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**Book review: beyond liberal democracy:
political thinking for an East Asian context.
by Daniel A. Bell and multiculturalism in
Asia. edited by Will Kymlicka and Baogang
He.**

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POLITICAL THEORY

Beyond Liberal Democracy: Political Thinking for an East Asian Context. By Daniel A. Bell. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006. 408p. \$67.50 cloth, \$25.95 paper.

Multiculturalism in Asia. Edited by Will Kymlicka and Baogang He. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. 376p. \$125.00 cloth, \$55.50 paper.
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— Leigh K. Jenco, *National University of Singapore*

Political theory has only recently begun to reflect on its own ethnocentrism, contributing to existing debates over the extent to which “culture” plays a role in shaping how we or others think about political life. East Asia has occupied an especially strategic place in that debate, as “Asian values” arguments continue to articulate a compelling Confucian alternative to the liberal individualism so long held to be an essential foundation of political and economic development. The two books under review here both examine the tenability of “Western” liberal values in Asian societies, one suggesting that historical and political contingencies in the Asian region often hinder the practice of liberal multiculturalism, and the other arguing that the culture of East Asia in particular determines a set of political practices often in tension with liberal democracy.

Multiculturalism in Asia, edited by Will Kymlicka and Baogang He, aims “to explore the varied and contradictory ways that issues of ethno-cultural diversity are conceptualized and debated in South and East Asia” (p. 1). This aim suggests a close look at some kinds of indigenous discourse—public debate, political rhetoric, academic scholarship—that either engage liberal multiculturalism or confront in broader terms the reality of their own multiethnic, multicultural societies. Despite these introductory promises, however, the book does not offer many potential theoretical alternatives to multiculturalism or indigenously rooted critiques of it. Instead, it primarily features individual case studies that document political and historical factors affecting the practice of multiculturalism in East and South Asia. Considered from this empirical perspective, the book is an excellent survey of multicultural policies in a range of too-often overlooked societies, from Laos to Sri Lanka, that furnish grounds for doubting the broad applicability of Kymlicka’s framework to Asian contexts. In her chapter on “hill tribes” in Thailand, for example, Mika Toyota explains not only why the model of a sedentary minority people within a bounded territory does not apply in mainland southeast Asia, but also how the liberal discourse of cultural recognition has been distorted by the Thai government to assert its dominance over non-Thai minorities (by reinforcing a notion of a “core” nation-state identity from which the hill tribes, as minorities, were excluded; p. 135).

Social-scientific approaches such as these have the great benefit of replacing impressionistic and reductionist “cultural” explanations with empirical evidence, but they do tend to elide precisely those indigenous traditions or intellectual resources that He and Kymlicka, in their introduction, uphold as potential alternatives to liberal multiculturalism. Most of the book’s contributors assume that liberal democracy is a standard whose contours need not be interrogated—even if its immediate applicability is contested in certain contexts, such as contemporary Japan (chap. 10) or Laos (chap. 4). Many potential alternatives prominent in the Asian context, such as Buddhism or Marxism, are relegated to “religions” or “ideologies” (pp. 5, 14) which are deemed inadequate because they “do not explain how to develop a democratic consensus on minority rights” (p. 5). But if the point of the book is precisely to explore, rather than discount a priori, the range of possible alternatives to liberal multiculturalism, how can democratic procedures be seen as necessary conditions?

John Bowen’s chapter on “Normative Pluralism in Indonesia” is among the few chapters in the book that asks if there are compelling “political theories and institutions developed in some Asian countries that are based on quite different assumptions about the categories and groups that make up nations” (p. 153). He identifies as a possible candidate the notion of “adat community” evoked by Indonesian groups advancing claims to self-governance, which coheres on the basis of shared norms, rather than “a general notion of prior residence or even minority status” (pp. 156, 157). To Bowen, fluid and contested notions such as *adat* offer alternative ways of characterizing subnational groups seeking self-governance, which may throw light on non-Asian cases (such as Corsican or Welsh nationalist movements) where “a state and a subgroup within the state represent the nature of that subgroup in conflicting ways” (p. 168).

He’s contribution likewise is refreshing for its more ambitious critique of liberal multiculturalism, even if it claims to provide “the Confucian approach to minority questions and minority rights” (p. 56; my emphasis). The chapter offers a much-needed reminder that long histories of internalizing non-Han ethnic groups gave rise to a rich Chinese vocabulary of self and other that can be, and is, redeployed in contemporary debates. Yet it remains unclear to what extent this vocabulary, tied so closely to civilized/barbarian dichotomies, can be identified as a specifically “Confucian minority rights legac[y]” (p. 60). Many Chinese relationships with “barbarian” minorities, after all, evolved out of late-imperial administrative exigencies, rather than having been directly derived from some given set of “Confucian” values. (He does not mention, for example, *fengjian*/regional autonomy debates or *zizhi*/self-rule discourses).

Much of this same kind of ahistorical reification of “Confucianism” plagues Daniel A. Bell’s book *Beyond Liberal Democracy*. Bell’s work, like Kymlicka and He’s, should be commended for providing an intimate look at societies

that most Anglo-American political theorists ignore. The wide range of topics that Bell explores—from just war theory to elitism to nongovernmental organizations to sports culture—suggests the richness of East Asian perspectives but, unfortunately, ultimately fails to do any of them (or the liberal values Bell critiques) justice. In his analysis of minority rights in Asia, for example, Bell argues on the basis of East Asian political conditions that “non-democratic forms of government can better protect the legitimate interests of minority groups” (p. 185). Ignoring similar arguments formulated in Western constitutional theory—from individual rights to judicial oversight to precommitment—he claims that Western views are inadequate (pp. 189, 192) and goes on to present a solution more suited to the “less-than-democratic” societies of East Asia (pp. 198, 203).

More troublingly, however, in Bell’s book the historical conditions and political struggles that gave rise to the complex societies of modern East Asia are too often reduced to the cultural influence of “Confucianism”—even when his own analysis suggests factors unrelated to it. The author acknowledges that there “are no distinctly Asian values” (p. 52), and in some chapters (such as those on East Asian capitalism and migrant domestic workers), he presents detailed empirical evidence of how contemporary conditions in East Asia differ from those in Western countries. Yet he repeatedly insists that such differences, if not explained, are at least best “described” or “influenced” by cultural differences rooted in Chinese political “traditions” such as Confucianism and (to a much lesser extent) legalism (p. 259; cf. pp. 61, 308). In many chapters, in fact, Bell identifies “Confucianism” not with any historically rooted tradition of discourse but simply with the words of the ancient thinkers Confucius and Mencius (e.g., pp. 31, 234–35). For example, his reading of the Confucian *junzi* (“gentleman” or “exemplary person”), portrayed as a superior intellect uniquely suited for political rule in the *Analects*, is quickly conflated with the institutionalization of a meritocratic civil exam system in China and other “Confucian societies” (pp. 153–54), as well as linked to “the idea of respect for rule by an educated elite,” which Bell insists “is a dominant strand of Confucian political culture” (p. 167).

Confucian texts were certainly seminal in East Asia, but Bell does not acknowledge that such texts do not articulate a uniform set of values so much as they provide minimal starting points for millennia of later (often conflicting) interpretations that reflect political motives as much as “cultural” influence. Indeed, even if it were true, as he claims, that in East Asian societies “most people have devoted time and energy to family and other ‘local’ obligations, with political decision-making left to an educated, public-spirited elite” (p. 12), it remains unclear to what extent this is a *cultural* rather than sociological or political characteristic. What is the role played by aggres-

sively nondemocratic governments (such as in the People’s Republic of China or Singapore) in fostering this decision to devote more time to family than to politics? How does the decision reflect the frenetic drive in East Asian societies to achieve national and personal economic prosperity? Like Bell’s claim that “the Communist Party leadership reflects the wishes of the people” in supporting war with Taiwan should Taiwan declare independence from China (p. 204), he fails to interrogate how political propaganda, path dependency, and other noncultural explanations—especially in authoritarian states such as Communist China—play a role in creating any given public consensus, and suppress dissent from this status quo.

Both of these books under review seek alternatives to liberalism in Asian political experience. In so doing, they make important contributions to the broadening of a more “comparative” political theory. Juxtaposing them makes clear the need for analyses that are conversant with the rich and varied cultural traditions of East Asia but also with their specific historical and political situations. Although it is the duty of the book reviewer to be critical, I do hope that books like these will inspire a new generation of political theorists to turn their attention toward Asian political discourses and reconsider the approaches most appropriate to these discourses.

The Future of Gender. Edited by Jude Browne. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 288p. \$85.00 cloth, \$29.99 paper.

Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category. By David Valentine. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007. 320p. \$79.95 cloth, \$22.95 paper.
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— Penny A. Weiss, *St. Louis University*

A male-bodied person dressed in a ball gown should be referred to as a) transgender, b) a queen (fem, drag, or butch), c) genderqueer, d) a transvestite, e) gender free, f) a girl, g) it depends (on how male-bodied persons self-identify, on their race and class, whether they are transitioning, what they wear the rest of the time, etc.), or h) other (sissy, fairy, woman, etc.). You will read David Valentine’s *Imagining Transgender* without ever arriving at an answer to this question, both because there is no obviously correct or clearly wrong one and because his interesting focus is on the consequences of whatever classifications we choose for ourselves and others. Jude Browne’s *The Future of Gender* is also concerned with “the conceptual efficacy of ‘gender,’ as a mode of analysis and as a basis for envisioning the emancipatory transformation of society” (p. 1). Here, too, you will not come to definitive answers about the relation of gender to sex, to political change, or to inequality, but in this case the cause may lie more in the character of the anthology than the concept itself.