I. The Issue: Culture and Peripheral Justice

One does not need to embrace Samuel Huntington’s theory of the clash of civilizations to recognize the increasing salience of cultural and ethnic conflict in the post-Cold War world. Indeed, recent major trends in the developing world, from the spectacular growth of Islamic fundamentalism in Muslim countries to the rapid ascendency of Confucian nationalism in East Asia, all demonstrate clearly that culture and cultural identities have become the driving force in global politics today.

How, then, do we explain the intriguing fact that precisely at the moment when the West scores a decisive victory over all political and economic alternatives, when capitalism is universally accepted as the only feasible way to rationally organize a modern economy, and when Third-World industrialization tears down the traditional North-South structure thereby marking the beginning of an age of capitalist globalization, there has emerged across non-Western societies an ever more powerful anti-Western backlash and an ever stronger aspiration for

---


2 In 1993, Hanoi published, at great expense, a romanized Vietnamese translation (in fifteen volumes with almost eight thousand pages) of “The Imperially Authorized Compendium of Institutions and Institutional Cases of the Great South” (“The Great South” was the Vietnamese imperial name for Vietnam, adopted in the late 1830s). The “Compendium of Institutions” had been compiled originally in classical Chinese by senior mandarins of the Vietnamese court at Hue in the 1840s. It was supposed to be an encyclopedic handbook of the Vietnamese government on the principles of bureaucratic Confucianism. The communist state translators of this voluminous work bragged of their determination to ensure that libraries, schools, cultural agencies, and even every family library all over Vietnam would obtain copies of their translation. The translation and impressive popularization of this massive work in the 1990s clearly demonstrates a powerful renewal of the national interest in the country’s pre-colonial Confucian legacy (Woodside 1997: 68–69).
cultural assertiveness? What does such cultural conflict portend for the world order of the twenty-first century?

In order to address these crucial issues, it will be necessary to take a step back and examine how the question of culture and modern transformation has become a dominant concern in social analysis.

A. Peripheral Capitalism and Cultural Nationalism

The rise of liberal modernity that took place in Western Europe and North America more than two hundred years ago, as Ernest Laclau and Chantal Mouffe have forcefully put it, marked a momentous mutation in the social imagination of Western societies. This mutation can be defined in these terms: the logic of equivalence displaced the logic of differentiation and imposed itself as a fundamental nodal point in the construction of the social. It introduced a new matrix of the social imaginary within which subordination was constructed as oppression, thereby designating the end of a society of hierarchic and inequitarian type.3

In the Kantian tradition, such a radical discontinuity has been conceptualized as the replacement of the primacy of the good life by the primacy of justice. No social order can persist without appearing just or being perceived by members of society as being just. Indeed, our intuitive conviction that each one should be rendered one’s due is so fundamental that it denies that sacrifices imposed on a few can be made right by a larger sum of advantages enjoyed by many, even by the welfare of society as a whole.4 However, this does not mean that every social order is equally just or should even be considered as being just. In traditional or illiberal societies, the notion of justice presupposes rather than defines an account of the basic principles in terms of which social advantages are divided and distributed among individuals. There the principles of justice are derived from what Hegel termed “Sittlichkeit,” that is, the customs, norms, and expectations inherent in the conception of the good life of a given society. According to John Rawls, it is in this relationship between justice and the basic structure of society that the most distinctive feature of the liberal