

Thesis summary of Andrew Martin Fischer, 10/2004

Population and political economy foundations of ethnic exclusion and conflict in contemporary Tibet

Using contemporary Tibet as a case study and focusing on the period of rapid state-initiated growth and transformation since the mid-1990s, this research has been inspired by the question; does inequality matter? Usually, debates over this question are formulated in terms of the tradeoffs between poverty and inequality, assuming that rising inequality is legitimated so long as poverty is falling. This thesis proposes an alternative formulation, and one that opts for an interdisciplinary methodology, combining quantitative and qualitative analysis, both grounded within an historical and interpretative epistemology. Departing from standard poverty or inequality approaches, the economic dimension of this research draws off the analytical framework of social exclusion and is combined with sociological and anthropological analyses into the social causes and responses to exclusion, inspired generally from historical institutionalism, such as the concept of the double movement from Polanyi. Central is the conviction that these latter disciplines are as important to answering the inequality question as the more economic dimensions of inquiry.

Besides being riddled with methodological problems of measurement and comparability, standard poverty analysis tends towards a static examination of the social and economic transformations within modernity and of the place of the marginalised and disempowered within these transformations. Modernity in this sense refers to a descriptive treatment of the characteristics that make our current period of history different from all others that preceded it, in both rich and poor countries alike. In social terms, this is fundamentally rooted in the demographic transition, along with other attendant transformations such as urbanization. In the economic realm, it includes: the long term decline of agriculture in economies worldwide; technological change, industrialisation and tertiarisation; the transfer of labour into secondary and tertiary activities; the increasing complexity and integration of economies, with concentration of value and ownership in central regions and the subordination of peripheral regions within national or international production and distribution networks; the central role of the nation state in these processes, whether ideology is guided by state or market orientation and; all impelled by dynamics inherent (although not deterministic) to capitalist development. Obviously, there are also political and cultural dimensions to these transformations, which will be incorporated into this work, although the main focus is on the social and economic dimensions as underlying foundational factors that drive change in the cultural and political realms.

The social exclusion framework, while incorporating insights from the poverty literature, focuses on “how or why individuals and groups fail to have access to or benefit from the possibilities offered by societies or economies”.¹ In light of the deep transformations wrought by modernity, it thereby serves as a potent way of analyzing the way that individuals or groups are integrated or sidelined by the processes of change, whether economic, political, social or cultural. To give a succinct example, in a community where incomes or prices are generally rising, even the monetary income

¹ Gerry Rodgers, Charles Gore & José B. Figueiredo, (eds), *Social Exclusion: Rhetoric Reality Responses*, Geneva: International Labour Organisation, 1995, p.44.

of a beggar will rise. If poverty lines are poorly adjusted to changing price levels, consumption patterns and so forth, this person may even be seen to be falling out of poverty. This tells us nothing of his or her well being, ability to integrate or participate within the community, or potential to move out of a marginalized and stigmatized status. Yet the well being of the community as whole is significantly effected by these latter issues, not the monetary income of the beggar per se.

It is for these reasons that I have come to connect the issues of social exclusion and ethnic conflict in my research. The former is often produced by the dislocating effects of modern transformations, which if unmitigated, whether due to negligence, discrimination or intention, have the effect of increasing insecurity and defensive responses with the effected communities. Dislocation is accentuated where communities have less capacity to buffer or adapt to shocks, typically in areas of peripheral capitalist development, in situations of occupation, or under the weight of political and economic disempowerment or subordination. Most notably, the reigning ideology guiding mainstream international development policy since the debt crisis of the 1980s, known as neoliberalism or the 'Washington Consensus', has profoundly exacerbated dislocation. This has taken place either through the economic collapse that has resulted from its policies in many countries and regions, or else through the general policy prescriptions that have reduced the mitigating functions of states, primarily through fiscal austerity combined with various regimes of liberalization, deregulation and privatization.

Within an interethnic context, unmitigated social dislocation potentially degenerates into communal conflict, particularly where impacts are experienced asymmetrically across ethnic groups. This research therefore addresses a corollary issue of the apparent increase of violent ethnic conflicts around the world over the last twenty years. Insights from the study of Tibet, which provides a case of potential although not fully manifest conflict, suggest that the exclusionary dynamics of polarizing economic change, which has been typical of the experience of poor peripheral regions of the world over this same period, provides the critical ripening conditions for such conflict to emerge.

The example of the Tibetan areas in western China is not necessarily typical to most of the developing world, in so far as China has been exceptional for its rapid growth over the last twenty five years since the beginning of its reform period. The country also increasingly stands out as a role model in its obvious inconsistency with the Washington Consensus prescriptions for growth and development, an autonomy that it enjoys due to its international financial clout, its effective position within international production networks, and the fact that its sources of growth, such as investment, have been largely domestic, among other factors. This has allowed the country to initiate large scale development drives, funded principally through government subsidy, such as the Western Development Strategy, which has been the main cause behind recent rapid growth rates in the western provinces of China over the last ten years. Some of the most notable growth rates, albeit within a small population base, have been observed in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) and Qinghai, the two province-level jurisdictions accounting for close to three quarters of the Tibetan autonomous areas and Tibetan population within China. Therefore, even the economies of these Tibetan areas have been growing, as well as average household incomes.

Nonetheless, rapid growth has been mirrored by manifest increases in inequality and worrying signs of intensified social exclusion among Tibetans. Despite higher than average provincial growth rates, Tibetans, as a predominately rural ethnic group, maintain the highest rural income poverty rates in China, although the comparability of these income measures is suspect, an issue addressed by this research. More relevant, they maintain the worst education performance in the country, i.e. illiteracy rates that are more than double those of the next worst large ethnic group, and far above the levels of the Han Chinese. Significantly, these differentials are vital obstacles to the integration of the majority of Tibetans within the dynamic leading sectors of the growing economy, mostly concentrated in urban areas and in the tertiary sector or large scale construction projects. This education divide in the Tibetan areas is a far more important determinant of exclusion than the urban-rural divide generally cited for China. It is also a divide that is not purely drawn along ethnic lines. As of the 2000 population census, there were approximately 13 percent of Tibetans in all of China with secondary education and above (versus fifty 53 of Han Chinese). This minority of the minority integrate well into the subsidised expansion. Nonetheless, this leaves 87 percent without education beyond the primary level, almost half of which had no-schooling at all. Thus where exclusion occurs in the Tibetan areas, it concerns mostly this large majority of Tibetans.

Reflecting these obstacles, growth since the mid-1990s in the Tibetan areas has witnessed a dramatic increase in urban-rural inequality as well as urban inequalities that rival some of the worst cases in China. The experience of these Tibetan areas is therefore reminiscent of the growth and inequality that were characteristic of Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s, particularly with regard to their own peripheral regions. Within this context, the increasing influx of Han and Muslim migrants into the Tibetan areas captures a large share of the gains of growth, with the legitimate concern among Tibetans that the cocktail of growth and migration is exacerbating exclusion among locals. This in turn fuels interethnic conflict and various forms of ethnic nationalism as responses to experiences of exclusion. These dynamics appear as the key contradictions – both economic and political – of the current push by the Chinese state for development in the Tibetan areas, which is ideologically rooted in the conviction that growth reduces conflict and ethnic nationalisms.

While social exclusion is apparent, ethnic conflict between Tibetans and Chinese or Muslims is less so, either because it has so far been successfully contained or else because various conditions have not yet coalesced into sufficient momentum to sustain conflict beyond localised events or short lived regional movements. Tibetans will typically evoke the compassionate nature of their Buddhist culture as an explanation for this containment of conflict. Nonetheless, the scenario of the racist backlash and violence followed by refugee exodus from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s in neighbouring Bhutan against the minority Nepali Bhutanese community is a worrying premonition of the potential for conflict that lies within even these idealised Himalayan Tibetan Buddhist cultures. Furthermore, there have been some trends in this direction among Tibetans in recent years, mostly directed towards Muslims and most manifest in Northeast Tibet (*Amdo*). Therefore, the Tibetan areas do provide for an apt case study of the latent ripening factors that can potentially mutate into more serious forms of conflict.

The central tenet of the research is that the contemporary experiences of ethnic exclusion and conflict in the Tibetan areas are related and driven by three processes: population dynamics, which deal mainly with the confluence of population transitions and migration flows; the macroeconomic dynamics of peripheral and polarised growth, particularly where one ethnicity dominates over another in the agency of such growth and; employment, whereby the exclusionary aspects of the two previous processes are played out in urban labour markets. As two corollaries: urbanisation and urban growth critically influence all three processes and serve as the arena for both exclusion and ethnic conflict, critically differentiating contemporary from historical ethnic conflict, and; both exclusion and conflict are exacerbated by phases of intensified integration into the central regions of China, along with consolidations of ownership and agency.² Within this perspective, the critical factors that effect exclusion and fuel conflict are the differentials between groups, such as urbanisation rates and education levels, rather than base line characteristics, such as population shares or poverty levels. In other words, inequality is central to the plot, albeit measured in terms of variables that are relevant to a dynamic understanding of the inclusion or exclusion of groups within development.

In this sense, the evolution of ethnic conflict in the modern period – and of nationalisms more generally – can in part be understood as reactive or associative forms of social protection by individuals or groups in response to exclusion. In particular, tensions are accentuated in poorer areas by polarizing or disempowering forms of dislocation and change. This understanding is important because it directs attention towards the asymmetrical outcomes of development and implicates the larger macro-environment – whether national or international – in the prevention of potential social crises. The role of economic models and policies or the manner of integrating peripheral regions and peoples into larger political and economic spheres bear significant responsibility in the genesis of crisis and conflict. Inequality must be evaluated under this light.

Therefore, the answer proposed by this research to the initial question on inequality is a qualified affirmative. The qualification, as stipulated by Polly Hill decades ago,³ relates to forms of inequality that are natural to communities and whose attempted elimination could prove counterproductive and even oppressive, a lesson that China has learned well from its heydays of radical Maoism. This domestic and indigenous type of inequality is implicitly assumed by proponents of the productive role of inequality, i.e. the Kuznets-inspired argument that increases in inequality are necessary to stimulate productive accumulation, particularly within early to middle stages of industrialisation. Yet these observations are based largely on the historical experiences of OECD countries. Such historical episodes were domestically driven, oriented, owned and controlled. During the waxing decades of the welfare state in rich countries, there were also inclusive, which explains declining inequality in the immediate post-war period, rather than any logic inherent to advancing industrialisation or capitalism.

² Intensified integration and consolidation can be considered synonymous with ‘globalisation’, defined as such, albeit this study deals with such processes on a national scale.

³ Polly Hill, *Development economics on trial: the anthropological case for a prosecution*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

These conditions are not typical to peripheral development in most of the poor world, in which domestically-bound constituents have been progressively disenfranchised from the main levers controlling local economies. Rather, in these cases, where rising inequality derives from exclusionary or polarised forms of growth, inequality may well be counterproductive, as well as increasing the obstacles for disadvantaged groups to integrate into and benefit from the fruits of development. By exacerbating the fissures of social conflict, this in turn has a critical impact on the well-being of communities, although such considerations rarely enter the standard calculus of growth and inequality. Although it is questionable whether China as a whole fits into this mould, the Tibetan areas of China provide for a poignant case of disempowered and intensified integration within a national setting, whereby growth exacerbates an exclusionary process defined along ethnic lines. It therefore serves as a pertinent example of the role of inequality within a peripheral growth setting, and thus the trade-offs between inequality and poverty within growth, rather than a peripheral setting of crisis and instability typical to poor countries since the 1980s.

Theory, Epistemology and Methodology

The theoretical approach draws from two sources: the analytical framework of social exclusion and; historical institutionalist analyses of the causes of social breakdown and the impulse for social protection that these engender. In the case of social exclusion, this refers to efforts of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in the 1990s to reformulate and apply theories of social exclusion, which up to that time had mostly referred to advanced industrial countries, to the developing world.⁴ This effort incorporated insights from the social exclusion literature in Western Europe, the underclass literature in the USA, structuralism in Latin America and related theories in other parts of the developing world. In particular, the Latin American contribution was already significantly advanced in this project, with detailed treatments of issues such as peripherality and marginality since the 1950s. The appeal of such an approach is that it ties together a variety of related issues under one rubric, such as poverty, inequality, exclusion, employment, discrimination, class, gender, marginality, peripherality, rights, entitlements, and agency. In particular, the ILO-UNDP approach emphasises the central role of 'citizenship rights' and how these interact with development policy, generating either inclusion or exclusion.⁵ This is a particularly interesting angle for the far western regions of China given the contested notions and practices of citizenship.

The historical institutionalist approach refers to the legacies of seminal thinkers such as Polanyi, Arendt and others on the conditions that led to the development of fascism in Europe before and during the social and economic upheaval of the inter-war period. It thereby serves to connect the more economic variables of exclusion, such as

⁴ For instance, see Gerry Rodgers, Charles Gore & José B Figueiredo, (eds), *Social Exclusion: Rhetoric Reality Responses*, Geneva: International Labour Organisation, 1995, and José B. Figueiredo & Arjan de Haan, *Social exclusion: an ILO perspective*, Geneva: International Institute for Labour Studies, 1998.

⁵ For instance, see *ibid*, p. 18; note that their conception of citizenship rights encompasses civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, although these are incorporated into a larger conceptualisation of citizenship that deals with different social and political notions of integration, eligibility, participation, responsibilities and so forth.

growth, structural change and employment, to the more intuitive variables of social responses and conflict. The key concept in this regard is Polanyi's double movement, whereby ethnic conflict – and nationalisms more generally – can be understood as one dimension of the impulse for social protection against the profoundly dislocating effects of modern transformations, whether economic, social, political or cultural, as explored in Putzel (2002)⁶ and elaborated above. This conceptual link is central to the thesis, particularly in the third section that deals with conflict and nationalism.

The research uses a historical-interpretative epistemology combining quantitative and qualitative methods at both macro and micro levels. 'Historical' in this sense implies looking at social phenomena as historically contingent or path dependent events that function in dynamic time and that evolve within irreversible structural transformations. 'Interpretative' implies that social events, with economic events being no exception, are motivational and discursive, and thus their meaning is embedded in language, belief systems, power relations, and institutional settings. Within this perspective, even quantitative analysis must be viewed as a heuristic process, only capturing one aspect of a fluid multi-dimensional reality and only verifiable in combination with qualitative insights. A historical interpretive approach thus allows for a dynamic integration of quantitative and qualitative methods that is inductive, investigative and iterative.

At the quantitative level, work was started before the PhD and has been continued to present. Data are taken mostly from official and publicly available Chinese primary statistical sources. In a few cases during field work, I have also had access to county or prefecture level data that is not publicly available. In the case of public material, population censuses and surveys are used to determine the distribution of ethnic populations as well as dominant demographic characteristics, migration patterns, and so forth. Rural and urban household surveys are used to determine mean incomes and their distribution and composition at the provincial level, and where possible, at the prefecture and county levels as well, along with a variety of other relevant statistics. Employment and wage statistics, together with education indicators, are used to determine employment dynamics. Finally, GDP, sectoral, fiscal, investment, infrastructure, social service, and other types of socio-economic data available from various national and provincial yearbooks are analysed.

My treatment of statistical data is almost entirely descriptive, avoiding the use of regressions that would require accurate sampling within a static framework. In my experience so far, I have found that the most relevant statistical insights can be gleaned through relatively simple arithmetic and surprising revelations into the nature of regional and group differences can be made by cross-referencing various statistical sources, particularly those that initially appear to contradict each other. Indeed, despite a profuse literature refuting of the relevance of Chinese statistical sources, particularly with regard to sensitive areas such as Tibet, I have found that their accuracy is sufficient to shed light on larger trends, patterns and structures throughout time, which are the object of my concern. Thus the issue of precise accuracy is not an obstacle to my quantitative work, whereas it would be of critical importance in more deductive forms of statistical analysis. To confirm this point, I have found that most

⁶ James Putzel, *Politics, the State and the Impulse for Social Protection: the implications of Karl Polanyi's ideas for understanding development and crisis*. London: Crisis States Programme, working paper No. 18 (October 2002).

of my quantitative interpretations from the data have not been contradicted by qualitative field work.

The statistical desk work is further supplemented by a variety of secondary literature from across the social sciences. The selection ranges from: contemporary political economy research on regional development in China; Tibetology, i.e. ethnographic, historical and religious studies research on Tibet, and; general theoretical literature on subjects of social exclusion, discrimination, migration, ethnic conflict, nationalism and so forth. Such secondary sources, combined with the ongoing descriptive statistical work, have provided important clues to guide field research in a handful of pertinent locations.

My qualitative field research can be described as a form of mobile and investigative ethnography. It is used in an iterative manner to test and refine insights derived from the quantitative work or else to add new dimensions of understanding. It is further informed by seven years of field experience living among Tibetan refugees in India and Nepal from 1995 to 2001. Current fieldwork has been conducted in all three of the major Tibetan regions in China, although I have concentrated on the regions of Northeast Tibet (*Amdo*) due to a range of concerns, such as existing and available contacts, ease of access, and the fact that this region has been the main hotbed for Tibetan-Muslim confrontations. In particular, further focus has been given to the multi-ethnic urban-rural nexuses surrounding the main regional centres, such as Xining in Qinghai and Lhasa in the TAR, along with a selection of county and prefecture towns in the Tibetan areas that act as local administrative centres. This focus highlights the integration of Tibetans into the dynamic parts of the regional economy, whereas much of existing poverty research on the Tibetan areas tends to focus on remote rural poverty, despite the important feedback affect that integration into urban centres has on the remote rural areas. The experience of discrimination or exclusion in the urban areas during key transitional phases not only shapes the emergence of urban social stratification, but it can also act to entrench remote poverty, a point that remote poverty research bypasses.

The methods of fieldwork have been innovated on the ground, with possibilities ranging from passive observation to informal conversation and formal interviews. In particular, emphasis has been given to informal collaboration with local scholars, who are a wealth of knowledge but who are considerably more constrained than foreign researchers in the dissemination of their findings. Already, some of my most fruitful fieldwork has involved lengthy conversations with local scholars in Beijing, Chengdu, Xining and Lhasa. Highlights have included: a lecture and discussion that I gave at the end of June 2004 to the Chinese Centre for Tibetan Studies in Beijing, one of the leading government organs for research on Tibet, and attended by some of the top scholars of Tibetan studies in China, both Chinese and Tibetan, as well as several advisors to the government on Tibetan issues; participation on field visits to Muslim and Tibetan areas of Qinghai in the summer 2004 with one Muslim professor of anthropology and ten of his MA students, including Tibetans, Muslims and Chinese, from the Qinghai Minorities University in Xining, and; many close contacts with over two hundred Tibetan high school and university students from across all the Tibetan areas, more than twenty teachers and several government officials, all in the vicinity of Xining, Rebgong and Chabcha, Qinghai province.

Given the political constraints of researching in the Tibetan areas, the exact planning and outcome of fieldwork has been difficult if not impossible to predict. In addition, my research has been weak on the subject of policy analysis, given the difficulty of determining the exact application of policies, as opposed to general and vague programmatic statements that are publicised at the official level. I focus on de facto ex post outputs and outcomes in my statistical research partly to overcome this obstacle. In order to improve this weakness, I would need more formalised collaboration with research institutes and even local governments. I have been working on building these, although none of these affiliations will be forthcoming before the end of my fieldwork.