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THE MODERNIZATION OF ASIA AND THE WESTERN IMPACT

by Giorgio Borsa

I have been asked to address this workshop on a theme that I made the subject matter of study and research throughout my life: the rise of the modern world in Asia and the European impact. You will agree that it is no easy task to sum up in a few words the results of over sixty years study. I will try, nevertheless, to make a few points.

The modern world had its origin in Europe as a result of a process of cultural, economical, and political change that developed between, say, the XI and the XVIII centuries. In the XIX century, this was extended, through the medium of colonial expansion, to Asia. The modernization of Asia was largely the result of the western impact not in the sense often implied by European XIX century historiography that the Europeans brought civilization to Asia as if civilization were a fluid that could be poured from one vase into another; but in the sense that the western economical, political, legal and cultural impact caused or hastened the disruption of the traditional Asian societies, setting in motion an autonomous process of change; and challenged traditional values, leading to a reappraisal of them.

The process started after the industrial revolution. The widely established view, influenced by the eurocentric and wiggish bias of victorian historiography, according to which the Indian Ocean came to be dominated by the Europeans since the Portuguese built their maritime empire in the XVI century, has been challenged lately. European, Asian, and particularly Australian historians have shown that the Indian Ocean economy already constituted a complex and highly developed system of trade before the arrival of the Europeans. This connected the Arabian peninsula and a few seaports of Eastern Africa with the western and eastern coasts of India and, further east, with Malacca and the Moluccas and Banda Islands; and it was operated by Arab, Turkish, Ethiopian, Jewish and above all Indian merchants — not merely the traditional peddler from the bazaar, but merchant-bankers who bought up en-

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tire shiploads of goods and owned fleets of ocean-going vessels. The Europeans accommodated themselves in the existing structure, operating side by side, sometimes in partnership, with the Asians; but they did not bring any innovation to the system. Like other diasporas, they contributed to its going; but their role was never crucial, not at least until the early XVIII century when the *British East India Company* and the British private traders, taking advantage of the simultaneous fall of the Safavid Empire in Persia and the decline of both the Ottoman Empire in the Red Sea and the Mughal Empire in India, established their dominance in the Indian Ocean trade.

It was not, however, until after the industrial revolution that such dominance gave way to military conquest and colonial rule. The industrial revolution and military conquest that followed it, changed radically the pattern of Euro-asian commercial relations. The emphasis was shifted from purchasing rare commodities, like spices, from the Asians, to be disposed of on the western market at a very high profit, to selling to Asians the products of the newly born industries. Colonies began to be looked upon as markets for European goods, as sources of raw materials and, later, as markets for capital and as balancing factors in the movement of international payments. The colonial powers forced a new pattern of economy upon their dependencies and upon countries like China that remained nominally independent, but were powerless to resist pressure from the West. The preexisting, largely subsistence economies, gave way to an economy based on the market, on money, on credit. This was accompanied, in most dependencies by the introduction of alien legal concepts: private individual ownership of the land instead of the *de facto* ownership by the ruler and stable possession by the tiller or the village community; contract law, mortgage, distraint and forced sale.

The money economy penetrated the village and destroyed its self-sufficiency: the peasants, forced to turn from subsistence farming to the cultivation of cash crops, became involved in the fluctuations of the international market. New classes of absentee landlords grew up, mostly money lenders to whom western law afforded protection or merchants who enriched themselves by acting as middle-men between the peasants and the Western trading agencies. Village handicrafts and cottage industries established at the Courts and in a few towns, were ruined by the standardized, cheap goods coming in from the West. The network of social relations within the village, based on the joint family, on the caste, on the exchange, according to a fixed pattern, of goods and services, was torn to pieces at the very moment when an unparalleled increase in the population upset the traditional balance between the land and the tillers. Stability and security — albeit at a very low level — gave way to flux, change and insecurity.

The disintegration of traditional economies and societies paved the way for Asia's modernization; but the crucial factor was the introduction of western education by the colonial rulers, who thought that if they could assimilate culturally their colonial subjects, they would find it easier to rule over them.

It was not to be so. On one hand XIX century political culture, with its

emphasis on progress and change, on liberty and equality, gave rise to western-educated political élites, who accepted western institutions and began to ask that their benefits be extended to their own countries.

At first these “occidentalists” — as they were called — were ready to cooperate with their rulers in order to achieve this end. “Let us speak out like men — said Daddhabai Naoroji, an early Indian national leader, addressing the 1886 session of the *Indian National Congress*, of which he had been elected president — and let us proclaim that we are loyal to the bones and that we understand the benefits the English rulers have conferred upon us...”.

On the other hand, the penetration of western culture caused a revulsion among the traditional ruling classes that felt threatened not only by the emergence of new values, but by the social dislocation that caused the loss of prestige and power they previously enjoyed; and this led to a cultural revival.

Asian nationalism was thus born as a result of two opposite trends, neither of which could prevail in its extreme form. No outright restoration of the pre-modern society was possible. Modernization is a very pervasive force and no premodern society can survive if exposed to a direct confrontation with the modern world — as it was shown by the defeat suffered by the mutineers in India in 1857, by the unsuccessful resistance to the British conquest of Burma led by the Buddhist monks, by the abortive attempt to stop the French conquest of Tonkin by a movement inspired by the Confucian *litterati* towards the end of the XIX century — not to mention the failure of the Boxer Rebellion in China and the abortive attempt at a restoration by the Satsuma *han* in Japan:

But the occidentalists too were soon to be deluded in their hopes of modernizing their countries by cooperating with the colonial rulers; for the colonial relationship contains in itself a basic contradiction. By bringing into contact premodern societies with the modern world, the colonizing country sets in motion the process of modernization; but when this turns against it, threatening its political and economical interests, it thwarts and distorts it to make it suit its needs. It encourages the demand for goods, to create a market for its industries, but hinders the development of local industries intended to meet such demand; it substitutes a commercialized, capitalist economy for a subsistence agricultural one, but it prevents the accumulation of capital by transferring the wealth produced to the mother-country; by imposing western education it spreads western values, but it denies its colonial subjects the opportunity to achieve the liberties and independence it has instilled in them; by improving health conditions it promotes the growth of the population, but not that of the means of subsistence etc.

At this stage, the antiwestern resistance led by the traditionalists combines with the delusion of the occidentalists, giving birth to Asian nationalism. The Asian nationalist leaders that eventually freed their countries from colonial rule, men like Nehru, educated at Harrow and Cambridge, Jinnah, a lawyer in the London Temple, Sukarno, an engineer from Bandung University, were not opposed to western culture and values, they revolted against colonial

rule when they realized that the colonial relationship was an obstacle to the modernization of their country.

In the process, however, they had to come to terms with tradition. If no outright restoration of the traditional society was possible, unreserved acceptance of the western model was equally unrealistic. Among other things, these occidentalists had learned from the west the concept of a nation and as nationalists they could not disown their cultural roots. They had to recover as much as possible of their own tradition in order to establish a separate identity from their colonial rulers.

Some sort of compromise was thus inevitable, that made it possible to reconcile modernity with tradition. The problem of asian nationalists became: how to modernize without becoming too westernized. Since the process of modernization is irresistible, reconciliation could only occur, as it has happened in Japan and other Eastern Asia countries with confucian cultural roots such as South Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand, by recovering those aspects of tradition that are compatible with modernity or even suitable to it. Wherever such a reconciliation occurs, modernization is no longer looked upon as westernization, but as the extension of a universal model of civilization, having its origin in Europe, but more and more open to contributions from other countries. A Japanese does not consider himself as westernized because he is modern anymore than I consider myself as anglicized because I am a liberal.

There are countries, however, where reconciliation between modernity and tradition is made difficult by factors rooted in their history and society, like the caste system, the very fabric of Indian society or like the islamic notion that legislation in muslim countries should be brought into line with the koranic norm as expressed in the *sharya*.

These countries resist modernization as a form of westernization, as the imposition of a foreign model; and while unable to reject modernization, they live it with a feeling of frustration and resentment, a mixture of love and hate towards the west which they blame for the difficulties they encounter in modernizing, bringing charges of racism and neo-colonialism.

One more point before I put an end to this brief survey. There is one exception that does not quite fit in with the model I described: that is the Philippines.

The Philippines were westernized before they were modernized. Unlike other asian countries, where powerful monarchies were established for centuries before the arrival of the Europeans, the Philippines had no strong cultural tradition of their own. When the spanish colonization began in the XVI century (the first settlement was established at Cebu in 1565) the 7000 scattered islands were inhabited by a population of brown skinned Malays and by a few chinese traders. The Malays were mostly hunters and shifting cultivators — only in the lowlands rice was planted. The largest stable political unit was the *baranguay* — a kinship group the size of a village. Except for Mindanao, where Islam was being introduced in the century that preceded the arrivals of the

Spaniards, the natives were mostly animists. The archipelago was unified, politically and culturally, by the Spaniards before Europe itself was modernized.

Apart from Mindanao, where resistance was strong, the local population was quickly subdued. After the conquest, the Philippines were run as part of the Viceroyalty of Mexico and integrated politically and economically into the Spanish colonial order, more and more in isolation from the rest of Asia. The great majority of the population was converted to christianity by an aggressive catholic evangelism. The friars marched in with the soldiers and the religious orders — Franciscans, Jesuits, Dominicans, Augustinian Recollects soon acquired great wealth, mostly through royal grants of land, enlarged by arbitrary extension — a practice they shared with the spanish colonial aristocracy and the native *datu* (village chiefs), loyal to the spanish power. With wealth and with the monopoly of education they soon enjoyed, the friars gained social influence and power.

The modernization of the Philippines came in the wake of the modernization of Europe. It began in XIX century when the opening of the Suez canal made it possible for an increasing number of young men, mostly *mestizos* from the wealthy middle classes, to go to Europe to complete their education. Here they were confronted with the new ideas of liberalism and nationalism, then sweeping the continent. Back home the “propagandists”, as they were called, gave birth to a reformist movement. At first they were not against spanish rule but, like early modernizers in other Asian countries, they asked for the Philippines assimilation as a regular part of Spain, for civil liberties and for participation in the government of their country.

In this they found ardent allies among the increasing number of native secular priests, who had grown resentful of the prominence gained by the Spanish religious orders. The propagandists and the philippine secular clergy were the forerunners of the philippine revolution that broke out at the end of the century when Spain became involved in the war with the United States.

Riassunto — Nel secolo scorso, l'affermazione europea in Asia trasformò le economie locali destabilizzando la società tradizionale. Ebbe così inizio la modernizzazione, che fu favorita dalle classi medie occidentalizzate, ma fu ostacolata dalle forze tradizionaliste.

Il Nazionalismo nacque dalla opposizione anti-occidentale dei conservatori unita alla disillusione della borghesia occidentalizzata. Così *leaders*, quali Nehru, Jinnah e Sukarno, che si opponevano alla colonizzazione pur,

accettando i valori occidentali, dovettero conciliare la modernità con la tradizione. Mentre nelle società confuciane e in Giappone tale conciliazione fu possibile, nella società indiana e in quella islamica tale processo risultò complesso. A questo modello di modernizzazione sfuggono le Filippine, che furono occidentalizzate ed unificate dagli Spagnoli prima della stessa modernizzazione europea.