

4

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE AN
ADVANCED COUNTRY?
Korea at the Crossroads

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1. Three positive and three negative criteria

I do not think the category "advanced country" or "advanced industrialized country" will be with us for a very long time. On the one hand the category has a taste of arrogance, like an "advanced person" which we fortunately do not use as a category; on the other hand it is very hard to define and any definition is bound to be controversial. There is also a strong political overtone to the category: the "advanced industrialized countries" are mainly countries surrounding the United States (which is now a service industry country with 70% of its GNP generated by the service industries), and presumably by and large in harmony with that country in the center. To become an advanced country, hence, has a connotation of entering the inner court around the United States of America, whether by closing the door so that no more countries can enter, or by leaving it open for late arrivals. However this is done there is an exclusiveness about the concept with global, geo-political implications.

However, the concept is with us, as are the concepts of being "developed" and being "modern". So let me propose three positive and three negative ideas that definitely should be included in the concept of being advanced/developed/modern. They are:

Satisfaction of basic human needs for everybody, meaning at least a minimum level of satisfaction of the needs for survival, for material/somatic well-being, for identity and for freedom (in choosing how to satisfy the other three);

Building of modern institutions, particularly in the field of bureaucracy, corporations and intelligentsia (the "BCI-complex")--capable of handling the basic execution or decisions for the country, of handling production, distribution and consumption and of producing the knowledge and skills for either;

Democracy, meaning the control by the people to see to it that the institutions are used also for satisfaction of basic human needs, in other words for the people--thereby linking the first and second points above.

Then there are the three negative points:

None of this should happen at the expense of nature which should remain viable as an eco-system;

None of this should happen at the expense of other countries which should remain capable also of becoming advanced/developed/modern;

None of this should be at the expense of the world system, by increasing the dangers of war or exploitation.

It could be added that the failure to include these three negative conditions as caveats is in itself symptomatic. The basic assumption seems to be that everybody meaning every country, is out for themselves regardless of what happens to the rest of the world and that the category of being advanced includes "at the

expense of others"; even at the expense of trampling on nature and other societies and endangering world peace. Clearly something is wrong when concepts are permitted to emerge in such an intellectually sloppy and morally totally indefensible manner.

The three positive conditions are, as indicated, strongly related to each other. The point of departure would be difficult to reject: the human being, in this case the citizen of the country that wants to become "advanced," as the centerpiece of the construction. The basic human needs indicated fall into four classes. Two of them are material/somatic, such as the need for survival (a rather basic one, meaning a low level of internal and external violence for the citizens of the country) and the need for well being (in the sense of food and clothes and shelter, and one might also want to include provision for health and the basic education that makes human beings human--perhaps also labor saving devices in order to eliminate unnecessarily heavy, dirty and degrading work). Then there are the two nonmaterial/mental/spiritual categories of basic needs: the need for identity with something, for instance with one's own traditional culture (problematic in connection with advancement, development, modernization) one's own language and religion in particular, with the products of one's own work, with people one feels attached to, near or remote, not to mention with oneself and the transcendental. And then there is the category of freedom which means having space, latitude, for instance at the elementary level of having a choice of types of food-stuffs to eat, not having it all

decided by somebody else like in a prison or some other total institution, dished up in front of one, even if the need for material, somatic well-being is well satisfied this way.

It is my contention that these four types of needs should be seen as being at the same level, with no class of needs having priority over the other. They are all important, and they are all the kinds of things for which people are willing to lay down their lives, meaning sacrificing survival for well being, identity and freedom if not for themselves for their kith and kin with whom they identify in general. Consequently there is no simple recipe of development saying that we start with food and clothes and shelter and then try to take the rest as they come along. The best road to advancement/development/modernity would be to work on all four at the same time, trying to make progress on all of them.

And this is, of course, where the three sets of institutions enter. Their task, indeed only raison d'etre is to be instrumental in having this take place. All three in European history emerged in France (and in the Ottoman empire) from early sixteenth century on, and have taken well known forms today. All the time there has been bitter debate as to who should have the upper hand, the bureaucrats, the capitalists or the intellectuals,--or the more shady background characters; single party officials, the military or the police (the PMP-complex). Democracy, the third pillar of the advanced society, is an effort to solve this dilemma by saying neither one, nor the other. The people themselves, including all those working in the BCI-and PMP-complexes.

By these three positive and three negative criteria one could now start evaluating the Korean advancement. Even if one should find that much has been done and even more will definitely have been done by the year 2000 in terms of satisfying the basic human needs, at least the basic material needs of Korean population, and that very much has been done in terms of developing a technocratic elite, both in its bureaucratic, corporate and intelligentsia (technicians, researchers, professionals) manifestations, one would still probably come to the conclusion that Korea falls far short in terms of democracy. Thus, the country is not as yet quite ready for admission into the "club of advanced industrialized democracies". In fact, very much remains as the country is not even lagging behind, but its lag is supported by a recalcitrant structure of now already a classical kind: the other triangle, an alliance between a single dominant, party which retains virtual monopoly on policy formation with the military and the police, capable of using the military and the police for its own purposes, including suppressing opposition. The problem of advancement is not only that of building a pattern of a viable democracy, but of dismantling the structure impeding more democratic formations, to prevent a relapse to autocracy.

One may now legitimately ask the question: what right does anybody from the industrialized, democratic and presumably generally advanced west have to exercise such judgments? The argument sometimes heard that we should not be entitled to do so because of our own lagging economic growth is ridiculous: there is no valid theory to the effect that lack of democracy can be

traded for high economic growth or vice versa. These are simply independent dimensions of advancement, which means that democracy is a sine qua non, a necessary condition for being anything like advanced whereas economic growth could be seen as a question of degree. What could be argued, however, from a socio-psychological point of view, would be that when the west is insisting so much on democracy in the Korean context it is also to let the country down: "Ok, you may have beaten us economically, but you are far short on the democratic dimension and we shall let you feel the burden of that short-coming!" I think there is something to this, and the argumentation in favor of democracy should not be in terms of something missing relative to the profile the west thinks it has been able to achieve of advancement, but as something missing relative to the basic human non-material needs of the Korean population. The fact that so many fight and struggle, some of them even at the expense of their own lives through self-immolation, bears ample testimony to the strength of this factor.

Then, the three negative criteria: to what extent is Korean advancement at the expense of nature, at the expense of other societies and at the expense of world peace? The ecological problems of the Republic of Korea are many, but perhaps not greater than in many other countries. If or when Korea makes other countries dependent on itself turning them into countries delivering raw materials and importing the fabricated goods of advanced Korea one may argue that this happens at the expense of other countries. And we are not at all convinced that South Korea does everything it could reasonably do in order to diffuse that time bomb under world

peace in the region called the Korean Conflict. But one might also be of the opinion that the key to Korean reunification is time; the generation that suffered from the horrors of the Korean War 1950 to 1953 simply has to go into biological or at least social retirement for conflict resolution to emerge. And that might point to the 1990s as a more positive period with more openings for real peace on the Korean Peninsula, probably by combining the step-by-step approach suggested by the South with the vision of a confederation suggested by the North. I am not at all convinced that the two exclude each other, on the contrary I think they complement each other quite well.

To conclude: the six dimensions brought in here to discuss how advanced a country wind up with two plus'es and four minus'es. Is this a harsh judgment? I do not think so, because for the model countries that Korea is imitating, much of the same can be said. They are all committing crimes against nature in their countries, and increasingly abroad, by exporting their most polluting industries-- not to mention waste products, including dioxins and nuclear waste. They continue in their pattern of making Third World countries dependent on themselves; as a matter of fact much of development assistance can be seen in exactly that perspective. And with their arms races in highly offensive weapons, much beyond the relatively innocent weapons (in an international confrontation, not as used against the country's own citizens) of the Republic of Korea, their ability to serve the interests of world peace may certainly also be doubted. Of course, there is no denial that through offensive

arms a balance can be obtained for some period. But the argument would nevertheless be that that balance is vulnerable, and can easily be changed not only into imbalance but also into war by incidents that are difficult to predict and even more difficult to avoid. And,

Finally it can also be doubted whether some of the countries so often held to be democratic really are that democratic. Such as the United States in spite of her self-image as a major bastion of democracy. The range of choice is too small, the participation is too low in fact only 50% of 52% in the last presidential elections as against as much as 56% in a country like India where that figure is a measure of tremendous achievement against the odds of illiteracy and difficulties of transportation and communication.

But, is the definition used here of an "advanced country" but rather arbitrary? I would agree but the burden would then be on anybody to come up with a better definition. One might try by leaving out one of the three components and forgetting the list of negative criteria. But the problem is that leaving out basic human needs would make the definition not only a-human, but also anti-human. What would be the purpose of the other two if not to provide a decent livelihood for people? Merely institution-building?

What could be argued would be that the BCI complex is an artefact brought about by recent western history, not exported to the rest of the world and very often under the slogan of "modernization". State logic is enshrined in the bureaucracy, capital logic built into the corporation and ordinary logical logic in intellectual activities--and these are three pillars of our existence as seen by the west. However, if one could do the same with highly de-

centralized states rather than unified centralized countries; with other modes of production than the capitalist mode; and by raising the level of knowledge of the population at large rather than training a small number of specialists, then it may be argued that much of the same could be obtained. Technocracy may be a sufficient but not a necessary condition. The centerpieces are, after all, the basic human needs, because they are basic, human and necessary.

In that case the third condition for being an advanced country might be taken care of automatically; people would themselves be in command. As a matter of fact, what has just been said is very similar to the green vision of what an advanced country would look like: strong emphasis on the local level, much less on the national level both in terms of administration, production/consumption/distribution in general and for knowledge in particular. But I doubt very much that the countries today considering themselves advanced would recognize a green society as an adequate exemplar of advancement, and accept it in their midst. Consequently, I think we are stuck with these criteria. There is no way for Korea of getting around being held accountable for its failure to implement canons of democracy. For that reason let us have a closer look at the theory of democracy since that, then, becomes the centerpiece of the whole argument. And here we have to proceed with some care as one might like to have a theory that covers many facets of democracy.