

Bridging the Critical Perspectives for Alternative Practices in 21st Century Geographies*

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One of the proposed topics of the 2nd ICGC is: “Why is geography so conservative?” In order to stimulate a theoretical dialogue, I propose that we rethink this issue historically through the Asian experiences. This paper focuses on bridging the gap between theory and practice within the critical paradigms of social theories on space. First of all, I want to show that, historically, conservative paradigms have been dominant in Taiwan’s academies and research institutions, and they prevails in most disciplines, not just in geography. The developmental state has been constituted as a historical vehicle for the hegemonic elites’ project of rebuilding the nation state. Such academic poverty is part of the social costs of political repression in the processes of growth and modernization. Up till the 1980s, along with social changes, critical paradigms of social theories were introduced into the campus as a new mode of thinking of western reflection after social movements in the 1960s. Both the political economy of space and the cultural studies on the spatial representations have greatly influenced the younger generations in the recent decades. Furthermore, critical perspectives cannot simply be transplants of the western thoughts as they were before; they have to be interactive processes with local social changes. How to articulate questions regarding the local and how to engage in theoretical and global dialogue are crucial. The critical perspectives have to face the unchanged structural problems of the nation state and the developmental state of the Taiwan model. In conclusion, this paper proposes to articulate all of the critical issues of class, gender, ethnicity, and environment with the spatial theory and practice. Beyond the trap of formal institutional division among geography, sociology, political science, urban studies, planing and architecture, the real challenge in fact lie in interactive autonomy. That is, we have to be aware of the autonomy of theory as well as the importance of the articulation between theory and practice, between spatial theory and planning-design practice, between state, social movements and radical intellectuals, and between global and local.

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“The problem of the proper conceptualization of space is resolved through human practice with respect to it. In other words, there are no philosophical answers to philosophical questions that arise over the nature of space – the answers lie in human practice.”

(David Harvey, 1973:13)

Inspired by one of the proposed topics of 2nd ICGC: “Why is geography so conservative?” I think this is not only a proposition for geography as classical “earth-writing”, but also a real question for geography in Asia. Certainly there are some specificities in the field of geography. The same question also applies to sociology as well as architecture and city planning in Taiwan. It’s worth some attention to tease out the conservative paradigm theoretically and historically.

The history went back to the beginning of the 20th Century in Europe. The modernity project was launched in the bourgeois confidence and in the conflicts in the eve of the world war. The East Asia was the most recently discovered land for imperialist penetration. For most of the newborn Asian countries, the 20th century was an economic development process for survival as well as a part of the larger modernizing project. When history turns a new page for the 21st century, the question of “who am I?” should be replaced by the questions of “what we did?” in the process of modernization, industrialization, urbanization, westernization, and the question of “what are we doing?” with regards to globalization. Thus, bringing into the reflection of the discursive struggles between conservative and critical paradigms, and between the case of Taiwan and the historical experience of the Asian Pacific, this paper aims to bridge the gap between theory and practice for the critical paradigm of social theories on space.

First of all, in terms of the regional differentiation, there is no such a thing as an economically integrated Asian region in globalization. But with the regards to the experience of modernity, the Asian pacific does share the common experience of the state-led economic development process.¹ For the purpose of dialogue, the Asian experience has to go beyond taking for granted as a neutral geographical boundary but a theoretical examination. After a close look at the empirical data in the late 1990s after a rapid growth through export economic development, the hypothesis of the Asian Pacific as an integrated region in the global economy has been questioned.

¹ For instance, a Korean scholar Yung-rei Bai’s paper on rethinking East Asia in the turning page of the century provided a significant reflection on the dream of strong nation state (Bai, 1999).

Adopted the historical periodization and calculation of Asian trade by J.A. Frankel, Stephen Cohen and Paolo Guerrieri, Manuel Castells pointed out that there is no such an integrated Asian Pacific region. That is to say, the fundamental dependency of the region with non-Asian OECD countries hasn't been changed so far through the performance of export trade due to the asymmetry of the trade between Japan and the rest of Asian countries (Castells, 2000a: 111-112). If we consider the cultural diversity and the recent divergent trends of Asian countries in the economic crisis, some common experiences still could be shared. That is, the state-led economic development processes as a means of the project of nation state building. The states have historically succeeded to promote economic development. However after the economy has developed, the role of the "developmental state" is now challenged by their integration into globalization. This is marked by the economic crisis after 1997 (Castells, 2000b). Furthermore, representing the affirmation of living qualities of emerging civil societies, the social movements are challenging the legitimacy of development values imposed by the state (Cheng and Hsia, 2000).

In Taiwan, it's important to emphasize the historical context of the overarching conservative paradigm of almost all academies and institutions, which were dominated by KMT government, a defeated right wing political regime from China. For instance, the textbook of "geography" in Taiwan had been criticized as a textbook of "history" for a long time due to the anti-Communist ideology and the closed information. Acclaimed as the preconditions of national security and social stability, this is exactly in the same process of the "Taiwan miracle" of the highly touted "Four Asian Tigers" in the Cold War. The developmental state has been a historical vehicle for the rebuilding of nation state. And the social processes of the growth and modernization afforded the high price of social costs and political repression. The critical perspectives only survived in the margin of political resistance.

As a new mode of thinking of the western reflections after the social movements in 60s and 70s the critical paradigms of social theories have been introduced into Taiwan since the 1980s. This is not only a transplantation of advanced western thoughts as those did before, but as an interactive process of social learning and social mobilization in the social change and political democratization in the 1980s. For instance, the class movements remain and formulate an alliance with social peripheral groups such as public prostitutes in the late 90s. Housing movement in 1989 triggered active urban movements. Integrating with historic preservation movements, the spreading out of community movements in 1990s has empowered their grassroots networking. In pursuit of sustainable development, the environmental movements

have formulated trans-border pressures to the pro-development policies of the state. The feminist movements have set up the base for the following gay and lesbian movements in recent years. Most of the social movements have been nourished by the critical discourses and get rise in the emerging civil society.

While Taiwan began to taste democracy in the 1990s, the economic growth, political democratization and social modernization are not equal to lesser contradictions of economic exploitation, political repression, and cultural domination. The emerging critical perspectives have to face the unchanged structural problems in the Taiwanese model of nation-state and developmental state even the nation state has been restructuring after the 1980s. For the purpose of social changes instead of reproducing existing social relations, the critical perspectives have to be articulated with all of the critical issues of class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, environment, urban and regional in the real life of the emerging civil society of Taiwan. The critical perspectives have to reformulate the theoretical questions as well as the practical strategies in the dawn of a new historical transformation in the information age.

Examining the conjuncture of the social and political transformation in the globalization of Taiwan, a major and serious contradiction is between the economic structure and dynamics in global economy and the political structure and dynamics of the nation state. On the one hand, the Taiwan's economy has been integrated into global informational economy. Taiwanese capitals increase their competitiveness through trans-border investment, especially in China. More and more, Taiwan is one of the nodes in the global flows and this seems a trend of no return. In fact, any policy cut of the trend will hurt the Taiwan's economy. In terms of further economic development in globalization, the integration between Taiwan and China is inevitable. In a process of "making capitalism in China" the structural role of Taiwan is to be a node in the network to introduce the production and management system of global informational capitalism into China in the turning page of a new century (Hsing, 1998; Hsia, 2000a). That is to say, Taiwan is the virtual bridge in the global network. We almost could foresee that the trans-border Taiwanese capitals would increasingly penetrate into the market of China. The so-called "China Circle" along the East Asian edge between Tokyo and Singapore will push the economic development of China further (Naughton, 1997). Whatever the categories we use or identified by themselves, the power of capitalist class from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and China itself will be integrated as historical forces to make the capitalist development in China deeper in the global economy.

On the other hand, the Taiwan's politics runs counter to the trans-border capitals. Going through the restructuring of nation state in the 1990s, Taiwan's state is a new state. After the presidential election in the March of 2000, the central government is a new government. The former president, Teng-hui Lee, claimed in his new book in Japanese that now the state is "the New Republic", or "the Second Republic", and "Taiwan ROC" has replaced "ROC (Republic of China) on Taiwan". Certainly and ironically, all of them are "the new state without nation" under the cover of political symbol of "ROC".

As to the Taiwan's society, after thirty-years economic development, an ambiguously categorized middle class has risen and a civil society is emerging. There are two intertwined but opposite lines have to be mentioned. It consists of social segments of fragmented identity. Besides, it expresses the historical shift of identity through social movements.

The former is the different values and identities expressed by different social segments since the late 1980s. For the historical reason, most of the repressed Taiwanese cultural identity is the counterpart of the nationalist project of conventional KMT, which is also against the political repression of KMT regime. In a broad sense of class interest, most of the middle class accepts American way of life that affirms freedom, democracy, and professional values. However, their national identities are fragmented and mobilized by the agitated elections each time. The society becomes a divided society in this sense. Once the cultural identity integrated with political forces to pursuit the national identity, the relation with China would be extremely tense to endanger the peace of Asian Pacific. This identity politics in globalization has historically rooted in the colonial experience of "orphanage syndrome" and in the misery experience of the massacre by the corrupted KMT regime in the early post-colonial period (Hsia, 2000b).

The latter is the identity politics in globalization is shifting from abstract national identity to the daily personal identities of their cities, communities, families, and individuals. The social actors in the emerging civil society express and spread out in a multiple dimension of urban movements, environments, community movements, aboriginal movements, women movements, gay and lesbian movements. As to the community organizations and NGOs/NPOs of class, gender, sexuality, and minority, the increasing convergence of their public voices is going to transform the nature of the state, de-legitimate the development, and reshape the characters of local government through opening the decision making process by citizen participation.

This is an alternative towards grassroots democracy (Hsia, 1998).

Then, where is the intervention space for the leftist? Besides the vacuum space for the leftist in the extremely tense with China mentioned above, facing the specific conflicts of glocalization in Taiwan, the practice of leftist intervention could be articulated with the issues of living qualities of places with critical analysis. This is the theme of reproduction of capitalist system. There is great potential of urban social movements.

Therefore, the paper proposes to articulate critical issues of class, gender, ethnicity, and environment with the spatial theories and practices. Going beyond the trap of formal institutional division of geography, sociology, political science, urban studies, planning and architecture, the real challenge is building the linkage between theory and practice, between research and politics, spatial theories and planning-design practice, between state, social movements and radical intellectuals, between global and local. An interactive autonomy is concluded as an idea to bridge the gap between theory and practice as follows. This is also the lessons come from my experience articulating between critical/radical intellectuals and the social movements in Taiwan. By the way, it's also a dialogue cross over the misunderstanding between researcher and planner, such as between my former teachers and friends, Manuel Castells (2000:389-390) and John Friedmann (2000:460-472).

First, **an interactive autonomy between theory and practice** is proposed due to the historical lessons in the turmoil of real radical politics. After the paradigm shift in 1970's, the political economic analysis on the social political processes of urban questions combines with the cultural studies on the spatial representations will be the center. On the one hand, considering the relative autonomy of theory and research, the researcher has to take his responsibilities to do a good research. Certainly, a good theory has to be used in practice; however, the science has its own criteria beyond political position. The quality of theory has to be judged by research rather than political community.

On the other hand, considering the relative autonomy of practice and politics, activists have to determine what they want by themselves. This is their right. They not just follow political guidance from the theory. What is to do is politics, not theory tells activists what's to do or to be done. The practice needs practical. The practice needs specific capability of flexibility to adjust the space and time consideration. The most critical principle in the practice of the ancient Chinese garden making for landscape

architects is “to each locality according to its own characteristics” (yindizhiyi).

As to the articulation between theory and practice, both of them need autonomy. The dialectic interaction between theory and practice is historically complicated. Since the relative autonomy, the relationship is not just a metaphysical exercise from philosophical questions to philosophical answers. At least, the problematic is from the practice. Instead of pure internal logic of conceptual system, in the critical discourse, the research question has to response the real questions raised from practice. The key of bridging theory and practice is “problematic”, the mode of posing research questions. Practice helps theory, and reflects what happens in reality. For instance, “command economy doesn’t work” is a part of history and reality in practice. While research is evaluated by its scientific criteria, political position needs political judgment. In other words, **practice raises questions but not answers**. Usually, we see right wing researcher raises lousy questions. However, left wing researcher does lousy research through lousy research machine after raised good question. We have to do good empirical research and we have to know what and how exactly happened rather than exercise pure theoretical deduction.

Therefore, in the positivist paradigm, the research was considered as neutral, but in fact social and institutional reproduction. In the Leninist paradigm, the politics took command, and theory became dogmatic. Now, an interactive autonomy between theory and practice creates an interactive boundary between different social actors and interactive communication. There is no such as a neutral researcher, but a self-aware subjectivity. The interactive autonomy defines the boundary of inter-subjectivity. Both sides nourish the boundary in between. The interaction between the subjectivities and the objective relative autonomy performs together as an interaction of posing research questions of problematic. The interactive space is the key element between the division of labor of theory and practice, which is political space. For instance, the division and interaction is exactly the roles of different players in a volleyball team. Only the mutual understanding and interaction between different actors could express their capabilities of the team.

Second, for the purpose of social change rather reproduction in a global capitalist system, the relations between state, social movements, and radical intellectuals have to be dealt with historically and practically. Both researcher and professional planner and designer are defined as intellectuals here. As to the internal contradictions between researcher, planner and designer, let’s leave the study to planning theory. In the historical sense, these conflicts are indeed “the small waves in the tea cups of the

intellectuals”. Considering the relation between state and radical intellectuals such as researchers, planners and designers, for instance, the policy maker is a part of the state. Even the role of consultant is also the same as an instrument of the state. But the state can be used and penetrated especially for the local state. The state may be studied with the society together. There is a power relation with the society. If we change the society, which can be changed through the state. In principle, the state represents the society, but distorted by the dominant class. So the radical intellectuals have to emphasize the logic of change rather than reproduction only. It’s possible for the radical planners and designers to emphasize the society rather than the state, to find maneuvering space against the power relation to the pressure from the state, towards the interest of powerless than the power elites.

Considering the relation between state and society, the social movements from the civil society are outside of state apparatus and remain their challenges to the system. And the citizen participation plays in the ambiguous space both inside and outside of the institutions, which provides possibilities to increasingly transform the nature of state through releasing the power of the society.

Again, considering the relation between the radical intellectuals and social movements, there could be an objective alliance between radical intellectuals and social movements. However, the radical intellectuals can’t use the social movement, the radical can’t guide the social movements for the reason of the interactive relationship between theory and politics as mentioned above. On the contrary, social movements are not all correct. It depends. The so-called middle class community movements are always the most conservative ones. The roles of radical intellectuals are providing analytical and theoretical understanding rather than advise to social movements.

There are no general rules of the relations between social class, state, and radical intellectuals. Radical intellectuals provide clear idea about what make progressive social change. However, it tests with people at grassroots level to build up interactive process. Radical intellectuals evaluate the possibilities of state apparatus, support the powerless, and bargain and negotiate with state. If the state supports, this is “reform”. Then we need good planners and designers. Cultural innovation is an automatic practice as research autonomous from politics. Good research questions provided from politics, good answers depend “professional”, which translates planning strategies for people how to do, and appropriates symbolic meaning for people how to express, just like a good engineer creates a good machine. Radical planners and designers have to sustain a good relation with people and provide good answers for

them. That's why education of planning and design are important, and why the qualities are important. The qualities of space and place are not the privilege of bourgeoisie. Radical planners and designers are not only expert to paint the surface on red color but no substantial change because there is only political position. Otherwise, the students are revolutionary when they are students. And after graduation, they become pragmatic bureaucrats.

Finally, let me say a word for the roles of radical intellectuals from the theoretical intervention in the discursive space of social theories to the planning intervention in the public space of urban politics, and the design intervention in the representation of urban symbolic. Their relations with the social movements will be the determinant distance of the historical stage of social transformation as well as spatial transformation. The social commitment is still important, but there is a historical challenge of the roles of radical intellectuals. Liberating the leftist from of Leninist limits, we have to search for new interactive roles of interactive spaces for the autonomy of intellectuals in the research, planning and design processes.

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