A ‘clash of cultures’ or the convergence of political ideology?

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The controversial ‘clash of civilisations’ thesis elucidated by Samuel Huntington sees global ideological conflict waning, to be replaced by new disputes between ‘the West’ and ‘the Rest’. In this view, tension shifts from the political to the cultural realm and takes on different dimensions. This thesis has attracted its share of criticism within the West as well as in Asia, but it has also complemented attempts by some Asian political leaders to insulate their regimes from a variety of criticisms, including charges of human rights abuses and to justify authoritarian rule. The notion that there is something culturally different or even mysterious about Asians has led some to argue that the West should get used to the idea that ‘they’ will never be like ‘us’ and that, in the words of Rawdon Dalrymple, former Australian Ambassador to Indonesia, ‘Confucian-style authoritarianism’ will prevail over liberal-democratic values, including human rights. While this scenario may unfold, the question is whether it is culture or a contest of power that underlies it.

The East-West dichotomy of the ‘clash of civilisations’ thesis has assisted Asian political leaders to posit a general Asian cultural aversion to some ‘Western’ concepts. With the global economic centre of gravity apparently shifting toward Asia, these leaders exhibit a stridency both in their rejection of criticism, from both domestic and external sources, and in the delineation of supposed fundamental Asian cultural values. What are depicted as ‘Western values’ are especially challenging now because local opposition groups (no longer simply labelled and rejected as ‘communists’) are calling for ‘human rights’, extended democratic rights and the like. By labelling these calls ‘alerts’, domestic challenges are blunted or made to seem less than legitimate. To do this, an alternative ‘Asian’ set of values is constructed.

What is particularly interesting in this is that the account of ‘Asian
values' provided by a select group of authoritarian political and community leaders in Asia is not without its adherents in the West. This fact carries with it significant foreign policy implications, and is especially important for the attempt by Australian policymakers to effect more extensive ties with countries in the region.

The argument in this chapter is that the notion of a clash of cultures is grossly misplaced. In our view, the more interesting and profound development embodied in the changing position of Asia in the global political economy, and the attendant assertion of 'Asian-ness', is the apparent development of comparable configurations of political ideologies in the 'West' and 'Asia'; a fact that is obscured by the proclaimed cultural dichotomy. Indeed, with nearly every attempt by self-proclaimed Asian leaders to specify a particular variety of 'Asian' cultural values distinct from those of the West, it becomes clearer that it is predominantly conservative political philosophy that they are championing. Their criticisms of Western society are invariably ethnocentric and stereotyped attacks on liberalism and, in many respects, mirror long-standing critiques of liberalism by Western conservatives.

This is not to suggest such positions are simply derived from earlier 'Western' thought, nor to contend that the broader political and ideological positions of different authoritarian leaders in Asia can be understood solely in these terms. Rather, recourse to conservative rhetoric by certain Asian leaders reflects long-standing concerns, which now combine with a recognition of the changing political challenges confronting them. The ideology of many anti-colonial movements and some of the first post-colonial governments drew heavily on anti-liberalism sentiment. The Asian socialist movement, strong in the South Asian countries, Burma, Malaysia and Singapore, was built on anti-communism and anti-liberalism.5 For example, once a self-styled socialist, Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew was an outspoken critic of both ideologies, but was not yet the critic of the West he was later to become. While many of these anti-communist socialists fell by the political wayside, anti-liberal sentiment remained an element of anti-colonialism and nation-building.

Having presided over major social, economic and political transformations, it is now the preservation of the order they have established that is perceived as the task at hand. We suggest that one of the consequences of this is that the preconditions for new political alliances spanning East and West are emerging and are potentially more significant than the forecast clash of cultures. As this chapter attempts to demonstrate, opponents of liberalism and social democracy, both inside and outside 'Asia', are drawing on each other's arguments and views with a growing synergy.

In attempting to advance the above-stated thesis, we concentrate on the resonances between conservatism across 'East' and 'West'. If space permitted we could detail the serious divisions within the 'East' over the positions enunciated by the self-appointed articulators and custodians of 'Asian values'. Such challenges further expose the superficiality and conceptual obfuscation of the supposed 'East-West' divide.

The implications of this analysis for policymakers and others in Australia seeking to accelerate and deepen economic, social and political engagement with the region are by no means negative. Certainly the analysis does not suggest such an objective is impossible or undesirable. Rather, it suggests that such engagement is best conducted on the basis of a full appreciation of the complex and diverse social and political realities of the region, and not on the basis of paradigms that conceal these realities. Furthermore, it emphasizes that engagement involves political and ideological alliances with forces in the region. The choice of allies should be publicly debated and not concealed behind the veil of culturalist arguments. Finally, these are more than choices about how to 'engage' with 'Asia'. They are also choices about what sort of society Australia should be, since different domestic interests are bolstered or weakened by both the particular forms of economic, social or political relationships with the region and the sort of values selectively identified with.

The 'clash of cultures'?

According to the conservative American political scientist Samuel Huntington, world politics is entering a new phase in which the fundamental source of conflict will be cultural rather than ideological or economic. The end of the Cold War has coincided with the increased economic and military power of non-Western civilisations who 'no longer remain objects of history as targets of Western colonialism but join the West as movers and shapers of history.' Huntington expects that there will be increasingly active conflict over the issue of Western cultural dominance and a heightening of inter-cultural friction around the globe. This friction, argues Huntington, derives from the fact that people of different civilisations have different views on the relations between God and man, the individual and the group, the citizen and the state, parents and children, husband and wife, as well as differing views of the relative importance of rights and responsibilities, liberty and authority, equality and hierarchy. These differences are the product of centuries. They will not soon disappear.

The consequence of this will be clashes at the local level, where territorial struggles take place between 'adjacent groups along the fault lines between civilizations', and at the macro-level where states...
belonging to differing civilisations compete for military and economic power, and over the control of international institutions and third parties, and competitively promote their particular political and religious values.  

Although Huntington believes that global political dynamics will increasingly be shaped by interactions between seven or eight major civilisations, he essentially sees the division between the ‘West and the Rest’ as the major source of conflict. Here, there is a stark cultural divide:

Western concepts differ fundamentally from those prevalent in other civilisations. Western ideas of individualism, liberalism, constitutionalism, human rights, equality, liberty, the rule of law, democracy, free markets, the separation of church and state, often have little resonance in Islamic, Confucian, Japanese, Hindu, Buddhist or Orthodox cultures.

Here, Huntington is drawing attention to elements of liberal thought, and proceeds to draw attention to a ‘de-Westernization and indigenization of elites’ in the non-Western world that portends a preparedness to confront these differences with a confidence and self-assuredness that has not existed in the past. To be sure, serious conflict will continue between states and groups within the same civilisation, but they will not be of the same intensity as inter-civilisation conflict in general or ‘West versus the Rest’ conflict in particular.

Huntington also makes observations about regional economic cooperation that have implications for the aspirations of Australian policymakers. Economic regionalism, he argues, stands the best chance of success when it is ‘rooted in a common civilization’. For this reason, he sees difficulty in a broad East Asian grouping rivaling the achievements of the European Community. Japan is so different culturally from its neighbours, argues Huntington, that it is the rapid extension of economic relations between China and countries with substantial overseas Chinese communities—particularly Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore—that is likely to shape the primary economic bloc unfolding in the region.

On this basis, Huntington points approvingly to Owen Harries’ reservations about Prime Minister Paul Keating’s notion of Australia as an ‘Asian country’. Harries’ cautions against Australia creating an historic first as a ‘reverse torn country: a fully Western country in which a significant section of the elite now advocates a move to membership of another, non-Western civilisation’.

While Huntington predicts a shift towards conflict of a more fundamental nature, it does not logically follow that global politics is headed for intractable difficulties, but it is clear that only the West’s resignation to a declining ability to have its essential values and its interests institutionalised as universally valid will serious conflict be avoided. It is incumbent on the West to ‘develop a more profound understanding of the basic religious and philosophical assumptions underlying other civilizations and the ways in which people in those civilizations see their interests’. For the first time, it is argued, the West faces the challenge of cultural coexistence, and Huntington stresses the need for the West to maintain the economic and military strength appropriate to the defence of its interests.

A comprehensive critical discussion of Huntington’s notion of a ‘clash of civilizations’ is not the purpose of this essay. Rather, we focus on the claim that it is culture, as distinct from ideology, that underlies recent friction between the so-called East and West over such issues as human rights, labour standards and law and order policies, and portrays further ‘clashes’. We agree that important global shifts in economic and political power favour heightened contestation over these and other issues. Frequent and forceful assertions about ‘Asian-ness’ from various Southeast Asian leaders reflects a recognition of this changing balance. There is also a discernible measure of concern in some circles in the West about its relative economic decline, although Mahbubani’s recent reference to a developing ‘siege mentality’ is overstating the case.

In this chapter we argue that any friction or tension between the ‘West and the Rest’ is unlikely to be a manifestation of cultural differences alone, or that such factors are supplanting political and ideological struggle. Rather we argue that the various attempts to portray ‘cultural conflict’ or a ‘clash of civilisations’ represent the harnessing of cultural arguments to ideological and political ends; an exercise to which Huntington’s thesis lends some intellectual credibility precisely because he operates largely within the same ideological perspective as those who are taking up the cultural cudgels with such alacrity—conservatism. We will attempt to show how protestations about a distinctive Asian culture often mask this more universal political philosophy, sung in two-part harmony. Interestingly, this cross-cultural ideological harmony is challenged by domestic groups in Asian nations who reject assertions that human rights are ‘Western’ values and associated views derived from culturalist dichotomies expounded by a small but influential group of self-appointed articulators and custodians of ‘Asian values’.

The ‘clash’ and its harmonies

Ironically, while Huntington’s thesis has merit in its provocative attempt to capture the dynamics of momentous historical change, it
ultimately rests on a rather ahistorical conception of culture. As O'Hagen notes, although Huntington defines civilisations as dynamic entities, his depiction of them is largely as immutable belief systems. Cultures are thus on an unchanging trajectory of distinctiveness. The utility of this understanding to the custodians of authoritarian rule is obvious: deep-seated cultural traditions cannot be expected to change overnight, even if that were considered desirable. The effect of this is to divert attention from the dynamics of social, political and economic life. Yet it is precisely the tremendous change internal to Asian societies that has precipitated both the broader shifts in global economic and political power and the concern shown by some Asian elites with 'traditional Asian values'.

The dramatic social transformations that have accompanied economic development in Asian countries not only ushered in new centres of economic and political power, but also new divisions and conflicts. Questions of wealth distribution, environmentalism and the position of women are surfacing, for example. None of these appear to have much to do with the current interest of some Asian leaders in what they portray as distinctively 'Asian' values. However, issues such as these have much to do with internal challenges—both real and perceived—to existing regimes. In defining 'Asian values', these leaders present themselves as the true bearers of Asian traditions, enabling them to brand dissenting views as 'unAsian' and 'alien'. And this is the clear intention of those Asian leaders who dismiss domestic and regional agitation over such issues as human rights.

Equally, the tendency to depict the 'West' as some sort of cultural monolith downplays significant disputes over liberalism. Certainly there are important points of intersection that bring various liberals and conservatives together. In particular, a market system not only rewards economic individualism and potentially expands the political space outside the state, both attractive to liberals, but it imposes a discipline on individuals and generates an hierarchical order of winners and losers that appeals to conservatives. Understandably, then, both conservatives and liberals share a deep scepticism about independent trade union power which is perceived as a threat to the prerogatives of capital and order more generally. Nevertheless, friction between these camps is not only real, but a central dynamic in the politics of most contemporary liberal democratic societies. The liberals' more optimistic view of human nature and associated emphasis on individualism, their relative lack of reverence for tradition in favour of reason and rationality, and their greater tolerance of the incursions of the market economy on social life have, over time, manifested in a range of unresolved disputes with conservatives. The contemporary conservative backlash against a host of liberal social and economic reforms underlines the thematic dilemma of trying to strike a balance between the respective rights and obligations of the individual vis-à-vis the state that would accommodate both conservative and liberal views. Even within liberalism there are significant tensions of this sort, notably between the advocates of a more laissez-faire economic individualism, popularly referred to as neo-liberals or 'dries', and the 'wets' who sanction a more interventionist social and economic role for the state. The former's conception of liberty is an acutely class-specific one which privileges and champions the liberties of those entering individuals with capital.

Huntington himself contributes to an idealisation of his own 'culture' by minimising the disputations within and between conservatism and liberalism. In a recent interview he asserted that 'one should not underestimate the central strength of American society which is individualism and the emphasis on competition and mobility, people going out and doing things for themselves and not relying upon government'. This is arguably an ideological account in so much as these are 'atmospheres' for some groups but weaknesses for others in American society. In the attempt to keep the East-West cultural dichotomy alive, various Asian political leaders happily adopt this simplistic caricature of the West as unproblematically liberal.

'Clash of culture' arguments are seductive, not only for those in the 'West' who wish to oppose dissent, but also to various elements within the 'West' who wish to promote conservative domestic political agendas. Neo-liberals, seeking a greater assertion of market relations at the expense of the state, find the content of some so-called Asian values useful in advancing, for example, the case for labour market deregulation and reduced state welfare spending. Lee Kuan Yew's gratuitous advice to Australians in 1994 was music to the ears of both neo-liberals and conservatives: 'to compete in the same race with Asians, Australians must be weaned from a dependence on public welfare and become more self-reliant and competitive'. He elaborated: 'Deep-seated problems of work ethic, productivity, enterprise, blood-minded unions protecting unproductive work practices, feather-bedding and inflexibility in wages are neither quickly nor easily cured'. These comments are exactly the ideological recipe to bring liberals and conservatives together in opposing common 'enemies'.

The discussion below concentrates on the correspondence between 'Asian values' and the philosophies and agendas of conservatives in the West who seek the restoration of what they identify as traditional values in their own societies. We will pursue this under the following headings, each of which represents a central and universal characteristic of conservatism: stability ahead of rapid change; human nature and the need for discipline; order and authority; traditional values;
obligations ahead of rights. In taking this approach, it is not suggested that the entire perspective of the selected leaders espousing 'Asian values' can be understood solely in terms of conservative theory and philosophy. Nor is it suggested that all of the Asian conservatives mentioned are friends of Asia or Asians. There are few political actors anywhere who do not have different, and often contradictory, ideological elements. We will concentrate on those 'values' that unite them ideologically. Major strands of conservative thought are present in the so-called 'Asian values' these leaders express and this suggests important convergences in political agendas common within and across the alleged East-West conceptual divide.

The survey of ideas by Asian leaders is necessarily limited rather than comprehensive, and draws heavily on proclamations by the activist Singaporean leaders and statements of these values by Thailand's King Bhumibol Adulyadej, who has a strong claim to be a 'traditional' Asian leader, even though he has not been an international advocate for Asian conservatism—his comments have usually been too stilted domestic dissent or activism. Singaporeans have certainly played a disproportionately large role in declarations about 'Asian values', especially in the international arena. But if the self-appointed role as regional custodian and articulator of 'Asian values' has irritated neighbours at times, it has less to do with the content of the proclamations than the diplomacy involved. At the same time, it should be emphasised that there are any number of similar examples that may be drawn from, inter alia, Indonesia, China, Vietnam, Malaysia and Burma.

Conservative values

Stability ahead of rapid change

The conservative's primary attachment is with the past, an attachment grounded in the notion that these values, beliefs and institutions that have survived and evolved over time must have done so because of their inherent worth. Even so, conservatives have not been opposed to all change, endorsing change where it is seen as functional for the preservation of the traditional values and the hierarchical social order for which they stand. Change is appropriate where it is drawn from the well of tradition, and conservatives emphasise continuity ahead of change, for too much of the latter violates tradition. Hence, Edmund Burke's fear of revolutionary change, which he thought as 'having no charm but for robbers and assassins, and no natural origin but in the brains of fools and madmen'. However, if traditional values are reproduced and change grows from them, then change is acceptable.

Since most Asian societies have undergone dramatic change in recent decades, it would seem that this conservative predisposition has little relevance to the outlooks of contemporary Asian leaders. After all, people like Soeharto, Lee Kuan Yew, Mahathir and their cohorts have seen remarkable changes—doing much to transform non-capitalist structures. In their earlier years, in particular, their rhetoric was replete with statements asserting the primacy of change at virtually every level of society. Much of this change was meant to strengthen society and state against challenges from the Left. For example, the Thai king has consistently argued for modernisation, but with the preservation of 'Thai values', the latter being a metaphor for anti-communism.

Yet the wheel has turned. So successful have their respective projects been, including the destruction of much of the Left, that the pace and extent of social change now threatens to loosen the grip of these leaderships over social and political life. The aspirations for change are now far more qualified, with a preference for Western technology and 'Asian' values. The Thai king is an excellent example of this, portraying himself as both a traditional leader and defender of traditional values, but as one who is an educated scientist, who can draw on science to support development. Like their conservative counterparts in the West, these leaders believe that for the preservation of traditional values the only way is to maintain social order amidst the dynamism of economic change and fear the consequences if they do not prevail. Huntington made a similar point, albeit in the theoretical garb of revisionist modernisation theory, some twenty years ago.

In his 1994 National Day speech, Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong acknowledged that change in Singapore was unavoidable, but contrasted change in his country with that in Britain and the United States. In Singapore, change was said to be 'evolutionary, not revolutionary', and he added: 'We do not have to make fundamental changes in direction because our political and economic institutions, and our public policies, are right'. In the same speech Goh left no doubt about what, above all else, must be preserved:

Our institutions and basic policies are in place to sustain high economic growth. But if we lose our traditional values, our family strengths and our social cohesion, we will lose our vibe and morale. This is the intangible factor in the success of the East Asian economies.

Whether or not this is the intangible factor, it should be clear that this is a strong call for the retention of the status quo.

The emphasis on traditional values amid flux and dynamism will be discussed below, but the significance to conservatives of this sort
of argument was highlighted by Australian conservative B.A. Santamaria, whose regular column for the *Australian* was given over to what he described as the wisdom of former Singaporean Ambassador to Washington, Tommy Koh. In reproducing Koh's *International Herald Tribune* article, entitled 'The 10 Values that Undergird East Asian Strength and Success', Santamaria urged that Australians seriously consider such values.

**Human nature and the need for discipline**

Conservatives have a fundamentally negative view of human nature, seeing humans as imperfect and requiring control. Whereas Rousseau saw humans as inherently free and good, conservatives understand humans as naturally evil and prone to anarchy and destruction. Hence, conservative writer Russell Kirk underlines how the force of tradition acts as a check on the 'anarchic impulse' of human beings. The imperfect nature of humans necessitates controls, and Peter Viereck writes about 'self-expression through self-restraint'.

King Bhumibol has consistently taken this position, arguing that order and discipline are absolutely necessary if social chaos is to be avoided. He has stated that:

> At present, discipline is viewed by some quarters as being virtually meaningless. ... As a matter of fact, discipline is highly essential, for it is the major cause why the rules and regulations that exist for the orderliness of men, organization, society or country are not rendered useless.

The theme of discipline is also strong in the attempts by Asian leaders to differentiate so-called Asian values from those of Western societies. In an ironic statement from the former Prime Minister of possibly the world's most socially engineered society, Lee Kuan Yew stated in an interview with the editor of the American *Foreign Affairs* that:

> There is such a thing called evil, and it is not the result of being a victim of society. You are just an evil man, prone to do evil things, and you have to be stopped from doing them. Westerners have abandoned an ethical basis for society, believing all problems are solvable by good government, which we in the East never believed possible.

Kishore Mahbubani, permanent secretary in Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, links 'East Asian discipline' with economic performance, stating 'the evidence is accumulating that socially cohesive and disciplined societies are developing a competitive edge in today's world'. Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir has also recently talked about the importance for Malaysia of a 'culture of self-discipline and responsibility towards society'. The Thai King had made similar observations in 1961 after one of his overseas trips, stating that the most advanced nations were the most united and well-disciplined. His argument was, however, the reverse of Mahbubani's, noting that the Asian nations were undisciplined and therefore performing badly in economic terms.

In Koh's 1994 National Day speech, he extended this theme, decrying what he regards as the light treatment meted out to criminals in the US and Britain. Echoing the criticisms of conservatives in those countries, he contended that some judges showed more sympathy for the offender than the victim. His intention was to hammer home the point that Singapore's authorities would continue to impose discipline and not shy from this responsibility. The alternative was social chaos and breakdown, as was now manifesting in the West.

This was a timely observation given that Singapore and the United States officials had, in previous months, been exchanging views over the sentence of an American teenager living in Singapore, Michael Fay, who had been convicted by a Singapore court on charges of vandalism. Sentenced to four months' jail, a $52200 fine and six strokes of the cane, Fay ultimately had his caning reduced to four strokes as a limited gesture to the American government which had actually appealed for a more generous clemency to avoid the caning altogether. President Clinton had referred to the punishment as 'excessive' and charges of barbarism were invariably levelled by human rights spokes-persons and individual commentators in the United States and elsewhere. In the United States, a *Christian Science Monitor* editorial maintained: 'It is not going too far to say that the caning of Fay is almost a literal expression of what Samuel Huntington has called an “emerging clash of civilizations”'. Lee Kuan Yew took the opportunity to claim the Fay affair evidenced America's moral decay: "The [US] daren't restrain or punish individuals, forgiving them for whatever they have done. That's why the whole country is in chaos: drugs, violence, unemployment and homelessness".

However, the reaction within the West to incidents such as the Fay caning actually demonstrates that the Singapore government's preference for a tough stance on law and order is by no means culturally based. Rather, like-minded conservatives in the West with the same basic mistrust of human nature were among the strongest supporters of the Singapore government's stance. Such attitudes are familiar to any reader of almost any popular Australian (or US or British) newspaper, often flying in the face of crime statistics that do not indicate massive crime waves. Severe discipline is seen as a force for order.

In Australia, Queensland National Party Member of Parliament, Vince
Lester, not only applauded the Singapore system but called for the adoption of flogging in Australia. Other sections of the Queensland National Party echoed this view and the Young Nationals went so far as to advocate flogging for minor crimes such as evasion of taxi or bus fares. The conservative Call to Australia Party, led by the Reverend Fred Nile, has demanded that government ‘re-introduce the tougher penalties [for law-breakers] we used to live by’.43

Amid the Fay controversy, Western Australian Premier Richard Court visited Singapore in February and on his return publicly embraced the reintroduction of the death penalty in his state.44 He spoke admiringly about the achievements of Singapore’s authorities: ‘They have entrenched a highly disciplined approach to law and order issues where everyone clearly knows the ground rules.’ He continued to remark, ‘there is no doubt that the discipline at a younger age has helped instil a strong sense of responsibility and pride in their country’. His Attorney-General, Cheryl Edwardes, also visited a Singapore Reformation Working Centre, in her search for a model for discipline-oriented work camps for young offenders.45 We should also keep in mind that the notion of crime as a fundamentally behavioural, rather than social, phenomenon informs much of the push in the United States for expanded expenditure on prisons. Clearly the punitive and disciplinarian approach to law and order in Singapore evokes significant support and respect in the ‘West’, with key public figures believing at least some elements worthy of recommendation. Interestingly, even Singaporeans are beginning to feel the criticism of this kind of approach from other Asian commentators, including from those who feel that crime is not a reflection of the inherent evil of people.46

Order and authority

The conservative emphasis on historical continuity ahead of abrupt social change and upheavals is linked to a conception of society as an organic whole. Society is seen as a natural, organic product of slow historical growth and it is tradition, morality and the force of habit that hold society together. It is enormously complex: embodying far more than the sum of its parts or the mass of its relationships. This living organism constantly renews itself. The importance of order is paramount in this view, and what is functional for order is morally defensible. Given the organic model, conservatives understandably view conflict as dysfunctional and threatening to unity and stability. According to Burke, the customary, unthinking parts of life form a major part of social existence and the life of this organism.47 Here the centrality of shared values in the maintenance and reproduction of order is underlined. The role of these values in underwriting social order cannot be overemphasised.

The primacy of order marks conservatives off from liberals, who champion individual freedom, and socialists and social democrats who are inspired by notions of social justice. Conservatives believe that without order and stability there can be no liberty or civilisation. Instead, to quote Hobbes,48 life would be ‘solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short’. Lee Kuan Yew’s observations on contemporary American social life reflect this view:

I find parts of it totally unacceptable: guns, drugs, violent crime, vagrancy, unbecoming behaviour in public—in sum the breakdown of civil society. The expansion of the right of the individual to behave or misbehave as he pleases has come at the expense of order and society. In the East the main object is to have a well-ordered society so that everybody can have maximum enjoyment of his freedoms. This can only exist in an ordered state and not in a natural state of contention and anarchy.49

This quote was also reproduced approvingly by Australian conservative columnist B.A. Santamaria in an article entitled ‘US decadence in a fascinating time’.50

Given their negative view of human nature, it is no wonder conservatives should place great store in order and fear imminent disaster in the event that it should break down. This surfaces in many of the Thai King’s speeches, where he emphasises unity as a key factor in society, believing, for example, that political conflict will lead to the ‘utter destruction of Thailand. It will mean that the Thai Nation which the Thai People have built up for so long will turn into an insignificant country . . .’.51 He has argued that unity could only be maintained through compromise, and urged that ‘everybody must know how to treasure Unity’.52 The King’s view is that unity prevents trouble, and where unity does not exist, subversion and crime result.53

This theme also emerges in Mahbubani’s complementary reservations about the direction of American society. He argues that:

American society, by permitting all forms of lifestyle to emerge—without any social pressures to conform to certain standards—may have wrecked the moral and social fabric that is needed to keep a society calm and well ordered. A well-ordered society needs to plant clear constraints on behaviour in the minds of its citizens. In the United States it is clear that many such fundamental psychological constraints have collapsed, with the acceptance of all forms of lifestyle as legitimate.54

Here Mahbubani is not only expressing concern about the collapse of order, but attributing it to the absence of a clear and unambiguous
moral stance in defence of a particular order. Despite the general reverence for order by its advocates, it is not a case of any order will do. Rather, an hierarchical order with clear lines of dominance and subordination and undisputed authority is mutually attractive to Western conservatives and Asian leaders championing the East Asian way. Thus, conservatives have historically looked to the institutions of family, church and nation rather than representative political institutions.

Interestingly, Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim, whose active promotion of an ‘Asian renaissance’ has included some notion of ‘political liberalty’ and a rejection of the idea that this is mimicking to economic development in Asia, is also strongly wedged to the primacy of order. ‘In facing the manifold challenges to civil society, we must remain focused on its basic needs. Foremost of these is the creation and preservation of social order, without which there would be chaos’. Significantly, Anwar’s greater declared tolerance of dissent is related to his view that ‘Properly instituted, democracy will ensure order and stability’.

Traditional values

Both in the emphasis on traditional values and in the supposed content of East Asian values, we again see a strong resonance with conservatism, where one of the major philosophical elements is the opposition to the idea of radical change and a preference for conservation of values and traditions considered essential to society. For others, there is a desire to conserve particular social and political institutions. While the discipline of market relations is attractive to conservatives, they have always had reservations about capitalism, insisting that there be a moral basis to the social and political order that transcends mere market logic. Irving Kristol’s *Two Cheers for Capitalism* is but the most striking contemporary reminder of this. As is observable in Australia and other advanced industrialised countries, this creates some tensions on the right of politics, distinguishing conservatives from liberals. Issues such as sexuality and civil liberties separate conservatives and liberals.

Asian conservatives have also stressed the importance of non-economic factors and the alleged centrality of traditional Asian values. Like Thailand’s King Bhumibol, who has always opposed change for its own sake, believing that there is much ‘good in the old-fashioned things’, Singapore’s Prime Minister Goh argues that a sense of community and nationhood, a disciplined and hardworking people, strong moral values, and family ties are the critical Asian values: ‘These values are tried and tested, have held us together, propelled us forward.

We must keep them as the bedrock of our society for the next century’. He continued: ‘It is not simply materialism and pursuit of individual rewards which drive Singapore forward, but more important is the sense of idealism and service, born out of a feeling of social solidarity and national identification’. This call for an emphasis on Asian values is based on a fear that they are giving way to a more Westernised, individualistic, and self-centred outlook on life.

As is so often the case with Western conservative critiques of their own societies, Goh emphasises the centrality of traditional family structures and values. When conservatives extol the virtues of the family, it is the patriarchal family they have in mind. This institution has a number of attractions for them. First, it embodies a clear power structure which is hierarchical and based on authority. The sexual division of labour and relations between parents and children are not based on egalitarian principles but tradition and the utility of those relations to order—both within the family and the society more generally. Second, it is a pivotal institution for socialisation—hence the common notion that the family is the building block of society. In particular, it engenders a sense of obligation and commitment to a broader community. This is one of the reasons that conservatives are often hostile to state-provided social welfare—it undermines the authority of family and community. Lee Kuan Yew is certainly in agreement with this, although he seems to claim it as a distinctively Asian view:

Eastern societies believe that the individual exists in the context of his family. He is not pristine and separate. The family is part of the extended family, and then friends and the wider society. The ruler or the government does not try to provide for a person what the family best provides.

Such views of the family allow for attacks on supposedly negative trends in society, pointing to the erosion of parental authority and discipline over children and the lack of respect for elders. Such statements are as common in the West as they are in the East, with Goh recently expressing concern that divorce rates are rising in Singapore and that there are indeed some single parents and juvenile delinquency in the island state. This perspective resulted in a recent policy announcement that unmarried mothers would be barred from buying homes from the Housing Development Board (HDB), rectifying a loophole that had seen 1000 unmarried mothers purchase HDB homes. Goh also reaffirmed government policy not to allow women civil servants the same medical benefits as men, on the basis that it was the government’s underlying philosophy to ‘channel rights,
benefits and privileges through the head of the family so that he can enforce the obligations and responsibilities of family members'.

The Singapore government has also established a Family Values Promotion Committee involving people from the public and private sectors, which has identified five family values to uphold: love; care and concern; mutual respect; filial responsibility; commitment and communication in their roles as parents, spouses, sons and daughters. Consistent with this, the government has supported the Maintenance of Parents Bill, which will legally enforce financial support for parents in old age, and has pressed for a new clause in the Advertising Standards Authority of Singapore's code stating that advertisers should consider society's mores as well as the five core family values.

The Singapore government's policies on the family are not without their contradictions. One of the measures Prime Minister Goh used of Singapore's progress in an address to party cadres in early 1995 was the growth in foreign maids. This rose dramatically from 36,000 to 89,000 between 1990 and 1994. These maids not only undertake domestic duties but are the primary carers of children. Traditional child-rearing responsibilities within the family are thus being transformed, and presented as a measure of social advancement.

Nevertheless, Goh's general concerns were echoed and extended by Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir in his claim that the Western concept of a family is a clear indication of its moral decline. He condemned the West for recognition of a gay or lesbian couple as a family if it adopts children, and for recognition of de facto relationships as family units. 'It will only produce illegitimate children who may, in turn, have incestuous marriages with their siblings'.

There is much support for these family values. Goh declared that he had even received positive feedback from housewives in the United Kingdom. Coincidentally, at about the same time, the Governor of Western Australia, Major-General Michael Jeffrey, delivered a speech in Perth that expressed similar concerns about divorce rates and the growth of single-parent families. Governor Jeffrey claimed that a 'British study found a direct statistical link between single parenthood and virtually every major type of crime'. Like many conservatives before him, he was expressing a clear preference for the traditional family structure which he saw as 'in some trouble'. The Call to Australia Party also emphasises the need to restore family values to prevent declining moral standards and to again make Australia great.

Hence, the Australian Broadcasting Commission's televising of Sydney's Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras in 1994 brought a variety of group and individual protests, calling for the promotion of the 'traditional' family, while the Lyons Forum, a group within the Federal Liberal Party, maintained that only traditional families bonded by 'God-ordained' principles could bring up children properly. Conservative United States House Speaker Newt Gingrich could also identify with these perspectives, and has no trouble citing the problem and enemy—liberalism.

Having emphasised 'traditionalism', it is not our intention to suggest that this is becoming the exclusive rationale for the contemporary social, political and economic order, but an increasingly central one. The new order is also, to differing extents, justified in functional terms tied to developmental imperatives. This is most conspicuous in Singapore, where an elaborate elitist ideology also exists which insists that a genuine meritocracy now prevails. Hierarchy and merit are thus seen to coexist and the challenge is to reproduce such an order.

**Obligations ahead of rights**

As we have discussed, according to conservatives, human nature is such that we should be very cautious about individual freedom. Social institutions such as the family, army and organised religion that suppress individual drives and aspirations thus play a critical role in generating order and continuity and are valued accordingly. But the importance attached to order and the overall interest of 'society' as a living entity also logically leads conservatives to attribute moral superiority to the 'community' over the 'individual'. Hence, it is obligations to community, society, nation, family and other established social institutions that conservatives stress, over the rights of individuals. As British conservative writer Roger Scruton puts it:

> In politics, the conservative attitude seeks above all for government, and regards no citizen as possessed of a natural right that transcends his obligation to be ruled. Even democracy—which corresponds neither to the natural nor the supernatural yearnings of the normal citizen—can be discarded without detriment to the civil well-being as the conservative conceives it.

Thailand's King has expressed the essence of this perspective, by placing emphasis on duties rather than rights. In summarising his perspective, he encapsulates the conservative world-view:

> A nation is made up of various institutions in the same way as all the organs which make up a live body. Life in a body can endure, because the organs, large or small, function normally. Likewise, a nation can endure, because its various institutions are firm and are fully discharging their respective duties. You must all realize that the nation is the life, the blood and the property of everyone . . . To uphold and safeguard the nation is the duty . . . of every party. Each and everyone must work together . . . sharing common aims and
objectives. Should any group fail in its duty...the entire nation may collapse and be destroyed.61

When individuals assert political, social or economic rights, conservatives view these as having no basis in history nor proven utility to society. This is another reason for the conservative antagonism to social welfare, which tends to institutionalise dubious 'rights'. Conservatives despise the so-called 'new class' for its part in fostering such claims.62

It is Goh's fear of this that underscores his recent attack on welfare as 'misguided compassion' which has led to disastrous results.63

The conservative understanding of inequality as natural also contributes to a mistrust of and hostility to democracy and calls for equality and rights. Such notions are wrong and dangerous, and pose a threat to order and stability. People do have differential abilities and capacities, not the least in the area of political leadership, and the real task is to ensure that the gifted are ensured their rightful place for the overall good of society. Inequality is thus both natural and functional and it is folly to attempt to disturb this truth. Obviously this reasoning provides a perfect rationale for hierarchical structures and elitist ideologies. Lee Kuan Yew has, of course, never been in any doubt about the construction of Singapore's 'meritocracy'.64

When we turn to the numerous efforts by the various leaders to specify distinctive Asian cultural values, none is more thematic or important than the insistence on society or community ahead of the individual. Articulations of this difference are heavily weighted towards explicit attacks on 'Western liberalism': individualism and liberal democracy. What becomes clear is the depth of anti-liberalism rather than any detailed self-awareness of traditional Asian values. It is this position that forms the basis of a spiritual rejection of human rights as either an alien or culturally loaded concept from the West as well as the more general defence of authoritarian rule.

The dispute between the American and Singapore governments over the FAY sentence was contested around notions of human rights. Leading Singaporean business figure Ho Kwon Ping added weight to the notion of a 'clash of civilisations' by portraying it in terms of contrasting attitudes in East and West over the rights of individuals versus those of the community. In an address to lawyers on the day FAY was charged, he observed:

The Western choice that it would be better for a guilty person to go free than to convict an innocent person is testimony to the importance of the individual. But an Asian perspective may well be that it is better that an innocent person be convicted if the common welfare is protected than for a guilty person to be free to inflict further harm on the community.65

The common depiction of the West as characterised by rampant individualism—and at considerable social cost—is lucidly summarised by Mahbubani:

In working so hard to increase their scope of individual freedom within their society, Americans have progressively cut down the thick web of human relations and obligations that have produced social harmony in traditional societies. Effectively in tearing down such social constraints, upon individuals, American society has carried out slash and burn tactics that have, as in natural forests, left sections of their society denuded of social obligations.66

Here we again clearly see the assumption of a natural proclivity for evil on the part of individuals and the moral superiority of community.

Asian leaders have advanced a variety of reasons to explain why they believe liberal democracy is unsuitable in the Asian context, but discussion over human rights has generated a conception that Asian systems should be judged not on human rights but in terms of economic development by 'good government'. For Mahbubani67 and Koh,68 the common characteristics of East Asian regimes define good government: political stability; wise leadership; sound bureaucracies based on meritocracy; economic growth with equity, but rewarding enterprise and achievement; fiscal prudence; social policies in such fields as housing, education and health care that make every citizen feel a stakeholder; national teamwork and partnership between government, business and labour; acceptance of the rule of law and an independent judiciary; and relative lack of corruption. According to Mahbubani,69 'to have good government, you often need less, not more, democracy'. Koh, however, sees a role for government in developing civil society.

The attempt to portray the concept of human rights as 'alien' may reflect concern about internal pressures in that direction no less than the international—or at least a concern that the latter may fuel the former. While human rights NGOs are still in their infancy or non-existent in China, Vietnam, Laos, North Korea, Burma and Singapore, there is a developing Southeast Asian Human Rights Network, which met in Bangkok in July 1994. Furthermore, of the 1800 non-government organisations that sent representatives to the United Nations World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993, some 250 were from the Asia-Pacific region.69 Australian Prime Minister Keating's reference in July 1994 to Indonesia as a nation of 'great tolerance' came in for criticism from human rights activists in Indonesia and the region. During a later visit to Australia, Indonesian human rights lawyer, Buyung Nasution, underlined his disappointment at this remark:
If you were in our position, people who were oppressed, harassed, some of us were arrested unlawfully, even tortured... of course we could not expect too much—that foreign countries will jump in and help us or get us relief but that at least we would expect that foreign governments would not pursue oppressive measures.\(^{93}\)

Recent attempts to link labour conditions to human rights and to tie trade concessions to progress on human rights has also elicited illuminating responses in Asia and the West. A US government sub-committee suggested linking privileges under the generalised scheme of preferences to improvements in these areas,\(^ {92}\) a position US Trade Representative Mickey Kantor threatened the Indonesian Government with. Asian leaders dubbed the push a blatant attempt at disguised protectionism.\(^ {93}\) Malaysia's Mahathir contended that the West was hell-bent on sabotage and would prefer Asia to experience the chaos. 'This is what the West wants—not democracy, not free trade and not human rights.'\(^ {94}\) He added: 'Actually, they want us to practice the democracy which brings about fastability, economic decline and poverty. With such a situation they can threaten and control us.'

However, the threatened withdrawal by the United States government of Most Favored Nation (MFN) status for China gave expression to significant US-based interests associated with China's regime. The Clinton administration was subject to intense lobbying on behalf of US companies to sever the link between trade and human rights, to safeguard access to both the huge market and access to cheap labour. As the Far Eastern Economic Review\(^ {95}\) reported, opponents argued that revocation of China's MFN status would mean the loss of American jobs; that trade would enhance social and political evolution in China, thus improving human rights; and that good US-China relations were essential for the security of the Asia-Pacific region.

These views seem to have prevailed, demonstrating that the liberal human rights push in the West has to confront powerful domestic interests that either rationalise or endorse the conditions and practices that are the subject of controversy.

Implications

The aim of this chapter has been to suggest a rather straightforward yet generally neglected point. That point is that the rhetoric about 'Asian values' and a potential for a clash of cultures, especially between the 'West' and 'Asia', masks convergences of political ideologies across nations. Although we chose to concentrate on the conservative elements of this rhetoric, we have not sought to depict the Asian leaders involved as conservatives per se. Their political and ideological positions are more complex than this. It would be possible to isolate other ideological elements in their broader political rhetoric, such as economic individualism and developmentalism, which also find sympathetic audiences in the 'West'. Even so, it is significant that the discussion of 'Asian values' has concentrated on essentially conservative values.

The nonsense that 'Asian values' are culturally defined has recently been demonstrated by a strong proponent of this perspective, Dr Mahathir, who joined with the conservative Japanese politician and author Shintaro Ishihara to write the Japanese-language book, The Asia That Can Say No: A Policy to Combat Europe and America. In the following publicity blitz, Mahathir, frustrated with the Japanese Government's support of the US, Australia and New Zealand position on his proposed East Asian Economic Caucus, accused the Japanese of not being 'East Asian'.\(^ {96}\)

A nonsense indeed, but the 'Asian values' line has a strong appeal in Australia and elsewhere—and not just among conservatives. In Australia this perspective has been accepted unproblematically by a host of policymakers, journalists, educators, public commentators and business people. This not only reflects the fact that various political and social ideologies have some points of intersection, it also reflects changes within Australia that render conservative and anti-liberal rhetoric by Asian leaders useful for domestic political projects. The changing global political economy, involving a new status and importance for Asian economies and societies, appreciates the currency of this rhetoric; after all, such economic development is seen to demonstrate that 'Asian values' actually 'work'. This process might be understood, as suggested by Robison in the introduction to this volume, as the 'internationalisation' of political and ideological contestations.

Not surprisingly, then, conservatives hoping to overturn social reforms of previous decades and neo-liberals intent on an agenda that would bolster economic individualism will select those elements of the 'Asian values' rhetoric that suit their particular cause. While the former may admire the attempt to retain patriarchal family structures, deference to authority and harsh penalties for crime, the latter see merit in emulating the relatively unencumbered business environment in its call for greater 'labour market flexibility' in Australia.

While it is easy to see that the cultural relativist positions of these self-proclaimed Asian leaders will have a particular appeal to those conservatives who believe that society is ultimately held together by traditional values, it is ironic that they also have an appeal for some liberals and radicals who believe their cases against ethnocentrism, racism or Western imperialism are bolstered by such rhetoric.\(^ {97}\)
Non-governmental development organisations have been particularly prone to feel that there is some truth in the 'Asian values' argument, even if they are uncomfortable with the policies of some of these leaders who espouse them. Part of the reason for this is that some of the development groups they support in Asia adopt culturalist perspectives themselves.

Independent of the increasingly conservative rhetoric by some Asian leaders, the influence of economic rationalism in policy circles over the last decade in Australia, and indeed, to differing extents, many other liberal democratic societies, has led to the institutionalisation of instrumentalist and functionalist values in the public sector. A not unrelated trend towards managerialist and pseudo-corporatist structures has accompanied this development. This is especially evident in education, where the usefulness of activities in this enterprise are assessed by ever-narrowing criteria relating to the interests of business and government. Technocratic problem-solving seems to have been successfully projected as the chief business of public policy. Such a direction opens up the possibility of stronger ideological convergences between bureaucratic elites across 'East' and 'West' than has hitherto been the case. This is not without application to bureaucratic elites in trade unions. Michael Easson, for example, has expressed a qualified defence of Lee Kuan Yew's philosophy on trade unions in Singapore. Easson, a recent Secretary of the Labor Council of New South Wales and Vice-President of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), appears to find some attraction in instrumental and corporatist aspects of unionism in Singapore without endorsing the overall model.

The implication is that, far from there being some imminent 'clash of cultures', we have unfolding preconditions for stronger political and ideological convergences across 'East' and 'West'. The facade of 'Asian values' conceals this crucially important development, effectively defining out of existence all opposition to the content of these values within Asia as 'Western' and/or 'alien'. For pragmatically minded governments and business people, desperately seeking to make a success of greater economic involvement with the region, the notion that 'Asians' are different provides a seductive rationale for double standards on human rights, freedom of expression and other universally meaningful issues. The most worrying scenario is that far from the internationalisation of political and ideological contestation offering new hope for the oppressed in Asia, it will not only dash such hope but also serve as a new offensive against liberal and social democratic ideas in the so-called 'West'.

Notes
1 Our thanks go to Amanda Miller for her able research assistance on this project and Richard Robison for his constructive criticisms on an earlier draft.
3 Joyce, Alex, Socialism in Asia, Donald Moore, Singapore, 1957.
4 Of course, even the notion of 'Asia' as a cultural or even political entity is a fiction, but we do not propose to take this up here.
6 Ibid., p. 23.
7 Ibid., p. 25.
8 Ibid., p. 29.
9 Ibid., p. 40.
10 Ibid., p. 27.
11 Murshid, for example, has observed that ASEAN is a regional grouping encompassing four civilisations that has operated quite effectively, in spite of cultural differences between member states; see O'Hagan, Jachna, 'Inter-Civilizational Conflict: A Critique of the Huntington Thesis', Working Paper 1, Department of International Relations, The Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University, 1994, p. 9.
13 Huntington, op. cit., p. 49.
16 The Singaporean Minister of Information and the Arts and Second Minister of Foreign Affairs, George Yeo, drew attention to what he saw as anti-Asian sentiments rising in the West in response to the emerging economic might of Asia. See 'East Asia must not fuel insecurity in the West', Straits Times, 8 Dec. 1993, p. 27.
17 This chapter does not propose to test the accuracy of the historical and social observations made by some Asian leaders. Some other forum is required to debunk the myths they purvey.

19 O'Hagen, op. cit., p. 18
20 Huntington, quoted in AsiaWeek, 6 April 1994, p. 36.
21 Quoted in Australian, 19 April 1994, p. 1. One of the rebuffs to this view came from a senior Hong Kong bureaucrat who happened to be in Australia at the time, Michael Sz, Hong Kong's civil service secretary and former director of foreign trade described Lee's view as outdated. Sz said he was 'most impressed with Australia's service sector and the massive reforms in the public service' (quoted in West Australian 27 April 1994, p. 4).
23 Quoted in O'Sullivan, Noel, Conservatism, Dent, London, 1976, p. 84.
25 King Bhumibol Adulyadej, Collection of Royal Addresses and Speeches During the State and Official Visits of Their Majesties the King and Queen to Foreign Countries 1959–1967 (B.E. 2502–2510), Bangkok, 1974, p. 66.
29 Quoted in STWE, 3 September 1994, p. 24.
32 Kirk, op. cit., p. 8.
33 Viercek, op. cit., p. 32.
34 King Bhumibol, op. cit., p. 88.
38 King Bhumibol, op. cit., p. 8.
40 'Clash of cultures' or convergence of political ideology?
42 Courier Mail, 5 July 1994, p. 3.
43 Coleman, Bruce, Call To Australia Party, pamphlet for the New South Wales State Election, 23 March 1995.
45 Ibid.
50 Quoted in Zalazar, op. cit., p. 111.
52 King Bhumibol Adulyadej, Royal Advice by His Majesty the King, 20 May 1992/2535 at 21.30, Bangkok: Office of His Majesty's Principal Private Secretary, 1992, para. 2.
53 King Bhumibol Adulyadej, Royal Speech Adulyadej to the Audience of Well-Wishers on the Occasion of the Royal Birthday Anniversary, Wednesday, 4 December 1992, pp. 1, 12, no publication details.
55 Mahbubani, op. cit., p. 11.
57 O'Sullivan, op. cit., p. 9; Viercek, 1962, p. 36.
58 O'Gorman, op. cit., p. 2.
60 King Bhumibol, op. cit., 1974, p. 60.
Further References


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