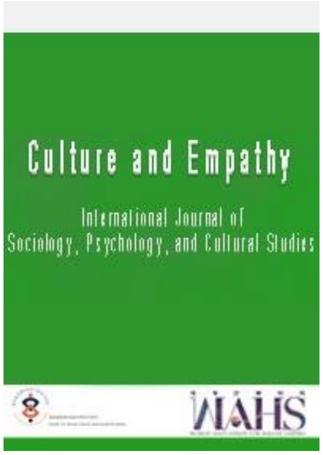
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Ricardo Pagliuso Regatieri, **Federal University of Bahia**

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The Straitjacket of Patrimonialism: Critical Notes on South Korea

Ricardo Pagliuso Regatieri, Federal University of Bahia

Abstract

The inception and development of the Social Sciences cannot be taken out of the context of European – and later also American – colonialism. This field of knowledge, with its assumptions, representations, concepts and analyses, has proceeded hand-in-hand with the consolidation of the capitalist world system. The latter has been marked by a separation between its core and the vast post-colonial areas of the globe. In the early 20th century, Max Weber, one of the founding fathers of Sociology, devoted a great amount of his extensive work to comparative research between different societies and historical periods, aiming at explaining the so-called uniqueness of the West. In general, his results point to cultural and economic deficiencies and absences of the non-Western world vis-à-vis the West. In this paper, I explore Weber's concept of patrimonialism and its usages to analyze South Korea. In addressing the latter along with more recent critiques, the paper argues that representations of South Korean society as patrimonial are ultimately hostages of euro-centered representations about the 'rest' of the world, that they operate on the basis of problematic historical premises, and that they obscure rather than help to explain the distinct contemporary configurations of capitalism and their specific forms of social domination in South Korea.

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Introduction

Patrimonialism is a broadly employed concept to describe and analyze various social realities. Countries as different as South Korea and Brazil, for distinct reasons but invariably on account of alleged continuities from their historical past, are regarded as 'patrimonial'. This paper will focus on the discussion about patrimonialism regarding South Korea. In order to do so, I will start by

CONTACT Ricardo Pagliuso ✉ ricardo.pagliuso@ufba.br

presenting the concept of patrimonialism as it was formulated within Sociology in the early twentieth century. I will then move to the debate about patrimonialism in South Korea, showing how the patrimonial argument employs the idea of the persistence of ancient practices. By addressing critical approaches to colonialism, modernity, and history, the subsequent section will shed light upon Weber's work and on perspectives influenced by Weber that purport that South Korean society is patrimonial. This will lead to a conclusion highlighting the problems embedded in the discourse of patrimonialism when attempting to deal with issues in contemporary South Korea such as corruption and favoritism.

Max Weber and the Concept of Patrimonialism

Discussions about patrimonialism in the Social Sciences stem, directly or indirectly, from the work of the German sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920). Weber approaches the issue of patrimonialism within his characterization of domination. According to Weber (1980:122), domination is "the probability that certain specific commands (or all commands) will be obeyed by a given group of persons." Weber discusses the bases of authority, conferring legitimacy to domination, and he defines three ideal or pure types: (1) legal domination, (2) charismatic domination, and (3) traditional domination. Legal domination is typical to modern capitalism and corresponds to the bureaucratic structures of the modern state and modern private enterprise. In this type, government is directed by rational rules, abstract norms and impersonality (Weber 1980; Weber 1985). Charismatic domination is related to devotion to extraordinary or supernatural qualities of an individual person. Prophets, exceptional warlords and mass leaders are among those who manage to attract followers through the power of their charisma (Weber 1980; Weber 1985). Finally, traditional domination is based on the adherence to long-existing norms and rules, i.e., on transmitted tradition; patriarchal rule is its purest form. Traditional domination is characterized by a combination of obedience to tradition and, in the absence of the latter, to the discretionary power of the ruler (Weber 1980; Weber 1985).

This last realm, traditional rule, is the one of interest for the discussion I want to propose in this article, especially in view of the relation of opposition it maintains with legal rule in the Weberian scheme. Within traditional domination, Weber describes two subtypes which embody a pair of distinct features: tradition and discretion. In feudalism, tradition prescribes rights and obligations in a clear way, and serfs as well as feudal lords submit to these prescriptions. The relationship between rulers and the ruled is rigidly defined and feudal lords are not to treat their dependents in any way that they please. This situation is very different from that of patrimonial rule. Whereas feudalism generally refers to medieval Europe, Weber portrays social formations as diverse as Ancient Rome, Ancient Egypt and Ancient China as patrimonial cases. Essentially, Weber understands patrimonialism to entail a transposition of patriarchal rule (*pater* in Latin = father) into the realm of the state: patrimonialism is a "special case of the structure of patriarchal domination" (Weber 1980). The patrimonial state is a private domain belonging to the ruler: the political community is an extension of the domestic sphere of the ruler; the finances of the state and those of the ruler are one; the ruler can dispose of anyone under his or her authority and request labor and activities as he or she pleases. The ideas of law, rights and duties are blurred under patrimonial rule. Typically, the patrimonial ruler does not issue rules regulating obligations between him or her and the ruled, but rather decides and gives decrees on a case-by-case basis. That is why Weber argues that there is room for discretion and personal preferences on the part of the ruler within patrimonial rule, elements that co-exist with tradition in an uneasy balance. The broader space for discretion which characterizes patrimonialism produces increased instability and a consequent "inhibiting effect for capitalism" (Weber 1980: 642), in comparison with the feudal structure from which capitalism develops. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the concept of neo-patrimonialism was introduced to designate social systems which were regarded as a fusion or hybrid of patrimonial and bureaucratic rule within the context of postcolonial states (Bratton 2011; Médard 1996).

A Patrimonial South Korea?

Writing about China, Weber discussed the intertwining of patrimonialism and Confucianism. According to his analyses, unlike the ethic of ascetic Protestantism, Confucian values tend to inhibit the development of capitalism. During most of the twentieth century, the East Asian Confucian legacy was seen as an obstacle to development; however, this would subsequently change dramatically on account of the debate on Asian values: "Ironically, while Max Weber had attributed Asia's failure to achieve capitalistic economic development to Asian values, many Westerners turned to these very Asian values to explain the remarkable economic growth in Asia during the 1970s and 1980s. [...] Like a chameleon, Asian values take on different colors depending on the time, space, and the intention of the discussant" (Lee 2001: 203; *inter alia* Jun 1999; Pohlmann 2000). Starting with an article by Edwin Reischauer in the mid-1970s, the constitution of the discourse of Asian values was spearheaded in the 1980s and 1990s by authors such as Roderick MacFarquhar, Peter Berger, Weiming Tu, Gordon Redding and Ezra Vogel (Reischauer 1974; MacFarquhar 1980; Berger 1988; Tu 1988; Tu 1996; Redding 1990; Vogel 1991). Even if the Asian Financial Crisis (1997-1998) has partially discredited the idea of well-succeeded Confucian capitalism, the discourse of Asian values has not vanished, with scholars such as Tu and Bell continuing to carry it forward. They assert that "Confucianism is a living heritage in East Asia" (Bell & Hahm 2003: 27) and argue for the existence of an "East Asian modernity under the influence of Confucian traditions" (Tu 2000: 205). Asian values based on the Confucian tradition are assumed to give rise to a strong state with a prominent role, to an emphasis on education, as well as to familism, personalism, and patrimonialism.

But beyond and parallel to the debate on Asian values, there is a more specific discussion on the topic of patrimonialism regarding the case of South Korea, which is my intended focus here. An important contribution to this discussion is Norman Jacobs' *The Korean Road to Modernization and Development* (1985). Jacobs considers patrimonialism to be a key element to understanding these two processes – modernization and development – in South Korea and highlights the “continuity of culture and tradition in the development of successive political and social systems” (Kim 2006: 40). In his analysis, “patrimonialism is the key feature of the political system in Korean society, while kinship and patron-client relationships are the fundamental units of social interaction” (Kim 2006: 41). Jacobs argues that “[r]elationships of domination and subordination in political and economic life were ultimately ordered on patrimonial principles,” so that patrimonialism functions as the “structural underpinning of the Korean political economy” (Kim 2006: 42). Jacobs summarizes his point by saying that, in South Korea, “the modernizing techniques of the developed societies” have been systematically used to “perfect, that is, to *modernize*, the existing *patrimonial* ways of doing things” (Jacobs 1985: 301). Since the publication of Jacobs’ book, it has become – with a handful of exceptions – almost a matter of course to characterize South Korean society as ‘patrimonial’: here one can expect to find personal preference and favoritism rather than impersonality, direct and traditional forms of domination rather than mediations by a modern bureaucracy, and the blurring of public and private spheres rather than their sharp separation.

Expressly in line with Jacobs’ analysis of patrimonialism, and by quoting his work, Nicole W. Biggart discusses the *chaebol* (defined as “money group’ or ‘financial clique”), which, according to the author, constitute the “dominant economic structure” in South Korea (1990: 115). Biggart refers to a definition of patrimonialism by Weber in his *Economy and Society* as a form of rule in which “power is held by a patriarch and administered through a personal staff, and historically has often included a military force” (Weber 1978, p. 226). Biggart goes on to say that the *chaebol*, in which “[o]wnership is concentrated within a family and subject to the autocratic decision making of a patriarch and his heirs” (1990: 114), are a clear expression, within the business world, of the patrimonial logic prevalent in South Korean society, which is rooted in the Confucian ethic. Similar to the feudal order, Confucian patrimonialism is based on hierarchy, but, in contrast to the former, does not encompass clearly established regulations, so that its relations are grounded on personalism and favor. Biggart concludes her text by saying that Korea’s institutional legacy is patrimonial and that, despite the Japanese colonial period and the influence of the United States in the aftermath of the Korean War – both of which have left important marks in public administration, business organization and academia, “[s]tate-business relations in South Korea are reminiscent of a preindustrial political and economic elite, and the structure and management of chaebol are clearly patrimonial” (1990: 124). According to the author, *chaebol* “integrate[s] crucial aspects of modern enterprise, such as professional management and rational financial techniques but they do so within a patrimonial framework” (1990: 124).

In “*The Personalist Ethic and the Market in Korea*” (1991), Yun-Shik Chang summarizes investigations on social change in South Korea which he had been carrying out since the 1980s. One key point of his article is that traditional cultural patterns do not necessarily oppose modernization. Chang identifies “what can be called a personalist ethic, deeply embedded in traditional cultural patterns but surviving industrialization and urbanization with remarkable resiliency” (1991: 121), as one of the foundations of South Korean sociability and argues that it adapts well to the market system. This personalist ethic, Chang (1991) writes, rests on the affectivity which emerges through face-to-face interaction rather than on relations based on contract and, in it, a sense of mutual obligation and exchange of favors prevails. Chang (1991) argues that this personalist ethic also pervades public administration: “Whereas the Weberian principles emphasize the impersonal character of public work and its separation from the private personal sphere, a personalistic environment tends not to accept the norm of impersonality and encourages the incumbents of public office to personalize their position and become possessive of it” (pp. 125). According to Seok-Choon Lew (2000), who also draws on Jacobs, patrimonial rule was institutionalized in the Korean peninsula during the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910) and strengthened during the Japanese colonial period; it has survived the war and has continued through the regimes after 1953, which have represented modern versions of patrimonial domination. Moreover, “Korean patrimonial ruling structure also played a particularly prominent role in the country’s recent rapid economic development” (Lew 1998: 27).

Historicity, Colonialism and the Social Sciences

More recently, scholars have put into question approaches such as those presented above. In *The Development of Modern South Korea* (2006), Kyong Ju Kim only partially agrees with characterizations of Korea based on patrimonialism and personalism. She argues that “[p]atrimonialism is not only a traditional legacy but also one dimension of development strategies” and that it “is only one face of modern Korea’s multifaceted social structure” (2006: 43-44). By pointing to its utilization as a development strategy, Kim is calling attention to the fact that a so-called patrimonial order can be intentionally established and re-built within the context of modernization efforts. Kim considers “neo-traditionalism” or “reconstruction of tradition” (2006) to be attempts by the state to mobilize supposedly traditional cultural elements, precisely in order to serve modernizing purposes. A more radical perspective, which also sheds light on this discussion, is Kyung-Sup Chang’s approach of compressed modernity. Created with reference to South Korea’s vertiginous experience of modernity, Chang’s (2010) approach seeks to address contradictions and collisions brought about by this process. The turning point in Chang’s analysis is South Korean modernization after the civil war under American influence and in harsh contention and competition with the socialist North. Indeed, as Chang points out, modernization in East Asian countries after the Second World War must necessarily be contextualized taking into account their strategic geographic location for American interests during the Cold War. South Korea, for example, was provided “with favorable access to their knowledge, technology, and market (which became indispensable ingredients for swift catch-up industrialization and modernization)” (Chang 2010: 25).

After the Korean War, an authoritarian capitalist state forged and put into practice a version of modernity which, despite being inspired by the American liberal model, was, in fact, radically different from it. South Korean modernization was essentially a “statist project”, Chang (2010) writes. In this context, “traditional values and ideologies, encompassing both societal and personal domains, have been tenaciously recycled or reinvented by statist modernization regimes. South Korea under Chung-Hee Park was a particularly pertinent case in this regard. He promoted the *chunghyo* (loyalty to state, piety to parents) ideology as a supposedly traditional basis of social and political order while pursuing an aggressive export-oriented capitalist industrialization as a national goal (Chang 2010). According to Chang (2010), “South Korean distinctiveness consists much more in its explosive and complex digestion (and indigestion) of Western modernity than in some isolated characteristics inherited from its past” (pp. 5). The view that practices and values can be recycled or reinvented for political purposes is also shared by Seung-Hwan Lee. According to Lee (2001), representations or imaginary constructs about Asia – such as the notion of patrimonialism – reveal the “ideologically-charged viewpoint of Asia intentionally created by Westerners since the period of imperialism”, and from that time on, “to justify their imperialist expansions, Westerners have considered Asian civilization as backward and barbaric” (pp. 203-204). Lee argues that Orientalism corresponds precisely to the discourse constituted by these relations of power (2001).

The concept of patrimonialism in the Social Sciences has been around for the past 100 years, but the time has come to critically address it in relation to the colonial roots of Western thought as well as to the problematic assumption of historical continuity. Patrimonialism is one of the most consensually (and uncritically) accepted barriers to the full completion of modernity in a society and this view largely stems from Weber’s comparative sociology. Patrimonialism is a catch-all concept (Erdmann & Engel 2006) used to refer to personal favoritism as opposed to impersonality, more traditional and direct forms of domination as opposed to the mediation of the modern bureaucratic apparatus, and the indistinction between public and private domains as opposed to their clear separation. All of these features, according to Weber, ultimately inhibit the development of modern capitalism. Weber’s reference point for comparison are the social and ethical-religious processes that took place in Northern Europe, which gave birth to capitalism as regarded in its purest form. This is the reason why Stuart Hall (1992) points out that Weber’s conceptualization of patrimonialism denotes incompleteness and absence.

In the past few decades, post-colonial and decolonial critiques have been pointing out that the emergence of European Social Sciences – and let us here specifically consider Weber’s sociology – cannot be disconnected from the constitution of Europe, and later both sides of the North Atlantic, as “the West” and everything beyond that as the “rest” (Hall 1992). Aníbal Quijano calls attention to the fact that global capitalism was, since its inception, “colonial/modern and Eurocentered” (2000). The European colonial “model of power involved a process of historical reidentification”, through which “new geocultural identities” were attributed to the rest of the world, starting with the colonization of the Americas, followed by Africa, Asia and Oceania (Quijano 2000). By means of this process, the category “Orient” was elaborated as an “other”, which is by definition inferior (Said 1978; Quijano 2000; Lee 2001). But besides the colonial roots of the concept of patrimonialism, we should also ask ourselves to what extent it is possible to speak of traditions and their endurance. As it has been convincingly argued by authors such as Theodor Adorno, Eric Hobsbawm and Benedict Anderson, ‘tradition’ must be regarded as (re)invented rather than as an unproblematic carry-over from the ancient past (Adorno 2003; Hobsbawm 2013; Anderson 1996). More recently, Wolfgang Knöbl (2007) concludes his book on the contingent processes of modernity in Europe, Asia and the Americas by stating that "it is unclear whether and how 'traditions' can remain stable over centuries" (pp. 314).

Conclusion: Beyond the Straightjacket of Patrimonialism

The Korean peninsula experienced a turbulent 20th century (Robinson 2007) that started with Japanese colonial rule and was followed by a civil war which led to its eventual division in two countries. The Korean War was the first situation in which Cold War tensions were brought to stage (Anderson 2013), and the result thereof was the establishment of two models of catch-up development backed by the two rival players of the Cold War respectively. In the South, the course of development, which has led the country to its current position in the capitalist world system, was orchestrated by the dictatorship of Chung-Hee Park from 1961 on, based on toil, sacrifice and oppression of its masses. The functioning of this model through democratization to the present day can only be properly understood by taking into account the international scenario of power and its repercussions within South Korea. Besides being colonial-biased, the concept of patrimonialism blurs particular social and historical processes, contradictions and specific forms of domination that have been produced and reproduced by virtue of the distinctive configurations of capitalism in South Korea, in its internal and international connections.

It is not without irony that, very recently, Chung-Hee Park's daughter and political heir was removed from office under the accusation that she engaged in the very supposedly Korean 'traditional' practices that her father had actually helped to (re)create and institute as the Korean way of doing business. It is very easy to once more invoke the notion of patrimonialism and label Geun-Hye Park's administration 'patrimonial', but that would mean overlooking the self-reflexivity that the Social Sciences and Cultural Studies have acquired to deal with the issues of colonialism and imperialism, and with the worn-out notion of continuity of traditions. When considering Geun-Hye Park's government and the deeds of the president, the structure of commitments which were institutionally set up in course of Korea's capitalist catch-up modernization should be held accountable rather than tracing such predilections back to times immemorial.

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Ricardo Pagliuso Regatieri is an Associate Professor of Sociology and a researcher at the Center for Afro-Oriental Studies at the Federal University of Bahia (Brazil). He received his B.A. in Social Sciences, his M.A. in Sociology, and completed his Ph.D. in Sociology at the University of São Paulo (Brazil). He spent a doctoral research period at the Goethe University Frankfurt (Germany). He was a visiting research scholar and a Research Professor at Korea University (South Korea). He was also a lecturer for graduate courses at Korea University and at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies (South Korea).

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