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The Public Sphere, Civil Society and Moral Community

A Research Agenda for Contemporary China Studies

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"In its deepest sense, the end of Communism has brought a major era in human history to an end. It has brought an end not just to the 19th and 20th centuries, but to the modern age as a whole" (Havel, 1992: E15). These words of Vaclav Havel give voice to a widespread mood among intellectuals around the world, a feeling that we are in the midst of a world historical transition so fundamental that it renders obsolete many of our standard paradigms for social research. Now, perhaps more urgently than in many generations, intellectuals everywhere, including certainly the United States and China, are groping not just for well-grounded answers but for well-formulated questions, for coherent research agendas that might enable us systematically to comprehend the exciting and ominous prospects before us.

As I see it, this article—like the entire conference for which it was written—is an attempt to contribute to sketching new research agendas for China studies in this post-Communist era. (Even though a Communist party still governs China, and may do so for quite some time, I presume that it is ideologically dead: it can no longer plausibly claim to represent a historical vanguard, and to stay in power it must adopt economic policies that contradict its basic principles.) My contribution comes from staking out some definitions for the terms *public sphere* and *civil society* and showing how those terms, so defined, can be used to open up an important line of inquiry into the nature of contemporary Chinese social processes.

In the past few years, many American China scholars have been using the terms public sphere and civil society in their formulations of

new research questions. But the terms have often been vaguely defined and inconsistently used, with the result that the research questions built out of them have often been unfocused and unanswerable. Even worse, insofar as different researchers seem to use the terms in different ways, without necessarily being aware of those differences, China scholarship comes to resemble a confused conversation in which everyone talks past one another.

In this article, I will propose that public sphere and civil society be defined in such a way as to focus on the moral and cultural dimensions of contemporary social transformations. I have no basic objection to scholars who define these terms in such a way as to focus on economic and political dimensions, so long as they define the terms clearly and use them consistently. My argument for focusing on the moral and cultural dimensions is in part genealogical, part practical.

It was through reading Jürgen Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (English translation published in 1989), that many China scholars learned the vocabulary of public sphere and civil society. Habermas's lifelong intellectual project has been centered on understanding the moral and cultural dimensions of modern societies; he has been fundamentally concerned with the ways that "lifeworlds" constituted by "communicative rationality" are increasingly colonized by "systems" of wealth and power.[1] If we derive our usage of public sphere and civil society from Habermas and want our usage to be consistent with this provenance, we should highlight the moral and cultural dimensions.

But, at best, such a genealogical consideration should only be secondary. The key reasons must be practical: how can we define our terms in such a way as to direct our work toward the most pressing questions of our time? One can make a powerful argument that the fundamental transformations of our time are in fact caused by cultural changes and the fundamental challenges are moral. As Havel puts it: "Communism was not defeated by military force but by life, by the human spirit, by conscience" (Havel, 1992: E15).

In the past several generations, social scientists have developed much better tools to study military force (and economic exchange) than "life . . . human spirit . . . conscience." If these latter more nebulous matters are indeed of crucial importance, we need to develop new approaches to studying them. Let us see how the concepts of public

sphere and civil society can be used to pose researchable questions about them.

THE PUBLIC SPHERE

For Habermas, the "structural transformation of the public sphere" is a story about the changing capacity of modern citizens to govern themselves on the basis of political institutions legitimized from below by informed discussion and reasoned argument. It is a story with a hopeful beginning but, so far in the twentieth century, an unhappy ending. In England and Continental Europe in the eighteenth century there developed a set of institutions that facilitated widespread public discussion about the norms that should govern public affairs—a type of discussion bringing together people of widely varying social backgrounds in which arguments were decided on the basis, not of appeals to social status or authoritative tradition, but of appeals to reason. This set of institutions for deciding on and legitimating the moral basis of political order constituted what Habermas calls a "bourgeois public sphere." Eventually, the development of this bourgeois public sphere led to the creation of a new kind of state, which depended for its legitimacy on the assent of a rationally constituted public opinion. This was the origin of liberal democracy in Western Europe and North America. But by the twentieth century, even in the West, this public sphere had been emptied of much of its content. Under the power of the modern mass media, corporate capitalism, and the powerful bureaucracies of the modern state, "public relations" and more or less subtle forms of propaganda had overwhelmed the capacity of an increasingly atomized citizenry to develop an informed understanding of the public good through informed rational discussion.

Habermas's account of the public sphere is thus about the rise and fall of democracy in the modern West. In his view, even though modern Western societies retain the forms of constitutional government developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they are, at least, in danger of losing the moral capacity for democratic rule because of the erosion of their collective capacities for informed, rational public discussion of the common good.

Although written about the history of the modern West, Habermas's work on the public sphere can be relevant to the study of contemporary China—if it is used at the proper level of abstraction. For Habermas poses a set of very general questions that pertain to societies around the globe at the end of the twentieth century. Throughout the world people are insistently demanding "democracy." Often, they do not really know what democracy is. In the reportage of Orville Schell,

> When pressed to be more precise about their vision of reform or their precise notions of how democracy might work in China, [student demonstrators on Tiananmen Square in 1989] tended to become vague and even flustered. . . . As one student only half-facetiously said, "I don't know exactly what we want, but we want more of it" [Schell, 1989: 6]

But in China and in much of Eastern Europe, members of democracy movements seem to be seeking a form of life in which authority is accountable to common norms based on widespread, open, rational discussion among citizens, a form of life sustained by what, using Habermasian terminology, we may call a "democratic public sphere."

Habermas shows how such a public sphere came into being among a specific set of historical circumstances and within a specific set of economic and political structures in eighteenth-century Europe. But he also implies that it is not necessarily connected with those conditions. In any case, he shows clearly that those conditions no longer exist. As Thomas McCarthy writes in his introduction to the English translation to *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*,

> In a post-liberal era, when the classical model of the public sphere is no longer sociopolitically feasible, the question becomes: can the public sphere be effectively reconstituted under radically different socioeconomic, political, and cultural conditions? In short, is democracy possible? [McCarthy, 1989: xii]

The future of democracy in China is certainly a vital question for many scholars, in China itself as well as in the West. Yet some scholars—ironically, especially in the West—warn us of ethnocentric biases lurking in the concern for democracy in China. Isn't this part of the arrogant old demand that they become like us? However, if we define public sphere in the way I have defined it above—a way that I believe is most consistent with Habermas's own usage—then we

might avoid ethnocentric biases. Defined at the level of abstraction used above, the concept of the public sphere is not wedded to a particular Western set of economic and political structures. It presumes that there may be different concrete forms of democracy. Far from presuming that a society like China must become like the West, it assumes that the West itself needs to search for new ways to revitalize its public spheres. The search for ways to institutionalize a public sphere under modern (or postmodern) circumstances brings China and the West together in a common quest.

It is somewhat less clear whether a public sphere in Habermas's sense would necessarily depend upon Western cultural assumptions about the fundamental rationality of individuals and the priority of individuals to society. I myself think that it is possible to have a public sphere with a distinctively Asian cultural style, and many Chinese intellectuals seem to think so too. In any case, the concept of public sphere can provide the focus of a productive cross-cultural debate on this issue.

CIVIL SOCIETY

In the thinking of Habermas, and of a long tradition of Western political theory, a democratic public sphere arises from "civil society." That is, a democratic public sphere does not descend from the realm of a benevolent state, it arises from below, from a voluntarily organized citizenry. The development of an active civil society is a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for the development of a public sphere.

But what is a civil society? The term is currently being used in an extremely loose fashion.[2] Partially, this looseness is the result of a lack of scholarly discipline—understandable because usage of the term suddenly became a fad among American scholars in the late eighties. But partially the looseness is also the result of an inherent ambiguity in the traditional formulation of the concept.

In the way in which it was used by classical Western social theorists, civil society did not refer to any form of social association independent from the state. Premodern forms—like extended families and traditional religious groups—might inhibit the formation of an absolutist state, but they could not support the efficient rationalization charac-

teristic of modern market economies and bureaucratic governments. Civil society was meant to denote modern or modernizing forms of social association. For Hegel, for example, civil society was a kind of society formed by individuals who had become independent of traditional loyalties, a sphere of life concerned not with the fulfillment of traditional loyalties but with the reciprocal meeting of needs.[3] Concretely, and for most other classical Western political theorists, civil society consisted in the utilitarian, contractual relationships characteristic of a bourgeois society created by a modern market economy.

But some important classical theorists recognized that relationships based purely on economic self-interest were inherently unstable. In Emile Durkheim's formulation, there had to be a "non-contractural basis for contract." Theorists like Tocqueville emphasized the importance of premodern religious and political traditions for imparting stability, solidarity, and moral discipline to modern civil society. In his view, although civil society was modern and market based, it also had to retain premodern and nonmarket foundations if it was going to play a role in preserving democratic liberties (Tocqueville, 1966: esp. chap. 2). However, modern Western social theory has never resolved the issue of how to reconcile the modern market with the premodern moral traditions that have somehow made it function. The term civil society carries all of the ambivalences toward modern market society bequeathed to us by our wisest social theorists.

Although it was in widespread use in Western social theory during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the term civil society was rarely used by the middle of the twentieth century. Usage was revived in the late seventies by Eastern European intellectuals/dissidents. Thus, for Adam Michnik in Poland, "the spontaneously growing Independent and Self-governing Labor Union Solidarity" was an indication that "for the first time in the history of communist rule in Poland, 'civil society' was being restored, and it was reaching a compromise with the state" (Michnik, *Letters from Prison and Other Essays*, quoted in Wolfe, 1989: 17). But the vitality of Solidarity stemmed not simply from modern contractual ties but from the traditions of the Polish Catholic Church. Application of the term civil society to a union like Solidarity, with its strong ties to Polish religion, carried into the late twentieth century the ambiguities bequeathed from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

In the 1980s, in the parlance of many European social theorists, civil society came to refer not simply to modern, economistic forms of association but to almost any form of social activity independent of the state—not only labor unions, independent economic enterprises and political associations, but religious congregations and ethnic communities. The reemergence of this broadly defined civil society was usually spoken of hopefully as the key to the revitalization of democracy in the communist world. But the collapse of state socialist regimes has led to ominous and sometimes tragic forms of social fragmentation and conflict, It is clear that the emergence of civil society (broadly conceived) fatally undermines rigidly authoritarian regimes; but it is less clear whether and how a newly empowered civil society can generate a democratic public sphere—a sphere of constructive public responsibility—in the postsocialist world.

A RESEARCH AGENDA FOR CHINA

Based on my reading of the experience in Eastern Europe with transitions from socialism, I would suggest to China scholars the following research agenda centered on the connection between a renewed civil society and the development of a democratic public sphere.

It is clear that, because of the reforms of the past decade and a half, there have arisen, or have been revived, a large variety of groups within Chinese society that are at least partially autonomous from the state. These groups include commercial associations, professional associations, associations for the care of the elderly, clan associations, religious associations, and even criminal associations like the Triads. Inevitably, the growth of these associations weakens the capacity of the state to control its population. But to what extent is this mélange of modern and premodern forms of social life leading toward the development of a democratic public sphere and to what extent is it leading toward a chaotic fragmentation of society?

Some scholars are calling this whole range of associations— everything from democracy salons to organizations of *getihu* to clan associations to *qgong* clubs—"civil society." But some are certainly more "civil" than others. That is, some are relatively more forward-

looking and open to rational communication with groups different from themselves. Those with the quality of "civility" might eventually contribute to the creation of a democratic public sphere (which would not necessarily require the establishment of a Western-style liberal democracy). Those without it may simply push China closer toward anarchic fragmentation.

But it is almost impossible to assess the civility of such groups from the outside. To some extent, they all have characteristics that make them both forward and backward looking, that give them both sectarian and ecumenical tendencies. One thing we have learned from the collapse of state socialism in Eastern Europe is that we have to be ready for surprises. Groups like the Evangelical Lutheran church in East Germany, which few Western observers imagined would have much political significance, played crucial, constructive roles at decisive moments in the social movements that toppled Communist regimes. Perhaps the only way of assessing the significance of such groups would have been from the inside—from a perspective that could have gained insight not simply into the quantity of their material resources but the quality of the moral commitments that gave them their vision and their strength.

This suggests that in China, likewise, we need to find ways to get "inside" the multitude of newly arising groups to understand the quality of their moral resources. Just because Habermas tells us that coffee houses played a key role in the development of a bourgeois public sphere in eighteenth-century England, we should not assume that teahouses might play the same role in China! What matters is not the consuming of a beverage but the fostering of a certain quality of relationship. We have to find ways of assessing the qualities that contribute to a civil society capable of leading the way toward a democratic public sphere.

METHODOLOGICAL EXEMPLARS

What should we look for in assessing such qualities and how should we look? The answer to these questions is not clear. We need to do more work on developing methodologies for understanding the political sociology of this new era. But I would suggest that we draw

copiously from ideas cultivated in the last several academic genera-
tions by anthropologists and cultural historians to supplement the
frameworks used by the economists and political scientists who have
most frequently studied contemporary Communist states.

We can see some good examples of the effectiveness of such
anthropological and historical methods by reading the papers pre-
sented in the fall of 1991 at a conference organized by the anthropol-
ogist and China specialist Rubie Watson on "Memory, History, and
Opposition under State Socialism." This conference brought together
(at the School of American Research in Santa Fe, New Mexico)
anthropologists and historians who specialized on China and on East-
ern Europe.[4]

Half of the papers studied China and half Eastern Europe and the
former Soviet Union. Among the China scholars, Paul Pickowicz
wrote of how a local intellectual in Hebei's Wugong Village managed
to write a community history that contradicted both the claims of
Maoist collectivism and the promises of market reformers. Ellen Judd
contributed a paper about how the Communist Party tried unsuccess-
fully to block out the antiauthoritarian memories of popular history
and popular culture embedded in the Mulian cycle of operas. Vera
Schwarcz portrayed the tenacious efforts of some May Fourth intel-
lectuals to hold on to and privately share memories of suffering that
contradicted the vision of the past celebrated during the Party's official
commemoration of May Fourth. Rubie Watson analyzed how (follow-
ing a pattern that has repeated itself often during Chinese history)
student protesters in 1989 "hijacked" the dangerous memories implicit
in the public mourning ceremonies for Hu Yaobang and how the
official monuments of Tiananmen have been made repositories for
officially forbidden memories of the June Fourth movement.

The other conference papers dealt with contributions of collective
memory in carrying on the "Velvet Revolution" of Czechoslovakia
(Andrew Lass), fomenting the civil war in the former Yugoslavia
(Robert Hayden), stirring up ethnic unrest in Georgia (Steven Jones),
and giving rise to religious and nationalistic movements in Mongolia
(Caroline Humphrey). The organization of the conference at least
implicitly presupposed that to understand contemporary transitions
away from state socialism, it was just as important to look at the moral

resources of groups opposed to socialism as to their economic and political resources.

The conference focused on one of the most central of those resources, the collective memories that make a group into a community. For to the extent that the moral dimension of civil society is crucial, the associations of civil society are not just interest groups, but communities. And communities are historically constituted, they are "communities of memory." As the book *Habits of the Heart* puts it, such a community of memory is

> one that does not forget its past. In order not to forget that past, a community is involved in retelling its story, its constitutive narrative, and in so doing, it offers examples of the men and women who have embodied and exemplified the meaning of the community. These stories of collective history and exemplary individuals are an important part of the tradition that is so central to a community of memory [Bellah et al., 1985: 153].

Many modern social theorists—especially American theorists extrapolating their nation's experience of restless social mobility to the rest of the world—have discounted the relevance for modern politics of collective memories and the moral solidarities that they foster. When they look at civil society, they see only interest groups, not communities of memory. They have tended to assume that such memories and the solidarities based upon them are premodern phenomena, subjects for the study of anthropologists and historians rather than analysts of contemporary events. But the movements of 1989 have demonstrated that such putatively premodern moral solidarities continue to be relevant. For that matter, the revival of populist political movements and communitarian social theory in the United States has begun to demonstrate that "communities of memory," and not just interest groups, are crucially important in the politics of modern liberal capitalist democracies as well.

The anthropologists and historians at the Rubie Watson conference advanced our understanding of the transition from state socialism in the first instance by telling us, by their example, that when we want to assess the quality of an emerging civil society under state socialist regimes, what we should look for are communities of memory. And how should we look? Here again, the papers from the Watson confer-

ence provide suggestive examples. In one way or another, all of them shift their gaze between the objective and subjective aspects of memory—and more generally between the objective and subjective dimensions of all aspects of the culture of civil society.

By objective memory, I mean the inscription of the past on the symbolic media shared by a social group. Modern anthropologists (and anthropologically influenced "culture theorists") insist that history is not simply embodied in written documents stored in libraries and archives. Following this tradition, the conference participants identified many different media of memory. For instance, as Rubie Watson points out in her paper, monuments like the Monument to the Revolutionary Heroes in Tiananmen Square can be powerful symbolic carriers of memory (Watson, 1993b). So can public ceremonies, like funerals, or even the routinized patterns of everyday gossip. Unlike the tests of modern academic historiography, the memories carried through such symbolic media are often richly ambiguous, multivocal, and multilayered. Symbols with officially approved surface meanings may evoke subversive hidden meanings. As Caroline Humphrey (1993) points out, such "evocatory transcripts" may become especially important in regimes that suppress freedom of speech.

The memories objectively inscribed in any kind of symbolic media have to be subjectively appropriated. Individuals have to interpret and share these meanings—a process that is not just cognitive but emotional, aesthetic, and moral. The process of interpreting common symbols—asking what they mean for people today, arguing about them, putting them into new words, portraying them in imagery and performance—creates moral communities. But where governments systematically punish people who form moral communities centered around interpretations of the past that differ from the "official story," the processes of interpretation take different forms than we are familiar with in liberal democracies. For one thing, the interpretation of illicit memories is segmented, it takes place privately in relatively small groups shut off from communication with other segments of society, even those that might be sympathetic to the illicit interpretation. In place of explicit verbal conversation, officially proscribed interpretation may rely heavily on gesture, facial expression, tone of voice. An illicit conversation may be an elaborate mixture of innuendo, meta-

phor, and allegory. Such means of communication constitute "restricted codes" (Douglas, 1973: 44-46), accessible only to persons deeply familiar with the conventions of a particular culture and the habits of a particular social circle. Trained, as Clifford Geertz has put it, to "separate winks from twitches" (Geertz, 1973: 3-30), anthropologists are the outsiders best able to enter such worlds of hidden interpretation.

Finally, the papers at the conference organized by Rubie Watson demonstrated also both the difficulty and the importance of a comparative study of the emergence of civil societies. Comparative study is difficult because, in the way I have defined it, civil society is a matter of moral ecology. Just as a natural ecology refers to the specific contexts created by unique patterns of interrelationship among many different environmental factors, similarly a moral ecology refers to the patterns of relationships and common understandings that sustain a specific group. What thrives in one particular ecological habitat will not necessarily thrive in another. What enables a particular moral community to thrive in one moral context will not necessarily enable communities to thrive in another context. Thus factors important for the moral strength of the Polish Solidarity movement in the early 1980s may not necessarily apply in a nascent union movement in China. (They might not even apply in the Poland of the 1990s.) Therefore, the specific qualities that constitute the "civilness" of civil society in one context may not be comparable to the qualities necessary in another.

Yet in the Watson conference, the juxtaposition of papers on Eastern Europe with those on China proved immensely illuminating to all concerned. Careful studies of one context stimulated a sensitivity to emergent possibilities in other contexts. In particular, the experience of societies that had already repudiated state socialist governments alerted China scholars for things to look out for in the Chinese situation.

CIVIL WAR OR PUBLIC SPHERE?

For China scholars, not the least benefit of a study of the development of civil society in Eastern Europe is that such a study forces us

soberly to consider possibilities that most would rather not think about. The civil societies that grew up under the decaying foundations of Eastern European state socialist regimes were an unstable mix of energies for construction and destruction. For instance, the papers on Eastern Europe written for the Watson conference demonstrate how dangerous collective memories become when they have to be preserved surreptitiously within narrow social circles using restricted codes. Under such circumstances, the memories often become one-sided, larger than life, luridly colored: a kind of "populist realism" painted in the same vivid hues as socialist realism. This is the kind of memory that often supports intransigent idiosyncrasy. Sometimes it gives life to unrealistic expectations. Sometimes it channels desires for revenge.

As envisioned by Habermas, the democratic public sphere is ideally a realm of horizontal communication among disparate members of a political community. The rhetoric of such communication must be broadly rational, appealing to arguments understandable to all and open to critical scrutiny by all. It was particularistically shared memories that often forged the moral solidarities that, across Eastern Europe, allowed a weakened but never completely obliterated civil society to challenge fatally the power of the Leninist state. But it is just such memories, differentially shared and luridly embellished, that are justifying the vicious civil war in the Balkans and varying degrees of ethnic, religious, or just plain fratricidal conflict throughout Eastern Europe. And it appears to be the fear of just such chaotic conflict that for the time being seems to keep Chinese society from widely supporting the overthrow of its regime, even though that regime seems to have largely lost its legitimacy, among the urban population at least.

THE WAY AHEAD

In light of the Eastern European experience, any realistic study of the development of civil societies in China will have to recognize the darkness mixed with the light. Because the issues at stake are so crucial, not just to the development of China but of the whole world, we do not, I believe, have the luxury of remaining morally detached from our research agenda. Inevitably, we will have to at least speculate,

with all due tentativeness, on the directions that the Chinese, Eastern Europeans, and, indeed, ourselves might have to take to create democratic public spheres and avoid falling into social chaos. I close this article with some such speculation, to be revised as we deepen our understanding of the constitution of the public sphere in the modern world.

The solution to the particularistic divisiveness caused by the emergence of new groups, morally energized through the preservation of distinctive memories of the past and hopes for the future, is not, it would seem, to suppress such groups, but to expose them to the light of day, to create, somehow, political spaces where citizens can safely discuss their different memories within the bounds of civility. In such contexts, overblown memories might be deflated through critical scrutiny, vengeful memories might be balanced by reminders of facts that the vengeance seekers have conveniently forgotten. Memories then would not disappear or be denied, but they might be calmed. The calming of remembrance might then allow communities of memory to find common ground with other communities in an interdependent world. For this to happen, perhaps, the variegated memories of diverse communities have to be linked to an overarching master narrative—a plausible, resonant common vision of where a complex society has come from and where it is headed.

For a while in the early history of the Soviet Union and in the first decade of the People's Republic of China (PRC), the Communist Party seems to have created a story of the past and a vision of the future that resonated with the multiple stories that a wide range of diverse citizens told each other about themselves. Private memories were pulled into a public whole. But the brutality of the Stalinist and Maoist regimes destroyed the credibility of that overarching master narrative even as they coercively forced their citizens to feign belief in it. These "spoiler states" thus robbed their citizens of a vital cultural resource for achieving public meanings. In the postsocialist world, bereft of a plausible master narrative, diverse communities of citizens focus their attentions obsessively on the contradictions between their memories, the incompatibility of their hopes for the future.

In the present situation, the greatest contribution of visionary statesmen may be to articulate the framework for new plausible, inclusive, generous master narratives that might channel disparate private mem-

ories into widely shared public hopes. Perhaps Vaclav Havel of Czechoslovakia has come closest to doing this—even though his eloquence was not in the end sufficient to stop the division of his own country. Are there any possibilities for the emergence of leaders with new integrative public visions on the Chinese scene?

To find them, we should perhaps look not to the mainland—at least not to people connected with the central government of the mainland—but to the periphery. As Tu Wei-ming (1991) has eloquently reminded us, "cultural China" is more than the PRC; it is the whole realm of "common awareness," consciousness of shared cultural predicament, that unites Chinese intellectuals throughout the world—in Taibei, Hong Kong, Singapore, San Francisco, New York, and Paris, as well as in Beijing. The most vital parts of cultural China are those beyond the borders of the PRC. It is there perhaps that unitive new stories about the meaning of Chinese history may begin to be told. Through this there may arise new understandings of the meaning of being Chinese today, and these may produce the cultural context within which a fractious Chinese civil society may bring to birth a Chinese public sphere.

NOTES

1. See Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vols. 1 and 2 (1984, 1987). Published in Germany in 1981, this work represents a culmination of an intellectual project that began with the publication of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.

2. See the article by Heath B. Chamberlain in this issue for a summary of the ways in which civil society has recently been used in the field of contemporary China studies.

3. A secondary source on Hegel's political philosophy that greatly influences me is Charles Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society* (Taylor, 1979: esp. 68-134).

4. I attended this conference as a commentator. The papers will be published this year (Watson, 1993a).

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