

No. 11, February 29, 2008

Globalization and Asian Fordisms

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Abstract: During the last decade, non-Japan Asia has emerged as a global region codetermining the processes of globalization. This article argues that there is an interrelation between the rise of the new Asias and the globalization of Fordism, especially with respect to the classical combination of Fordism and automobilism.

Keywords: Fordism, Fordisms, Asian Fordisms, globalization of automobilism, global restructuring of the autoindustry

(1) The globalization discourse has entered a new phase, [1] reflecting multi- and interdisciplinary research instead of a political dogma or a particular Weltanschauung. The phrase globalization has lost its charm and charisma. It is used now in a disenchanted manner as an analytical tool for research in various areas.

(2) Differentiating types of world regions in terms of action- and reaction-patterns concerning globalization is challenging. Comparing the status of the Asian region with Europe and the US should be of particular interest. By simple quantitative figures the Asian region is the world's biggest global region in terms of population, market-potential, production-power, and financial flows.

(3) Compared to Europe, however, there is a considerable lag of institutional and political integration. An Asian Union like the European Union is not likely, not to mention the unreasonable fiction of a United States of Asia. Facing the dynamics of modern globalization, we have to look at the global region of the Asias from two different, but interlinked perspectives. First, emerging new globalization-related interrelations within Asia, that is, between Asian nations, must be considered. Second, we must pay attention to new globalization-related interchanges (*Wechselwirkungen*) between Asia and other nations and regions of the world.

(4) Modern history has been shaped since the nineteenth century by the triumph of empirical sciences, the Industrial Revolution, modern nations, and the emergence of class societies. Since then, the societal realities and political ideologies of the twentieth century have created the paradigms of social differentiation and life-world-structures that drive globalization in the twenty-first century. This is Fordism. Notwithstanding the rhetoric about post-Fordism (related to social, economic, and cultural changes in

the so-called advanced industrial nations), I hold that the expansion, intensification, and modeling of Fordism will turn out to be a major issue of the twenty-first century. More specifically, the future history of Fordism in the Asias, particularly in China and India, will be a crucial element of twenty-first century global history. [2]

(5) Before elaborating on Fordism in the Asias, it is useful to take a look at the concept of Fordism itself. The term is of course associated with Henry Ford, the image of the famous Ford-T Model and Henry Ford's and Charles Sorenson's methods of advanced factory-work-organization. In the cultural and social sciences, however, Fordism has a much broader meaning. This article refers to the broader concept of a peculiar regulation-modus of modern society on the one hand, and socioeconomic, social-structural, and basic political-institutional arrangements and process-dynamics on the other. [3]

(6) I am proposing that Fordism should not be dealt with as a definition but a theme. This understanding of Fordism reveals a contested terrain that is bound up with semantic controversies nurtured by various intellectual schools and ideologies. Almost all prominent authors on Fordism from Friedrich von Gottl-Ottlilienfeld to Antonio Gramsci and Michel Aglietta link the formula to their philosophical and macrosocial theory positions, which makes it difficult if not impossible to draw upon Fordism or Fordization as a solid analytical concept for empirical research. [4]

(7) Struggling with the manifold attempts to conceptualize Fordism systematically and historically, four main features can be identified. [5] First, mass production based on rigid divisions of work and flow-production via conveyor belt; second, mass consumption based on high workers' payment and organized workers' representation effecting conflict-compromise and expansion of elaborated material life-style down the status ladder; third, establishing the basic elements of a Keynesian welfare state guaranteeing social security and widespread consumers' demand thereby stabilizing economic growth on a high level (at least in theory); fourth, international stability via regulations regarding the monetary system and financial markets (Bretton Woods etc.).

(8) For an analytical orientation, it is helpful to focus on three dimensions of social tensions:

- individualization versus mass-culture,
- consumption versus production,
- freedom versus regulation.

Following Georg Simmel, these dimensions do not only reflect juxtapositions but also interactive relations (*Wechselbeziehungen*). Together they constitute the model of modern capitalistic society.

(9) In sociological theory, Fordism is closely related to Western modernization and capitalism (elaborated in the writings of T. Parsons, K. Davies, W. Rostow, W. Zapf and many others [6]). Thus, the project of Fordism reflects interest constellations, power structures, and values; it is also an important part of globalization. Fordism is part of the challenge both Western and non-Western societies are now experiencing. Non-Western societies are facing the economical as well as sociocultural assets of the West, and the economical as well as sociocultural resources of non-Western Fordisms challenge Western societies. Fordism as a project of societal formation can be understood as a middle-class "festival." It represents and celebrates the success of the European and North American middle-class in the twentieth century. The history of Fordism tells the story of the emergence, expansion, and ascent of the modern capitalistic middle-class society that is now continued and modified by the Fordist newcomers in the Asias. Hence, we are facing global varieties of

Fordism. [7]

(10) Since the 1980s, various forces in the so-called highly developed societies have questioned classical Fordism. The trends from industrial production towards the service sector, the redesigning of the welfare-state towards deregulation and privatization, the polarization of the income-structure with a considerable squeezing of the middle classes, and the impact of the emerging knowledge-society dominate the conversation about post-industrial society and post-Fordism. [8]

(11) Although the socioeconomic phenomenon of Fordism covers much more than automobilism, it is illuminating to take a closer look at Fordism and mobility. The automobile industry has for decades been the forerunner and model for work force formation, work-organization, and industrial structures. Automobilism has become one of the labels and symbolic icons of modernity. In short, Fordism is essentially an expression of modernity as mobility, more specifically, it has come to express modernity as *individual* mass-mobility.

(12) Three structural prerequisites characterize the configuration of mobility and Fordism. First, there has to be a technical infrastructure for mass mobility related to individual mobility. Second, professional networks and social institutions have to become available to handle and compensate systemic and non-intended consequences of individual mass mobility (police-force, hospitals etc.). Third, individual claims for freedom in space, including societal provisions and protections of unrestricted physical movement (basic citizens' rights) have to be guaranteed, probably via dominant value judgments and ideologies that connect mobility with freedom, democracy, and progress.

(13) Although Western and Asian variations of the mobility-model of Fordism must be studied carefully, one can say that these three dimensions are essential. They require the availability of mass produced vehicles, the construction of a massive societal infra-structure (material assets like streets, institutions and organizations), and considerable social and legal support of individualism with regard to the use of mass produced mobility vehicles.

(14) All available data show clearly that automobilization in the Asias is going to play a big role in the globalization processes of the next decades. The figures of Table 1 indicate that the Asias will be a hugely dynamic market for automobiles in the region and on top of it, produce heavily for the non-Asian world market. [9]

Table 1: Global Vehicle Production in 2005 and 2006

NATION	Vehicle Production 2005 (in millions)	Changes from 2000 to 2005 in %	Vehicles per 1000 inhabitants	Vehicle Production 2006 (in millions approx.)
USA	11,981	- 6.4	790	11.3
JAPAN	10,799	+6.5	572	11.4
GERMANY	5,758	+4.2	593	5.8
CHINA	5,708	+175.9	21	6.5
S. KOREA	3,699	+18.8	308	3.8
FRANCE	3,549	+6.0	602	3.2
SPAIN	2,753	- 9.2	574	2.7
BRASIL	2,528	+50.4	120	2.6
INDIA	1,627	+103.0	11	2.0
RUSSIA	1,351	+12.1	207	1.5
THAILAND	1,125	+173.3	126	1.2
ITALY	1,038	- 40.3	660	1.2

Source: Globus Infografik no. 0891 (Sept. 8, 2006) and no. 1276 (March 30, 2007)

(15) In 2006, China became the second largest automobile market and it will not be long before it becomes number one surpassing the markets of most European countries; it was number three before 2006, topped only by the US and Japan. India will follow suit and soon become a major car country in terms of consumption and production. Other countries like Malaysia and Indonesia have been slower starters but represent considerable automotive potential. In 2005, the Asian nations (including Japan) produced more vehicles than Europe and Russia, and more than North America. The automotive industry is thus an essential element of the expanding Fordism in the Asias.

(16) Moreover, cars made in Asia will feed the fast growing markets for low- and medium-cost individual mobility not only in Asia but also in Central and South America as well as in Africa. The remarkable success of the new super budget Renault / Dacia Logan car (produced in Romania) in Western Europe shows that there is a potential for technically unsophisticated automobiles even in the regions with an advanced car industry and culture.

(17) Past social science research has articulated common structures and differences between US Fordism and European Fordism [10] but little research has been done on Asian Fordism(s). Only recently have some studies about Japanese work organization and culture – “Toyotism” has been a catchword in the discussion – focused on what could be called Asian Fordism. [11] There can be no doubt, China’s modernization and industrialization will be highly Fordist not only in production patterns, but also with regard to its emerging culture of mass consumption. The same should hold true for the development in India and other Asian countries. In the twenty-first century, Fordism is likely to have a long and intensive Asian History.

(18) Not only China, but also the global region of the Asias as a whole, is becoming the factory of the world for toys, electronics, textiles, car parts, and other consumer goods. Notwithstanding the sharp rise of the service sector particularly in China and India during the last years, Fordist industrial production processes and the development of a Fordist consumer-culture fuel the growth-rates of the Asian economies.

(19) Current research is beginning to focus on different strategies of mass-production and patterns of mass-consumption, involving organizational-technical solutions, political power structures, institutions of conflict regulations, and so on, but also on items like the empirical validity of the “culture of rationalization” (Vittorio Rieser), ideas of social justice, individuality, and family. It is my thesis that the tradition of secularity, religious syncretism, and life-world-pragmatism of Asian societies will be as important for the globalization of Fordism in the twenty-first century as protestantism and Social Democracy (I am referring here to Ralph Dahrendorf’s understanding of the term [12]) have been for its success in the West before.

(20) The awareness of the Asian impact on Fordist globality is at present much greater on the West Coast of the US and in Australia than in Princeton or Boston, not to mention the almost total ignorance regarding this topic in Europe. Yet the highly differentiated cultural and economic situations in the region of Asia are creating new types of Fordism. They are influenced by demography, state roles, ethnic configurations, and international dependencies, and affect gender, work ethics, seniority, and everyday life. The upcoming Fordism in Indonesia will differ from Korean Fordism at least as deeply as Fordism in Sweden differed in the 1960s and 1970s from Fordism in Spain.

(21) As the new types of Asian Fordism emerge, they will influence Fordism and post-Fordism in the older industrialized countries of the Euro-American region. Huge product markets and high-tech production

structures in the Asian regions force patterns of classical Fordism back into and onto countries that have become accustomed to identifying themselves as post-Fordist (for example, the return of old industries in the US-Mexican border region not only on the Mexican side, but also in the United States). Labor migration within the European Union is another case of reanimating Fordist production in highly developed countries.

(22) Asian Fordism will create new structures of international divisions of work. The emergence of new Asian centers and peripheries of economic development do not follow the geographical fantasy (or wishful thinking) of the Braudel-Wallerstein school. [13] The assumption of a hierarchical value-production-chain from West to East is fading fast, as the dynamics of global network structures transcend the old center-periphery geography. Chinese electronics and automotive multinationals act more and more like their European, American or Japanese counterparts, and the recent (August 2007) state-initiated and state-regulated concentration in China's auto-industry is clearly geared towards global empowerment. To put it metaphorically: centers and peripheries will be (almost) everywhere from now on.

(23) It is useful to rethink classical Fordism in modern Western societies, and it is necessary to focus on the new forms of Fordism in modern Asian societies. The combination of Fordism and automobilism may prove to be an enduring feature of socioeconomical and cultural development worldwide, at least in this century. Whatever the future of capitalisms and Fordisms will be, Asian voices will be heard and Asian choices will mark the future path of globalization.

Notes

This article is a revised version of a talk given at the Third Global Futures of World Regions Conference, "The New Asias and the Vision of East Asian Sociology," held in Seoul, September 28-29, 2006.

[1] The emergence of globalization as a research topic in the social sciences during the 1980s and 90s has led to theoretically ambitious concepts on the one hand – for example by Roland Robertson, Anthony Giddens, and Ulrich Beck – and on the other provoked strong criticisms of the discourse of globalization as a Western, and especially Anglo-Saxon, ideology.

[2] Fordism is certainly not new in Asia. Japan, the so called "tiger-states" and also India and China are already Fordist in different stages of intensity and in variations; however, Fordism in many regions of Asia is still in a very early – often prenatal – phase.

[3] Talking about Fordism also means talking about capitalism but the cognitive interrelations between these two formulae cannot be laid out here in detail.

[4] See Friedrich von Gottl-Ottlilienfeld, *Fordismus. Über Industrie und technische Vernunft* (Jena 1926) and Michel Aglietta, *Régulation et Crise du Capitalisme: l'Expérience des États Unis* (Paris 1976).

[5] See Ralph Jessop, *Fordism and Post-Fordism: A Critical Reformulation* (Lancaster 1991).

[6] For a summary discussion of the literature, see Peter Flora,

Modernisierungsforschung (Opladen 1974) .

[7] This formula copies the concept of “varieties of capitalism” created by David Soskice; see Peter Hall and David Soskice (editors), *Varieties of Capitalism* (Oxford 2001) .

[8] See Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* (New York 1973) and Alain Touraine, *La Société Post-Industrielle* (Paris 1969).

[9] Since August 2007, one can watch an ambivalent and ambiguous status of the discussion: on the one hand there is much talk about the coming of the *new* Asian, esp. Chinese auto-invasion; on the other hand, much is said about the backwardness of the new Asian cars regarding safety features and technological sophistication. Serious analysts however have no doubt that Chinese and later on also Indian automobiles will cover substantial parts of the world-market, like the Japanese and Korean cars have done in the recent past.

[10] See Reiner Flik, *Fordism and Eurofordism* (Munich 2003).

[11] See Norbert Altmann, Koshi Endo, Masami Nomura, and Makoto Yoshida, *Innovative Arbeitspolitik? Zur qualifizierten Produktionsarbeit in Japan* (Munich 1998).

[12] See Ralf Dahrendorf, *Lebenschancen – Anläufe zu einer sozialen und politischen Theorie* (Frankfurt 1979) and Ralf Dahrendorf, *Der moderne soziale Konflikt* (Munich 1994).

[13] See Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Capitalist World Economy* (Cambridge 1980).