or development. Instead, Baiocchi contended, we should consider three alternative motifs to conceptualize democracy as a traveling, hybrid political culture: translation, discipline, and friction. The metaphor of translation is useful to the extent that it posits horizontal lines of communication and conversion of universal ideas from one civil society or public to others. Indeed, the act of translating implies multiple dialogical encounters and processes of democratic learning between participants, perhaps best exemplified by transnational advocacy networks such as the World Social Forum. For its part, the metaphor of discipline helps to explain how certain discourses of democratization are socially and politically regulating in character, in that they prescribe what can and cannot be done under a democratic system; Baiocchi gave the example of democracy promotion, much in vogue among some sectors of the Euro-American foreign policy establishment, in which hierarchical, disciplinary relationships are established between international institutions and local publics in societies being democratized. Finally, the presentation turned to the motif of friction, which, as formulated in Anna Tsing's work, is the most promising of the three because of its capacity to account for the disjuncture between democratic ideas and societal contexts, as well as the unexpected fit (or lack thereof) between such elements in hybrid political formations.

The paper by Craig Browne, entitled "Democracy, Religion and Revolution", consisted of a critical reading of Charles Taylor's *Modern Social Imaginaries*. Browne argued that Taylor's use of the latter concept is bifocal in nature, since it contains, on the one hand, a descriptive component that refers to a non-transcendental moral order of mutual benefit as well as an analytical framework

that can be used for civilizational and societal comparison (in the mould of the paradigm of multiple or alternative modernities). On the other hand, Taylor's concept of modern social imaginaries is prescriptive, for it contains a moral narrative whereby modernity is characterized by the non-recognition of social hierarchies and, perhaps most tellingly, by a secularized condition defined not by the end of religion, but rather by the co-existence of the secular and the sacred. Browne then proceeded to a critique of Taylor's position via the work of Claude Lefort and Cornelius Castoriadis, who have both extensively written about the democratic project as an imaginary and as a process of radical creativity. Specifically, Browne leveled two charges in Taylor's direction. Firstly, Taylor holds a republican conception according to which liberal democracy is implicitly the only model of the modern social imaginary under consideration, thereby underestimating the possibility that totalitarianism can also be a constituent form of the latter; by contrast, Lefort understands that democracy is an unoccupied and permanently indeterminate site of power. Secondly, as Castoriadis's thinking makes clear, Taylor does not adequately recognize the presence of socio-economic and political hierarchies and relations of domination in his understanding of modern social imaginaries, stemming from his conflation of analytical and normative claims.

"NGOs as Theoretical and Empirical Objects", the paper delivered by Elisa Reis, advanced a new typological framework through which to understand non-governmental organizations. Reis contended that globalization and the consequent crossing of borders, which is itself leading to the revival of public interest in civil society, have altered the terms of interaction between the state, the market and society – or, in other words, between the political, economic and social spheres. Accordingly, this situation has produced phenomena such as new forms of governmental management of civil society actors and fostered the multiplication of NGOs

around the world. Reis's findings, which were based on a survey of some 300 NGOs in Brazil and work with focus groups, highlighted questions such as degrees of institutionalization of NGOs in relation to the state, their professionalism and participation in officially recognized fora, their accountability to publics and members, as well as their representational capacity. Importantly, Reis proposed a typology that distinguished between five basic types of NGOs, including those that began as social movements, advocacy organizations, revamped client networks, and proto-bureaucracies.

Overall, the session provided a theoretically rich exploration of a variety of concepts and arguments related to the themes of democracy and civil society. Browne's paper was the most purely theoretical, since it was concerned with the core of what the ideal of modern democracy is and ought to be; whereas Baocchi was interesting in discovering useful tropes through which to interpret the globalization of this democratic ideal in the direction of hybrid political cultures, and Reis with how civil society organizations that have led the push toward greater democratization can be analyzed and classified. I was left with a few puzzles: what kinds of intercultural frictions are likely to generate democratic outcomes or, on the contrary, anti-democratic, totalitarian ones?; what are the prospects for the project of thick or radical democracy today, in light of the dominance of liberal or even formal, procedural democratic models?; and do NGOs, as *de facto* proto-governmental organizations, help or hinder this project of self-organization of society? These are urgent questions for all sociologists and social scientists in our age – surely the indication of a highly stimulating and successful session.

Fuyuki Kurasawa

Session Report: Revisiting the Classics

The first paper of this session was by Giuseppe Sciortino (Trento University,

Italy) and Martina Cvajner (Trento University, Italy) on 'The Sexual Problem of Order: The Classical Roots.' The central premise of the paper is that social theorists have assumed that gender and sexuality only emerged in the late 1990s with post-structuralism, feminism and queer theory as an object of sociological theorizing and interest. Sciortino and Cvajner say that this is not the case, indeed the founding fathers and the few mothers of the sociological discipline were deeply interested in issues of sexuality and gender and wrote extensively on the subject although their writings have tended to be overlooked in the discipline. The classical authors (Marx, Weber, Rousseau, Durkheim, Marianne Weber, Simmel, Hobbes) bring 3 assets to the study of sexuality: 1) they were interested in the regulation of sexual behavior in the absence of tradition; 2) they tied studies of sexuality to the key intellectual debates of their historical moment; and 3) they saw sexual behavior and its regulation as a central problem of modernity. But according to Sciortino and Cvajner, their central analytic virtue is that they are not obsessed with power relations (i.e., Engels, Foucault and Bourdieu) as central to sexuality. Rather they saw gender relations as a more pragmatic problem for social order. For example, desire is potentially disruptive. How can it be channeled? Although the classical theorists were sometimes wrong in their assessments and their work is frequently larded with politically incorrect visions of sexuality and gender relations, at least they were wrong in interesting ways.

The second paper was by Eduardo de la Fuente (Monash University, Australia) on "Aesthetic Explanations of the Social Bond: From Simmel to Maffesoli". This paper aimed at constructing an 'aesthetic of everyday life' by focusing upon Simmel's essay "Sociology of the Meal" and Maffesoli's essay on the Art of Drinking. For Simmel, eating together is another way of signaling belonging to a group, while for Maffesoli, drinking, particularly drunkenness, is a way of signaling your individuality and apartness from the

group. The paper argues that society more than ever requires an aesthetic formation of the social bond and that Simmel and Maffesoli model this relation in divergent ways. Simmel posits a collective fusion, a groupness. Yet dinner is a fragile social bond as one inappropriate participant can ruin the entire event (think for example of the film *Borat* and his ability to disrupt an etiquette driven dining club). Maffesoli's drinking moment creates an affective ambience, an emotional space that overcomes the formal requisites of Simmer's meal.

Both papers were well received but the questions were principally addressed to de la Fuente as his argument was somewhat unusual. Jeffrey Alexander asked how one could talk of the 'aesthetic' without speaking of Durkheim. He also asked the author whether he had grappled with a theory of beauty or the sublime. Mabel Berezin asked whether he had reflected on the issue of authenticity. Edmund Wright asked if de la Fuente had considered either music or painting in his analysis of the aesthetic. Fuyuki Kurawasa said that he had a hard time thinking about a sociological theory of aesthetics without taking Durkheim's "collective effervescence" or Weber's idea of "charisma" into account. Gianpaolo Baiocchi asked whether the writings of the *College de Sociologie* in Paris in the early 1900s could be brought to bear on the discussion of aesthetics. Gilles Verpraet cleverly brought the two papers together by asking if either author had considered an "aesthetics of sexuality".

Mabel Berezin

Session Report: Global Civil Society

Does a global civil society exist? The panel started with this provocative question raised by Professor Kim and his collaborators (S. Lim and S. Kong). They were followed by an equally interesting presentation from Gilles Verpraet that developed an axiology for a global civil society. Both presentations raised new

theoretical and meta-theoretical agendas for addressing sociological concerns that transgressed the boundaries of a single society. The third and last presentation by Shujiro Yazawa took us back to the classical core of the theories of civil society by reviewing the development of these theories in the context of Japanese social sciences.

The first paper by Kim et al. examined the newly emerging world order in terms of the dynamic relationship among Inter-State System (ISS), World Capitalist Economy (WCE), and Global Civil Society (GCS). It focused on their variegated relationships ranging from conflict to cooperation. On the one hand, globalized capitalism is supported by such powerful governments as the G8. Further transnational corporations are constantly looking for cheap sources of power, natural resources and lucrative markets. On the other hand, non-actors including NGOs and social movement organizations keep watch of destructive impacts on the environment, monitor social inequalities and try to preserve local cultures. Global civil society, which was partly defined as the increased participation of the NGOs in global affairs as well as their greater interaction with the governments, cannot be understood without looking at the links joining NGOs, intergovernmental organizations and world capitalist economic institutions. Kim et al proposed a new theoretical framework of the world order by bridging between International Relations and Social Movement theories. They paid attention to the "meaning work" of non-state actors in socializing governments as well as their role as advocates, campaigners and activists on a transnational level. In particular, they emphasize the concept of global framing, the role of transnational networking and an expanded notion of political opportunity structure that looks at the interaction between domestic and international politics. The three axes of GCS, ISS and WCE are in a relationship of mutual interpenetration; it is argued that GCS can influence

the other two as a challenger, competitor and collaborator.

The second paper by Gilles Verpraet focused on the normative and communicative basis for a global civil society. It was pointed out that cultural reception on a global level brings about not only exchange and translation but also some fragmented reception, reinterpretation and acculturation processes. A process of inter-cultural dialogue will be extremely important under the globalization processes. This can be developed through different discourses such as geopolitical strategic narrations and visions, the philosophical discourses for cosmopolitan globalization, and the sociological and political discourses for a global civil society. Within the framework of cosmopolitanism, for example, different strategies could be developed such as intervention, inclusion, recognition of the alterity and control. Within this framework, moreover, a number of dilemmas may also be conceived such as the dilemmas of a European cosmopolitanism, of universalism, of insecurity and of foreigners promoting a culture of shared ambivalence. The result of taking seriously the normative and cultural dynamics involved in a global dialogue will be to enrich our understanding of diversity in the civil society regarding institutions, networks and cultural citizenship.

Finally, the third presentation by Shujiro Yazawa also made a case for the idea of global civil society by relating the discourse to the idea of civil system, the origin of which he traces to the Marxist theory as it has been developed in the context of Japanese social sciences. It is argued that the concept of civil society is a strategic and methodological concept that enables us to conceptualize society as a whole from the material basis of society. In relational terms, civil society is juxtaposed against both feudalism and communism. Civil society is the citizen's society, but also we should remember that this citizen is of a certain class. Civil society as system of productive force

means a number of things. First, it means that the agency of productive force is not the individual but the citizen or citizen class. Secondly, it means a modern, dynamically developed productive force that is supported by private ownership, liberation of citizen from feudalism, freedom, human right, democracy, humanism and technological innovation. Thirdly it means an open system of productive force. The principle of civil society is freedom. But a civil society also means a society filled with the ethos of the public. Globally, civil society must be a civil system society that goes beyond the framework of national society. Building up a civil system is the meaning and the task of the global society. That is why we call today's global society a "global civil society."

From the discussant and the floor, a number of challenging questions were raised regarding the meaning and operation of the (global) civil society. For example, what exactly does the notion mean as a new lexicon? What is civil society and what are the institutional and cultural processes for it, locally and globally? Does a global civil society really exist, with a set of institutional structures operating at the global level comparable to the functions of the press, the law and democratic elections in a society? How may we overcome the problem of incommensurability of cultural differences? How are we to combine the open global structure with the domestic structure, especially given the many cultural variations across the nations (for example, some countries have stronger a nationalism than cosmopolitanism)? And what is the most important force breaking up the boundaries among the nations (for example, the internet)?

More questions were raised than answered. It seems most of the participants shared the view that the notion of global civil society was very difficult to measure and apply. Still, some found it a very appealing notion as denoting a realm of political and civic relations – or, in the words of a presenter, of "negation of domination" – that otherwise could not be

fully captured by other concepts. The session ended with an interesting yet provocative comment from one of the participants: the better concepts are amorphous. This could be a question for another series of debates.

Agnes Ku

Session Report: Narrative and Cultural Sociology

Agnes Ku's case-study concerned the social and cultural struggles surrounding the fate of two piers in Hong Kong Harbor, one in the mid-90s and another in 2006. Hong Kong has no cultural policy tradition that prioritizes heritage values. From the administration's viewpoint the destruction of the piers was a necessary price in modernizing the business district as part of a globally competitive strategy. Of particular interest to Professor Ku was the development of a social movement of younger people that employed diverse communicative techniques to assign new meanings to the piers. In particular 'collective memory' of the piers was shifted from their colonialist associations to the role in the people of Hong Kong's everyday life (so echoing Melucci's "rights of everyday life"). For example, they used boats to go to work, visit friends or go shopping. While the short-term goals of the movement were not achieved, in Ku's assessment a significant counter-hegemonic terrain has been opened by these struggles.

Philip Smith provided an analysis of the narratives of global warming. The title refers to the modes by which the scientific discourse of global warming and climate change has been reworked into codes and mythical forms – narratives – suitable for circulation in the civil sphere. His analysis of news treatments of the issue drew on the typology of genres developed in Smith's *Why War?*: low mimetic, romantic, tragic and apocalyptic. Smith tracked the movement of global warming over the past forty years from a low mimetic to its current near-hegemonic apocalyptic genre

form. Finally, as a critical addition to Beck's risk society thesis, Smith drew out the increasing reflexivity developing towards this very practice of narration, especially in journalistic commentary.

Mabel Berezin's paper examined the curious mediated afterlife of the events surrounding the hijacking of the Italian *Achille Lauro* cruiseship in 1985 by four heavily armed men belonging to a splinter group of the PLO. The Reagan administration undermined a near-completed negotiated solution to the hijacking by attempting to seize the hijackers, in the process violating international law. The trigger for this self-understood moral outrage was the late discovery that an elderly disabled passenger, a US citizen named Klinghoffer, had been murdered. Klinghoffer's iconic status (there was a televisual dramatization, an eponymous opera etc.) has risen while similar acts against US citizens have not. Berezin's paper (and current research) tracks media interpretations of these events and their resonance in elite US and Italian newspapers. It emerges that it is a "template event" for US understandings of terrorism and how to address it. Because the US reporting downplays context, it leaves the event more curiously neutral and the interpretation of the event more open to internal political manipulation. It became "a part of American civil religion – a deeply cultural belief in American exceptionalism and the guardian of virtue that sometimes has disastrous and anti-democratic consequences".

Questions were addressed by the presenters en bloc within limited time so not all questions received specific answers. Ron Jacobs, Jeff Alexander, Edmund Wright and Elisa Reis all asked, broadly, for further methodological elaborations from each speaker. Gianpaolo Baiocchi asked Berezin whether her work addressed the specific International Relations (IR) literature and what were her thoughts about the way the *Achille Lauro* narrative resembled a bad Harrison Ford movie. Berezin agreed with the Harrison Ford character of the narrative, but reminded us that the

real-world narrative has significant immediate effects, such as the fall of the Italian government at the time of the hijacking.

Ku elaborated her dominantly textual approach which took into account the social circulation and reflexive engagement of texts but also looked to the broader actions of social movements. Eduardo de la Fuente had asked Ku about the possible connections between her analysis and architectural codes and the difficulties architects have in presenting their public concerns in a non-elitist frame. She replied, yes, that architects had been involved in the Hong Kong social movements but within conventionally professionalist modes of action.

Philip (who kept his responses very short due to time pressures) replied to Wright that his method, although textual, does include questions of authorial agency and audience/addressees. In brief his method tracks the process through which actors 'ramp up issues, or push them down the genre hierarchy', looking in particular at the role of key organizations such as the UN, NASA and Greenpeace as sponsors of particular genre choices.

Paul Jones

Session Report: Multiple Modernities

The plenary session on multiple modernities began with a talk by Volker Schmidt, 'What's Wrong with the Concept of Multiple Modernities?' As the title suggests, Schmidt was generally critical of the concept of multiple modernities, finding it to be sociologically meaningless, conceptually flawed, and empirically inaccurate. Instead, Schmidt suggested that we are only now entering modernity. There are only two geographical regions (the West, as well as East Asia) that had become fully modern, and – talk of a Confucian ethic aside – these looked pretty similar according to a number of baseline criteria for what modernity might be. For Schmidt, social scientists would do better to think about parallel processes of diversity and homogenization.

Schmidt was followed by Sangjun Kim's paper, "Beyond Multiple Modernities: Structural Homology, Cultural Heterology". Like Schmidt, Kim also pointed to important flaws with the concept of multiple modernities, such as the lack of alternative definitions of modernity, and the maintenance of Western presuppositions about what modernity might be. Ultimately, Kim argued for the need to move away from a position that identifies modernity with the West, and for the necessity of recognizing the influence that Asia had on Europe in the very formation of Western modernity (e.g. technological and trade flows from East to West during the Middle Ages). As a solution to ongoing problems, Kim suggested a theory that emphasized three successive layers of modernity: (1) proto-modernity, (2) colonizer and colonized modernity, and (3) global modernity.

After a short break we heard Jeff Alexander's paper, "Trauma, Post-colonialism and Contested Modernity". Alexander emphasized the relationship between civil society and modernity, pointing to the different ways in which the struggle over (and for) civil society is often a traumatic process. Alexander's primary target of criticism was the globalizing assumption of the theory of multiple modernities. In contrast, Alexander pointed to the ways that these globalizing processes were blocked or deformed by anti-civil actions, which took the form of international wars and colonialism. From this perspective, the central challenge for globalizing modernity was the question of how to create institutions of global civil repair, which might be able to work through these traumatic actions of anti-civil aggression and colonization. An additional challenge was how to create civil repair within new postcolonial nations, particularly when those pressures tended to be blocked by anti-civil pressures within the new nations.

Allen Chun presented the final paper of the morning session. Chun's talk, "Can the Postcolonial Speak (in Sociological Theory)?", provided a nuanced and insightful

hermeneutic interpretation of what post-colonial speech looks like. As an intellectual discourse, it was spoken primarily by writers located within the metropole. Situated primarily within the cultural disciplines, its emphasis was the cultural sources of colonial domination. Developed within a specific history of theoretical debate, it was intended to supplement pre-existing radical traditions of political economy. Chun insisted that these discursive modalities of postcolonial discourse needed to be accounted for, if postcolonialism was to find its place within the social sciences.

After an extremely insightful comment by Il Joon Chung, which placed the different papers in dialogue with one another, there was a spirited debate in which all the authors were challenged to justify various presuppositional assumptions and empirical claims that they made. It is not possible to do justice to the quality of the discussion, other than to say that, by the end of this first session of the conference, we were significantly behind schedule.

Ronald Jacobs

Session Report: Social Order and Interpersonal Ties

The session is chaired by Young Jin Yang from the Dongguk University, South Korea and by Il Seong Yoon from the Pusan National University, South Korea. Kiyomitsu Yui presented a paper on "Symbolic Media and the Theory of Social Transformation: From Luhmann via Habermas to Parsons". The paper presents an interpretation of the late Parsons aimed at explaining how symbolic interchange media constitute the basis for sophisticated social institutions. Yui argued forcefully for the continuing relevance of systems theory for contemporary social science. The topic of social ties was also at the centre of Edmund Wright's (University of Cambridge, United Kingdom) analysis of Roy Bhaskar's Critical Realism. Wright roots his argument in the philosophy of perception stressing how, in

Bhaskar's terms, reality may be perceived as something but be indeed something else. Bhaskar all too easily talks of material 'objects' that can be variously interpreted in diverse hermeneutics but which are nevertheless ontologically real. Yet, Wright pointed out, yet in the natural world we are surrounded by flux and ambiguity and cases of mistaken identity. In a cloud chamber there might be some lines. Are these one or two particle trails? Wright developed his argument further pointing out that everything that surrounds us has a special (symbolic) meaning that is linked to our faith, to our ancestors, to socially stratified knowledge. Faith in the existence of a common or shared object with a shared interpretation is intersubjectively achieved through language. Faulty perceptions can also be updated, but these are always provisional. This kind of communicative/viscous/constructivist realism would provide an alternative to Bhaskar's rather crude pronouncements on the nature of the real. The third presentation by Jaehyuck Lee deals again with issues of individual perception and social institutions, this time from within the debate on civilization and human nature. Lee presented and discussed some results from the brain sciences, and interpreted these from a social perspective. He stressed how human behaviour is the response to different perceptions that are both socially acquired and brain-mediated. These cognitive competencies (e.g. "theory of mind") are universal among humans when compared to animals but are also deeply socialized.

A common emphasis in the session was on the fact that societies are possible because they process cognitive, normative and emotional dynamics through language. The debate focussed particularly on the role of language for both individual perception and social institutionalization. It highlighted how there is a common recognition of the importance of language but also very different interpretations of it by the various theoretical traditions.

Giuseppe Sciortino

Session Report: Technology and Information Society

This session considered the move to an 'information society' in the broadest sense, this including not only material technology but also the significance and nature of mass mediated communications in the social world today. It was chaired by Yong Hak Kim of Yonsei University and Sung Pyo Jun of the University of Ulsan. The session started with a comprehensive comparative vision of information society presented by Mun-Cho Kim of Korea University. Using evolutionary and systems theory this traced the logic of social organization and social order in the movement from small scale hunting and gathering societies through industrial society and on to an emerging world based upon carefully differentiated cyber, cybrarian and cyborg principles. Professor Kim emphasized that these would replace the current 'information society' paradigm as systems of IT became more deeply implicated in the body and in subjectivity. Paul Jones of the University of New South Wales spoke of the decline of 'hegemony' as a core concept in cultural studies. He noted that this had been influential in the 1980s as Stuart Hall examined the role of common sense and populism in the organization of the media and political ideology. Hegemony had been replaced by neo-Foucaultian visions of governmentality as the theme du jour for critical commentary. Now it was perhaps making a return through more positivist studies of citizen engagement and knowledge as this correlated with media consumption. Routine survey research, for example, could document a knowledge gap in popular understandings of key issues. Further, the concept of hegemony would seem to have ongoing currency given the current ubiquity of moral panics and populist talkback radio, as evinced for example in the Australian context where there was a new panic every week about some minor indiscretion.

Ronald Jacobs from the State University of New York also explored the relation-

ship of the media to democracy and the public sphere. He noted that a normative model existed in which a reasonable and unbiased media would inform the public. Next there would be rational public deliberation leading to feedback of 'opinion' to the political and media spheres. The history of media sociology had been one in which such ideals had been shown to be unrealistic. There were problems of access, monologue rather than dialogue and reciprocity between the public sphere and the media, but also simply general disinterest. Jacobs claims we need to find new ways too encourage civic engagement. Moving away from the news and objectivity models, he argued that dramatic or non-objectivist representations are helpful. When politics becomes entertainment we can encourage debate. Shows such as *Murphy Brown*, *The West Wing* and *The Late Show* energize people and make political issues fun to consider rather than a tedious civic duty.

RC16 co-chair Fuyuki Kurasawa was also interested in the role of non-rational or not fully rational forces in promoting good citizenship. Assisted by some slides, Kurasawa demonstrated the power of iconic images in generating humanitarian aid for crisis situations. Yet problems were emerging of compassion fatigue, this in part generated by stereotyped representations of disaster and distant suffering. These could encourage fatalism or the application of 'basket case' labels to entire nations and continents. Further, many of the images that were striking were complicit in a process of commodification and aestheticization. A solution was proposed in ambiguous images or in images that were in some way puzzling or unexpected. These could break through the clichés and generate new subject positions for viewers.

A commentary on the session by Il Sung Yoon of Pusan National University noted some congruence between the themes discussed in the papers and anti-government protests in Korea that were ongoing at the time of our meetings. These

candle light demonstrations by young people had a strong aesthetic component and made use of internet technologies to coordinate action. Speaking to Jacobs' work he observed that discussion does not guarantee good outcomes. History had shown that many bad decisions had been arrived at deliberately. Why did social theory have so much belief that people talking to each other would solve problems? Kurasawa was asked about his methods for interpreting images. How did we know if an image had a positive aesthetic power or was simply exploitative? The following question and answer session covered a number of issues. Aesthetic images of suffering might be good, it was suggested, if they drew attention to issues in an over-crowded and image based public sphere. Others suggested that we might look to discourse about the images in order to anchor our interpretations of their social and psychological effects.

There was an extended discussion on the question of whether or not a polarized public sphere was a bad thing. Although Habermas seemed to hint that the emergence of consensus was necessary as an

end, the feeling in the room was that just getting debate and interest going on serious issues was achievement enough today. He had maybe set the bar too high. There was further talk about the destiny of cultural studies over the next decade and the challenge for social theory in making sense of a cyborg civilization where the human/non-human interface was no longer a boundary.

Philip Smith

Call for the Next Issues

Last but not least, as editors of the *Newsletter*, we would like to remind our distinguished readers that we welcome contributions (of some 750 words) for the next issue. If any of you has suggestions for a special section or wants to take on responsibility for a special issue, please contact the editors. Whether you are in the East or the West, the South or the North, we hope that the crisis won't hit you too hard and wish you all a happy, productive and peaceful new year.

*José Maurício Domingues
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