

BIOS AND CULTURE IN ASIA

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In this paper, I will argue that certain fundamental characteristics of Asian societies, and for that matter other developing societies in Africa and Latin America, give credence to the cultural dimension in promoting biopolitics in all its varied manifestations.

As a theoretical introduction with practical implications, we cannot talk about bios and its promotion without referring to culture. Culture is specifically a human manifestation, a conscious creation for the achievement of existential well-being. On the other hand, man represents only one of the numerous realized forms of bios -- although the only one possessed of reason and intelligence, and some would also say of emotions as well.

Culture, as a system and process, interacts with a defined environment, influencing it and in turn is influenced by it. Indeed, it could be argued that with advances in technology man now has the means and capacity to alter the environment in fundamental ways to enhance his survival whether real or imaginary. Developments and breakthroughs in the fields of bio-technology, bio-medicine and bio-genetics are suggestive of potentially far-reaching structural alterations, both to our ways of thinking and acting. If culture is defined as "a system of values", "a hierarchy of organizational procedures for the pursuit of valued objectives", "a set of institutional imperatives", "a meaningful system that gives purpose and direction to life", or more simply, "an existential mode", then the nature and potentials of a cultural system, both in its material and intellectual dimensions, would have tremendous consequences for the future of bios and its evolution. Bios in the next millennium would, therefore, hinge on both the activating and adaptive capacities of culture in coping with the challenges posed by bio-engineering and bio-research.

Bios and culture are interconnected, constituting a dialectic. Man, as a manifestation of bios, creates culture and in the process implicates other biotic and abiotic forms, whether for good or bad. The question then is, can cultural development in the next millennium enhance bios or, alternatively, can breakthroughs and advances made in bio-research help to enrich culture and in doing so expand and deepen mankind's appreciation of the fundamental law governing bios viz., interdependence?

To be sure, discoveries and advancements made in bio-research cannot be divorced from culture. Culture both encapsulates all meaningful human activities and sets limits on the use and application of the available stock of knowledge. Can culture prevent the abrogation of its primary roles as a consequence of the pace forced by bio-engineering and bio-research? Or can one put up a case for symbiosis, whereby cultural development and the development of the bio-environment could relate to each other in practical and meaningful ways? Before we try to answer these and other related questions, let us set down the main parameters of Asian cultures in order to elucidate the main propositions more clearly.

Seen in broad general terms, four cultural traditions exemplify the Asian situation, namely, the Indic, the Sinic, the Islamic and the Malayo-Polynesian. Of course, seen in terms of their actual manifestations in the countries of Asia, tremendous variations are observable - a fact due, no doubt, to differences of ecology, history, social structure and economic activities pursued. Similarly, the different modes of cultural contact among the Asian countries, not to mention the time, intensity and combination of elements involved in cultural contact, have also created variegated outcomes in cultural development. For example, early south-east Asian cultures, from the 6th to the 15th century, had a strong overlay of Indic influences. However, from the 16th century, Islamic cultural-religious traditions began to displace the Indic in Indonesia and Malaysia. Vietnam, Japan, and Korea assimilated cultural-philosophical ideas associated with Taoism and Confucianism over several centuries. Indeed, it was the Chinese variant of Buddhism that reached Korea and Japan during the early part of this millennium.

Despite apparent variations and differences, all four traditions exemplify certain unifying perceptions regarding man and man's relationship with nature, the environment and bios.

First of all, man is regarded as a part of nature, a fellow participant together with all other living things and, indeed, non-living things as well in some instances. According to the Sinic tradition as exemplified by Taoism "all things are one", "there is a moral harmony in all things", "heaven covers all equally" etc.. In philosophical Hinduism and Buddhism, there is also the exemplification of the oneness of things, that is, all things, all objects are related, constituting one reality, one Supreme Essence of Brahma. God in this respect is not only everywhere but everything - pantheism. It is a concept of man and the universe not fundamentally dissimilar to the underlying animistic elements that formed the bed-rock of the Malayo-Polynesian belief system of the past. In this regard, all objects, living and non-living, are perceived as sharing in a common soul-substance called *semangat*. This soul-substance can assume various forms according to the perceived physical-behavioral

characteristics of the object in question. In Islam, there is an exhortation against indiscriminate destruction of living forms - that the bountiful resources of nature provided by God for human enjoyment should only be expended according to genuine needs. It is clear, therefore, in various ways, all the major cultural philosophical traditions associated with Asia recognize implicitly or explicitly either the essential inter-relatedness between man and nature or regard the unity between man and nature as sacrosanct.

Secondly, it can be shown that Asian cultural traditions tend to regard all human actions as having a moral dimension. This unity of the mundane and the spiritual or the secular and the religious permeates the philosophical-cultural attitudes associated with Taoism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam as well as the animistic belief system of the Malay-Polynesian tradition. In other words, all forms of existence including inanimate nature, are believed to be guided by, and also submit to, imminent moral, cosmic principles. This aspect of belief is best exemplified by Hinduism and Buddhism according to various permutations of cause and effect relating to human well-being either in this life or the next. In the case of Islam, not only is there no differentiation made between the religious and the secular, but the concept of salvation or eternal life, i.e. the entry into paradise, syurga, on death, is solely dependent on the faithful discharge of moral ethical duties enjoined by the religion of Islam. Both Taoism and Confucianism recognize the existence of an all-embracing or heavenly principle (tien) that guides, adjudicates and infuses human affairs.

"The music of heaven is that by which
the sage nourishes all living things.
Though heaven and earth are great,
they act impartially on all things.
Though the things of creation are
many, the principle of peace is
the same."

Book of Tao. Book IV
The Source of Power 37.2.

"Tien (Providence, Nature, God) is
the dispenser of life and death,
wealth and rank. The chun-tzu
must learn to know the will
(ming) of Heaven and submit
to it patiently."

The Analects of Confucius
Books XII, 5 and Book II, 4.

Thirdly, the philosophical thrust of Asian cultural traditions pertinent to an adequate consideration of the maintenance of bios is its emphasis on the performance of duties either as a basis for the creation of a moral-ethical society (Confucianism, Islam) or for the enhancement of one's social and existential status in the next life, whether it is on this earth or in heaven (Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam). In Confucianism, the building block of society is the family, made up of five basic principles, (Wu lun) viz., the principle governing relationships between father and mother, father and son(s), father and daughter(s), and the principle governing relationships between brothers.

The family was seen as the microcosm, and society, the macrocosm. In similar fashion, there was also another set of principles that governed the relationship between the family and the state. The proper performance of these duties, it was believed, would lead to social harmony in the family and political stability in the realm. Islam's emphasis is on the faithful discharge of certain religious duties, towards God as well as towards one's fellow man, as a means of achieving both personal salvation and the ideals of an ethical society in the Darul Islam - abode of Islam. In doctrinal Buddhism, belief in the four noble truths and the faithful adherence to the eight-fold path, is believed to lead to a state of complete extinction, nirvana or enlightenment. However, in Mahayana Buddhism, stress is more on the accumulation of merit or alternately, the avoidance of demerit, karma. Implicitly then, there is an exemplification of the need to fulfil moral duties or at least to act humanely in order to achieve a better existential status in the next cycle of rebirth - samsara. Similarly, in the case of Hinduism, the enhancement of one's caste status in the next life is believed to rest on the faithful discharge of duties associated with one's present caste status. This concern with the importance of fulfilling duties in order to bring about order and permanence whether seen in terms of eschatology, social or cosmic harmony is pervasive and deep-rooted in Asian cultures. No doubt, there have been social inequities perpetrated in the past in the name of maintaining harmony, yet this does not detract from the fact that harmony derived from interdependence and buttressed by it, is central to the philosophy of life of Asian cultural traditions.

The pertinent question at this point is, have these concerns a contributory role in the maintenance of bios in the next millennium, given the vast moral, ethical and practical implications arising from advances and breakthroughs made in bio-research?

There is no doubt that the ongoing achievements of science and technology will continue to affect man's perceptions of the universe and his

future in it. Over the last few centuries, there has been a cumulative demythologization of the universe, a process paralleled by increasing secularization in social life. The discovery of the basic principles pertaining to matter and the unlocking of the DNA Code e.g., have tended to strengthen man's belief in his intellect. The Anthropos Principle currently becoming fashionable in certain intellectual and scientific circles may be regarded as symptomatic of this tendency. Briefly, the Anthropos Principle claims that since man and the universe are intelligent -- the universe is regarded as intelligent because it is maintained by discoverable laws -- then man's evolution as a conscious and thinking being is inherent in the operation of nature and the cosmos. In other words, the universe is seen as a construction of intelligent forces which are orderly and perfectly meshed with each other. This is regarded as not merely a perspective of man but equally a fact of reality.

The treatise underlying the Anthropos Principle is compelling and will no doubt have far-reaching impact on the future of bios since its essential thrust is to put man in the centre of the universe. Not only does it validate the primacy of the mind, "I think, therefore I am" (cognito ergo sum), but more importantly it puts man above all biotic forms - an emphasis, or more correctly a re-emphasis, on anthropocentrism as a fundamental world-view. How will such a world-view, bolstered by the discovery of inherent cosmic laws, affect the development of culture and in the process, the maintenance of bios as we know it? To be sure, such a view of reality stands in diametrical contrast to the traditional Asian cultural- philosophical perspective which, as suggested earlier, regards man as a participant among other participants in the biotic world. Equally pertinent is how advances in bio-research underlined by the central arguments of the Anthropos Principle will affect man's moral-ethical standards in the long run in regard to bios in general.

It is certain that current developments in bio-research have not only weakened traditional Asian cultural-philosophical beliefs regarding bios and man's relationship to it, but paradoxically, has given them new rays of hope for the future. Bio-genetic and bio-medical breakthroughs e.g., promise to alleviate shortages and relieve sufferings (witness the "green revolution"). The perceived benefits are so strong, not to mention the promise of great profits for financial backers of bio-research and its application, that there will be few detractors, at least in principle. The basic problems for many Asian societies would more likely than not be finance and bio-technological competence viz., the need to search for ways and means to capitalize on the expected benefits associated with bio-research in its various fields. Does this not represent a conflict with their traditional philosophical-cultural notions regarding the interdependence of bios?

In theory, at least, this is the case. Certainly, among the more conservative and religious, in particular the orthodox, the laws of nature are still regarded as God-given and therefore should not be tampered with. At the same time, there is a disquiet, colored by uncertainty amongst even educated sections of Asian societies, not to mention those in European societies who are already debating the moral-ethical and legal dimensions of bio-research, regarding both the spiritual and practical consequences associated with, e.g., bio-medical research. Bio-medical breakthroughs in particular constitute potential moral-legal issues simply because their application directly confront generations of accepted philosophical-cultural values and beliefs. It is undeniable that certain bio-medical breakthroughs, e.g., in vitro fertilization (IVF) have brought direct benefits to the recipients, not to mention the medical practitioners and specialists who promoted them. However, quite often it is the financially or socially advantaged that derive the full benefits of bio-medical breakthroughs, thus raising a potential moral problem.

It should be obvious at this point that not all discoveries or breakthroughs in bio-research are life-threatening or alternatively life-enhancing. Similarly, neither do all bio-research breakthroughs raise moral-legal problems, not at least with equal impact on all philosophical-cultural systems. Be that as it may, the central issues relating to culture and bio-research must now be looked at in order to ascertain their permutations of cause and effect.

If one were to view culture as "cause" or as an independent variable, it has the potential to create two conditions conducive to the maintenance and enrichment of bios: a) it can set standards of moral-legal behavior to ensure conformity with or adherence to prescribed uses arising from bio-research; and b) it can institute a system of equitable distribution with regard to the benefits derived from bio-research. To perform both tasks efficiently would require not only a consideration of the necessary steps but also the identification of the socio-cultural and political instruments that can contribute to their realization.

In the case of Asian cultural-philosophical traditions, and, for that matter, non-Asian ones too, efforts will have to be made to strengthen certain value-orientations or attitudes of mind that will be conducive to the maintenance of bios in the next millennium. Among them are the basic cultural-philosophical viewpoints presented earlier, such as belief in the unity and inter-relatedness of bios; and the sense of duty in the promotion of bios. What is being suggested is that Asian cultural traditions already contain the requisite ingredients of belief for the structuring of positive attitudes conducive for the promotion of bios. The question then is, will the pertinent institutions (religious, educational, scientific, political) help to bring about their realization and in the process re-energize functional elements of the traditional cultural-philosophical systems of mankind as a whole?

To be sure, there have been fundamental alterations in Asian cultures. The institutionalization of modern science and technology has not only brought about a weakening of the hold of tradition on the thought and action of Asians but, perhaps more significantly, it has also led to the shaping of attributes and awareness more akin to the unifying superstructure of science. Increasingly, the different societies of the world are being drawn closer and closer together by the standards set by modern science and technology on the one hand, and the imperatives of development and economic growth on the other. What we are witnessing then, is a worldwide phenomenon never seen before but nonetheless pregnant with problems and opportunities for both cultural development and the future of bios.

At this point, one is prompted by an important observation made by Dr. Vlavianos-Arvanitis. In her presentation at the First International B.I.O. Conference, she stated: "Bios provides for alternative futures."² It is a statement that is sentient and calls for a deeper analysis of its possible realization under different cultural systems.

Seen synchronically, focusing on a cultural system in evolution, improvements and advances in bio-research -- particularly bio-genetics, agrotechnology and bio-medicine -- promise to increase life expectancy, delay ageing, improve general health and physical functioning, improve genetic strains in human reproduction, influence the sex-composition of a population, improve yields in productive processes whether natural or induced - in short, have the potential to cause a general but radical shift upwards in the quality of human life. In other words, the conditions of survival associated with human societies in the last millennium (when man survived because he invented a system of cooperation based on shared beliefs, no doubt bolstered sometimes by coercion) have altered irrevocably, thereby necessitating an equally fundamental shift in man's conception of culture.

What would be the implications for culture -- constituted of economic, political, social and scientific-technological institutions -- should the life expectancy of its members undergo a quantum leap? What are its implications for family and social structure? How will the productive system associated with the economy operate, given the fact that there will continue to be a demand for psychologically satisfying employment? Or alternatively, will there be adequate leisure pursuits to meet the cumulative and expanding tastes of the seemingly "ageless" population? Who should or should not be eligible to reap the benefits of bio-research?

Similarly, bio-genetic research promises not only improved strains in plants, but also improvements in the intellectual quality of man. For the first time Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* seems to have become a realizable goal. Even then, the intellectual geniuses he created to populate his brave new world could not solve the eternal quest of man, the search for meaning and purpose in his existence.

A cultural system attempts to fill this meaningful gap and in general it succeeds to a large extent. Despite its partiality in the interpretation of reality - partial in the sense that it constitutes one of numerous interpretations - it does offer convincing answers to such troubling questions as:

- (a) Who am I?
- (b) What is the purpose of my existence?
- (c) Is there an after-life?

Progress in bio-research will improve human life materially and physically. However, its implications for culture (whether culture is seen as an independent or dependent variable) remain to be explored and understood. No doubt society will become increasingly pluralistic in that it will accommodate many diverging and converging systems of belief and practice, yet the need for an all-embracing or superordinate system of binding ideas seems necessary. Can a new politics be constructed to fulfil this need? Or should a cultural system be consciously evolved to provide the meaning and direction for existence under conditions created by advances in bio-research?

Advances in bio-research and their potential applications have an implicit political dimension on science. This means that a political authority without moral-ethical qualms will be bound to misappropriate and misuse them for its own ends. This suggests the need for a system of checks and balances, in other words, an open democratic system which only a dynamic cultural system can offer.

The issue of bios in the next millennium, then, entails equally a directed and conscious effort at cultural development as much as a leap of the imagination, to give it meaning and overall purpose. As for the present, culture is essentially adaptive. Both the formal (legal) and informal (moral-ethical) norms underlying it are increasingly unable to satisfactorily resolve new moral-ethical dilemmas created by advances in bio-research. In this regard, moral-ethical problems created by bio-research are multi-dimensional requiring a multi-level, multi-focal and multi-disciplinary dissection in order to determine their implications. Clearly, conventional legal approaches supported by equally conventional scientific insights will not suffice.

In other words, there is a need to systematically examine the concept of legal right as well as the concept of legal responsibility in both their individual and social dimensions.

The potential of bio-research breakthroughs to radically alter the nature of human society and culture is very great indeed. One fundamental functional aspect of culture is that it acts normatively on the behavior and thought of its members. On the other hand, any innovation or invention, whether of a biotic or abiotic (technological) nature, is potentially disequilibrating. It is anybody's guess what the implications would be for culture should there be an unhindered burst of scientific-technological discoveries within the space of a generation. From the political dimension, it is possible that a nation-state may hold the world to ransom by simply using a discovery it has made in bio-research to its own advantage or, worse still, as a weapon to coerce and subdue.

Seen diachronically, or across cultures, many Asian societies, in particular those struggling to build up not only their economies but equally their cultural life, may be put at a tremendous disadvantage due to the advances made in bio-research. To be sure, they too are benefiting to some extent from the advances made. However, with the exception of some Asian nations - Japan in particular - most others still lag behind in

most fields of bio-research simply because of inadequate resources whether it is in high-level scientific-technological manpower or in infrastructural support of both. Furthermore, most are still engaged in rebuilding their cultural foundations which were either weakened or shattered, first by political forces of an external nature and subsequently by internal upheavals, not to mention the cumulative influence of modern science and its ethos.

What, then, are the chances of such societies in coping with the dual demands of cultural consolidation, which many Asian states see as a *sine qua non* for integrating the various ethnic communities making up the policy, and moral-ethical growth generated by bio-research advancement? Can such nation-states preserve their cultural systems (values, beliefs, institutions) or will they be "drowned" by the ever-expanding scientific-technological wave emanating from advanced societies? Will they remain dependent cultures just as their economies have been described as being "dependent"? Can they build alternative futures for themselves consequent on advances in bio-research?

These are questions with no easy answers. However, it can be argued that for bio-research and its perceived benefits to contribute positively to the future of bios including mankind, two basic prerequisites must be met: Firstly, each cultural system must reawaken, reconstitute or reinforce, as the case may be, those cultural-philosophical values that are conducive to the preservation of bios as a total manifestation. In other words, each cultural system could attempt to articulate those basic value-precepts -- the interdependence of bios; morality in one's actions; and sense of responsibility toward bios -- that serve to promote bios in its own unique way according to its social, religious and historical circumstances. This then would serve to provide the cultural basis for the maintenance of bios. Secondly, since bio-research advancement has an impact both inside and outside the nation-state responsible for it, there is a need for an internationally accepted code of conduct -- preferably enforceable -- to ensure that both the conduct and application of bio-research are life-promoting and life-sustaining. A set of principles should therefore be formulated in order to define legitimate areas of bio-research. In this connection, bio-engineering of viruses for destructive purposes would be considered illegitimate. A set of norms should also be enunciated to guide the appropriate use of findings arising from bio-research.

Quite obviously, such institutional procedures would require long drawn-out studies, discussions, negotiations and verifications. Not least is the establishment of an internationally accepted body -- perhaps the International Court of Justice could serve as a model -- of eminent experts (scientists, philosophers, cultural experts, religious leaders, etc.) to ensure that the accepted principles and norms are broadly adhered to.

There is no doubt that breakthroughs in bio-research are potentially explosive whatever way one chooses to view them. They could be applied to obtain political leverage; they could be applied to undermine the moral-ethical foundations of a society; and more directly they could be applied to destroy the integrity of bios as an interdependent system.

As human societies enter the next millennium, the cultural and moral-ethical challenges posed by man's scientific genius goaded as it is by his desire to improve his physical well-being, will also grow in complexity and frequency. Fundamental issues will have to be addressed and acute dilemmas will have to be faced and resolved. There are no easy or obvious answers, given the interdependent and integrated nature of human existence and bios.

What seems clear is that there should emerge two fundamental levels of integration among the nation states of the world in order to promote not only the human species but bios in general. The first level involves an integration of basic moral-ethical principles pertaining to man and his relationship to the cosmos. This set of principles can be conveyed or transmitted through a religious-belief system, a system of moral philosophy or more simply a set of "do's and don'ts" bolstered by example and precept. On the second level, the nation-states of the world could further be integrated by the faithful observance of a set of principles or norms in bio-research and its application. Only in this way, can both the challenge and the promise of bio-research be adequately met and realized in the next millennium.

Bio-research has, and will continue to, open up new vistas for culture. However, will human societies show equal genius in creating cultural systems and institutions that take full cognisance of the challenge and promise resulting from bio-research and, in the process, achieve alternative futures for their adherents? Similarly, can different cultural systems continue to compete and cooperate in a manner that not only enhances man's survival as a species but equally, the biotic system on which he depends? Once again, it is worth noting that the potential effects of bio-research breakthroughs on cultural development are enormous and far-reaching. In one sense, a cultural system may be regarded as a construction of reality that gives its adherents both a sense of identity and meaning toward life. As such, it is composed of the collective experience of its adherents, both in the past and present, bolstered by idealized perceptions of reality. Bio-research breakthroughs have the potential to alter reality as perceived and experienced and, therefore, can lead to a state of disorientation or cognitive dissonance. There could then be a breakdown in the cultural process leading to a state of anomie and possibly a destruction of bios as we know it.

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