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## CHAPTER 11 WHY DO WE NEED A REFLEXIVE SOCIOLOGY IN EAST ASIA?

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### Basic Concepts Defined

Let me briefly define three basic concepts that I shall use in this paper: 'rush-to development', 'risk society', and 'reflexive modernization'. Rush-to development (1) refers to a specific developmental strategy that the state purposively pursues to accelerate economic growth in the quickest way by mobilizing all the available resources to obtain such objectives as the increase of per capita GNP and exports. The South Korean experience since the 1960s is a good example.

The concept of "risk society,"(2) in turn, refers to the variety of pathological consequences of this instrumental modernization which rapidly changing East Asian societies face these days. Risks are here understood as institutionally and politically constructed, not simply technically determined. Risks may be very high where irresponsibility and corruption, for example, remain deeply embedded in bureaucracy as we find in many East Asian countries.

Finally, "reflexive modernization" is proposed in this paper as an alternative concept to the rush-to development. Reflexive here means a deliberation of the side-effects of modernization. Such deliberation would require a number of institutional modifications and reforms by which "a contradictory symbiosis between modern and anti-modern", or "an half-modern society" can be elevated to an higher level of social formation "on the basis of further modernization and radicalization of modernity". (3) The primary focus of this paper will be on South Korea, but its implications can be easily extended to many countries in East Asia.

### Modernization Revisited

There are three unambiguous reasons why East Asia has become a topic of global discourse today. The first is related to the economic development of East Asian countries. According to the data of World Bank and Asia Development Bank, the GNP per capita annual growth rate from 1980 to 1991 was as high as 9.8% in Taiwan, 8.7% in the Republic of Korea, 7.8% in China, 5.9% in Thailand, 5.6% in Hong Kong, 5.3% in Singapore, whereas the average annual growth rate of all other developing countries in all regions is only 1.3%.(4)

During the same period of time the real GDP annual growth rate turns out to be 9.6% in Korea, 7.8% in China, 7.9% in Thailand, 7.7% in Taiwan, 6.9% in Hong Kong, 6.6% in Singapore, whereas the average annual growth rate of all other developing countries is 3.3%. Furthermore, the East Asian economic development is also characterized by low inequality in the distribution of income, as demonstrated by the fact that the seven high growth, low inequality economies in the world include Korea, Taipei, Singapore, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Thailand, and Japan, all of which belong to East Asia.(5)

The second concerns the political transformation which many East Asian countries are undergoing. The trade-off between economic growth and political authoritarianism was once suggested as a key to understanding the pattern of East Asian development, but this is no longer as evident as before. As we all know, liberalization and/or democratization began to spread rapidly throughout East Asia from the middle of the 1980s as evidenced by the experiences of the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, Hong Kong. To be sure, political authoritarianism still reigns in some Asian countries justifying itself in the name of economic modernization. It seems quite clear, however, that the Tiananmen uprising in 1989 foreshadows that even the PRC regime is not immune from popular aspirations for participation, that is, democracy. The erosion of the social basis for the one party dominance by LDP in Japan has also invited keen attention.

East Asian development may be characterized by a peculiar combination of such trends as aggressive industrialization, political transition toward democracy, and cultural resources of action which differ significantly from the dominant Western paradigm of rationality. At stake here is not simply a Weberian question of whether East Asian religions, such as Confucianism and Buddhism, have contributed to the economic development or not. On the contrary, this has something crucial to do with cultural awakening of East Asia in terms of identity and cultural orientations. East Asians may seem conscious not only of economic power but also of their own cultures, as revealed when some East Asian politicians challenged the Western concept of human rights. Nevertheless, culture is much more complex, fundamental and normative in that it deals with the meaning of life involving the variety of moral, ethical, and aesthetic questions.

It is precisely within this cultural context of human relationships that East Asians, despite economic success, become anomic full of strains since, to a great extent, the moral fabric of the society has been destroyed in the process of the rush-to capitalist development. This is why we need to examine self-reflexively the role that we, as sociologists, have played in this process and will need to play to construct a more humane society in the future. Our task is at once analytical and reflexive. We need to have a fair assessment of what we have gained and lost from the rush-to development we have pursued. This involves a critique of modernity as experienced by East Asians. A sociological

assessment requires concepts by which negative consequences of modernization can be critically examined. This will lead us to explore the way in which such deficits of modernization can be overcome.

### The Korean Experience of Rush-To Development

A macroscopic view of Korea's economic development since the early 1960s shows an extremely fast rate of growth, indicated by more than a 10% increase in the GNP for many years. The great population shift from rural areas to central cities followed a rapid succession of factory openings which led to a miraculous increase in exports. What made this kind of transformation possible can be attributed to a sudden and widespread "*Shinbaram*" as a surge of emotive energy. The people's collective desire to "live well together" and their spirited conviction that "we can do it" became the impetus for a massive movement of agricultural workers into the cities in order to attain their dreams through education and hard work.

**Table 1. Percentage Distribution of Work Forces by Industrial Sectors: 1958-1995**

	1958	1965	1970	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995
Primary	81.6	58.6	50.4	45.9	34.0	24.9	17.9	12.5
Second.	4.6	10.3	14.3	19.1	22.6	24.4	27.6	23.6
Tertiary	13.8	31.0	35.2	35.0	43.4	50.6	54.5	64.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	99.9	100.0	100.1

Source: National Statistical Office, Annual Report on the Economically Active Population, 1972, 1985 and 1995.

As indicated in <Table 1>, the primary sector workers constituted 81.6% of the total work force in 1958, whereas this figure plummeted to 50.4% in 1970, 34.0% in 1980, and 17.9% and 12.5% in 1990 and 1995, respectively. On the contrary, those employed in the secondary sector represented a mere 4.6% in 1958, steadily increased to 27.6% in 1990, but reduced to 23.6% by 1995, as with other postindustrial countries. Contrastingly, the number of workers employed in the tertiary sector rose continually from 13.8% to 64.0% during the same period. The percentage of urban population also leaped dramatically from 28% in 1960 to 89% in 1994 in cities where the population exceeds 100,000.

In short, structural transformation refers to rapid urbanization, deepening of industrial structures, diversification of occupations, rising level of education,

expansion of white collar and skilled laborers, and so on. One can hardly fail to notice the salient trends of change in Korea as the rapid expansion of exports, success in developing automobile, semiconductor, shipbuilding and steel industries, establishment of large industrial complexes in Changwon, Ulsan and Kumi, construction of high-rise buildings in downtown Seoul, Pusan, Taegu and other major cities, overflow of passenger cars, rapid development of communications infrastructure, the spread of consumption-oriented culture.

### Deficiencies of Modernization

An all-out expansion of materialistic values has also exacerbated a number of social pathologies. The "rush-to" development not only relied on military intervention, but also contributed to the development of abusive and hostile human relationships. As a consequence, ethics for respecting and caring for others disappeared alarmingly while a state of anomie prevailed in the society. Since people are mobilized to be exclusively concerned with their selfish interests, the moral fabric of society began to tear apart at the seams. Moreover, the capacity for peaceful management of social discord (6) became seriously reduced and narrowed. Borrowing Herbert Marcuse's phrase, the Korean experience of the rush-to industrialization is tantamount to "one-dimensional" development.(7) Thus, corruption, power abuse and atrocious crimes ran rampant. Moreover, because the "rush-to" modernization placed great importance to immediate tangible results, no one seemed to take long-term responsibility for their actions. Having only one track in mind, the government and business leaders spared little concern for the possible negative repercussions their policies and development plans could have for the society in the long term.

The recent collapse of the Han River's Songsu Bridge and the Sampoong Department Store in a middle class district of Seoul, together with the gas explosion in the city of Taegu and others clearly reveals how fragile human life is and how meaninglessly and unnecessarily so many lives have been lost. In terms of violent crime, it has been revealed that there are more sexual crimes committed against women than has ever been imagined, that incidents of patricide increased with immediate inheritance as the main motive, and that young gang members targeted and cruelly murdered wealthy citizens. Against this backdrop, one cannot help but feel an immense loss of security.

Risk in this sense is neither random nor contingent, but complex and highly structured. Complexity here means that the causes of risks are not one dimensional. The costs of bureaucratic decision-making have soared, while the excessive preoccupation with external and material growth and the fascination with immediate results, without regard for the future, has failed to build a sound moral foundation for modernization. Though economic growth is impressive

from a comparative perspective, Korea suffers severely from various risk factors which may include the following:

- Surge in individual and organizational egotism
- Corruption permeating the entire society
- Crimes, especially atrocious and inhuman crimes
- Human trafficking, including violence against women
- Devaluation of life
- Lack of flexibility and responsibility among public officials
- Prevalence of jerry-build, low quality construction
- Rise in traffic accidents
- Pollution, contaminated drinking water and food products
- Destruction of the ecosystem, leading to an endangerment of life

### The Middling Grassroots as a Backbone of Civil Society

I would like here to go back to my original question: Why is Korea, despite its remarkable economic development, still haunted by so many crises and risks? The central argument that I endorse is that Korea's way of rush-to development has gone in a direction that has ripped apart the basic elements of moral fabric rather than cultivating them. This has given rise to strong social movements backed by college students and intellectuals. The middling grassroots may be seen in this context as a specific combination of the student movements and the middle class formation.

For convenience sake, let me compare two groups within the middle class in Korea using national survey data from 1996. The grassroots segment of the middle class which I call the "middling grassroots" (MG) refers to those who see themselves as part of as much middle class as "Minjung" (people), the latter understood as the base and source of popular sovereignty. It is this double identity of MG that distinguishes them from the propertied segment of the middle class (PMC) which refers to those who understand themselves only as part of the middle class, without developing the kind of popular identity which MG has nurtured. The following data are meant to show the undeniable differences between MG and PMC, though they both constitute the middle class in Korea.

**Table 2. Experience of Active Participation by MG & PMC (%)**

	MG	PMC
Signing Petition	52.0* (273)**	32.8 (448)
Environment Movement	41.5 (272)	27.9 (445)
Boycott of product	23.6 (275)	11.6 (450)
Demonstration	25.8 (275)	7.8 (448)

\* % refers to the proportion of those who have experience of active participation among each group of MG or PMC.

\*\* the total number of each group of MG and PMC.

<Table 2> shows that MG has grown up with far more active participation than PMC in such activities as signing petitions, environment protection movements, boycotts and street demonstration. There is also strong evidence that MG is better prepared to join various citizens' movements in the future. Furthermore, <Table 3> shows that MG is inclined to trust labor unions whereas PMC is not. Combined with other data, this clearly suggests that MG is more capable than PMC of understanding the situation of suppressed social groups and exploring solidarity with them in terms of actions as well as moral consciousness.

**Table 3 Trust in Labor Unions by MG & PMC (%)**

	MG	PMC	Total
Trust	64.6	47.5	54.0 (389)
Distrust	35.4	52.5	46.0 (331)
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

$$\chi^2=19.89977, df=1, p=.00001$$

The implication of these discoveries is clear. As an embodiment of social movements which continued along the Korean path of rush-to development, MG has acquired new morality and value orientations and, as such, represents the backbone of civil society understood as the site where individual rights and

freedoms are protected and guaranteed, and where public spheres and solidarities are formed independent of political and economic power.

### Toward Reflexive Modernization

The value orientations of MG in Korea can be best described as post-conventional or post-materialist. This moral resource is neither traditional nor bureaucratic, but participatory and reflexive. Instead of being instrumental and suppressive, it attempts to reinstate dialogical and participatory human relationships in social organizations for better understanding and cooperation among their members. Moreover, the post-conventional value orientation is likely to resist the taken-for-granted authorities, opening up the space for self-expression and discursive justification. According to Inglehart's international comparative study,(8) this cultural orientation is found particularly strongly among the younger generations in Korea.

If the rush-to development has brought about risk society, we can go beyond this by implementing the idea of reflexive modernization. The risks we are facing are not natural disasters, but dangers created by bureaucratic, technological, and sociocultural systems. The process of deliberation is to be institutionalized in order to overcome these risks and dangers. And I believe that it is here that we should reexamine traditions from a post-conventional perspective to derive, if possible, from these a normative potential which is still valid for us today and can be taken as a yardstick for a critical assessment of modernity realized so far. This hermeneutic approach to traditions differs from the typical social-scientific analysis of the positive correlation between Confucianism and the economic and social development in East Asia.(9) Characteristic of reflexive modernization is a deliberative attempt to make use of traditions in order to work out a normative basis of critique of, and alternative to, modernity from within, while appropriating traditions anew from a critical hermeneutic standpoint.(10)

The most important sociological task we may confront in this regard is how to make our social organizations transparent, responsible and humane by our collaborative efforts. For the moment, we can identify the two most important conditions for reflexive modernization, that is, the free flow of information and a democratization of decision-making processes. Monopoly, segmentation, and distortion of information commonly found in bureaucratic systems hinder the development of creative potentials of their members. It is also necessary that the exercise of authority be based on neither traditional status, nor bureaucratic titles, but on a common rationale and mutual agreement among the members of an organization. This means that instead of bureaucratic rationality based on a command system, a communicative rationality, in the sense of Habermas' theory, may lead us in the right direction for pursuing the reform of social organization.

The idea of reflexive modernity requires an hermeneutic reappropriation of traditions via MG's post-conventional approach to society and culture. The prospect of an East Asian network and solidarity among sociologists seems to depend upon our capacity to work out this vision as an alternative to the Western conception of instrumental rationality and the rush-to development we have experienced as a derivative of this.

### Notes

- (1) Martin Hart-Landsberg (1993), *The Rush-To Development: Economic Change and Political Struggle in South Korea*, New York: Monthly Review Press.
- (2) Ulrich Beck (1992), *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, London: Sage.
- (3) Ulrich Beck (1993), *Die Eifindung des Politischen*. Surkamp, p.97.
- (4) Hilton Root (1996), *Small Countries, Big Lessons: Governance and the Rise of East Asia*, Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, p. xi.
- (5) *Ibid.*, p. xii.
- (6) Han Sang-Jin (1994), "From Bureaucratic Authoritarianism to Civil Society: The Lessons from the Korean Experience", paper read at the International Sociological Association World Congress, Bielefeld, Germany.
- (7) Herbert Marcuse (1964), *One Dimensional Man*, Boston: Beacon.
- (8) Ronald Inglehart (1995), "Modernization and Postmodernization: Changing Korean Society in Global Perspective," Paper presented in the Symposium on Korean Culture in Global Perspective held in Seoul National University, Seoul, Korea.
- (9) Tu Wei-Ming(ed.), *Confucian Traditions in East Asian Modernity*, Harvard Univ. Press, 1996. W. de Bary & J. Haboush (eds.) (1985), *The Rise of Neo-Confucianism in Korea*. New York: Columbia Univ. Press.
- (10) James Palait (1996), *Confucian Statecraft and the Korean Institutions*. Seattle: Univ. of Seattle Press.