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Technology and culture: Genetics and its ethical and social implications in Asia and Europe

Soraj Hongladarom

Genetics has become a prodigious force in today's world. After the success of the Human Genome Project, which sequenced the entire genomic structure of humans, genetics has become much more powerful. Not only is genetics of importance to professional scientists, it, and the disciplines it has spawned have had an impact on wider society, religions, cultures and traditions. Since the genetic make up of human beings can be said to define what it actually is to be human, the social and ethical implications are profound. Moreover, as the sciences and technologies that make up these new fields have become part and parcel of the current globalising trend, there is a growing enthusiasm for genetics and its related disciplines. Countries, determined not to be left out, are 'jumping on the genomic bandwagon'. It is not surprising then to see genetics at the forefront in Asia too.

On 17-18 March, 2007, the Center for Ethics of Science and Technology (CEST), Chulalongkorn University, Thailand, (in collaboration with the European Academy of Environment and Economy, Germany), organised an international workshop on "Technology and Culture: Genetics and its Ethical and Social Implications in Asia and Europe." The workshop was part of the Eighth Asian Bioethics Conference, and also part of the Asia-Europe Workshop Series 2006/2007 organised by the Asia Europe Foundation and the European Alliance for Asian Studies.

The key question of the workshop was: what are the ethical and social implications of this introduction of the new field of genetics in Asia and Europe? Around twenty scholars from more than ten countries gathered together for two days to search for an answer. The scholars came from a large variety of disciplines. There were philosophers such as myself, Margit Sutrop from Estonia, Leonardo de Castro and Peter Sy from the Philippines, and Ole Döring from Germany. There were lawyers such as Jürgen Simon from Germany, Carlos Maria Romeo Casabona from Spain, Terry Kaan from Singapore, Jakkrit Kuanpot from Thailand, and Cosimo Mazzoni from Italy. Moreover, Anna Cambon-Thomsen from France is a medical doctor; Minakshi Bhardwaj, representing the UK but originally from India, represented both biology and science policy studies; Le Dinh Luong from Vietnam is a geneticist, and Chan Chee Khoo is an epidemiologist. Despite the group's diversity, there were no disciplinary barriers. We were determined to search for common ground.

Among the topics discussed during the workshop, one or two stood out. Le Dinh Luong asked a very pertinent question: What use is ethics in science and technology to people who are poor? He told

the group that he was born into a poor family and had experienced first hand the horrors of the Vietnam War. He then became a scientist and believed that science and technology could indeed deliver his people from poverty. But he added, for people in poverty, there is little room for ethical considerations. Such discussions were the provinces of the rich who had the leisure to ponder them as their basic needs have been met. This reflects the viewpoint that science and technology are to be seen as instruments for economic development. Le Dinh Luong's view was not shared by the other members of the group, though everyone shared his sentiment. Perhaps ethics should be seen, not just as a perk for the rich, but as a necessary part of a regulatory framework which would make it possible for science and technology actually to become poverty-reduction instruments. Without such a framework, it is entirely conceivable that, instead of science and technology, (genetics included), becoming a tool for poverty reduction, exactly the opposite would occur - science and technology could become tools of the rich to further exploit the poor. The problem, then, is how to institute such a framework so that global justice is achieved and genetics and its related disciplines becomes a friend of the poor rather an enemy. To find a solution, a clear understanding of the social, ethical and cultural implications of genetics is crucial.

The group also discussed how different norms and values, such as those apparent in the East and the West, could be reconciled. Margit Sutrop was critical of the notion that these values are simply too different to be reconciled under one system. According to her, values that are typically associated with the East, such as putting more emphasis on the community rather than the individual, downplaying individual privacy in favour of public order, etc., are also to be found in the West. Privacy, of course, was an important concept in the discussion of genetics because there was a natural concern about the genetic data of a population being manipulated in such a way that the rights of the people are undermined (this was the main focus of the lawyers who attended the workshop). When the issue was raised about how privacy is justified, then the different belief systems became apparent. My colleague Somporn Promta, also from the Philosophy Department at Chula, and Chanroeun Pa from Cambodia are Buddhists, and are naturally concerned with how the Buddhist teachings can be interpreted so that we gain further insights on the problem of privacy. Nonetheless, it was agreed that there are certain values that should be upheld no matter what cultural tradition one originates from. The group also discussed the Singaporean proposal of 'reciprocity.' This is an implicit agreement between the government and its citizens where the government expects certain loyalty from the citizens and



they, in turn, accept a certain degree of restrictions for the sake of public order and stability. As an alternative the group discussed the concept of 'solidarity' which does not presuppose the hierarchical or paternalistic attitude which seems to be implicit in the concept of reciprocity. 'Solidarity' is a concept that has roots within the Western tradition, but it can also be seen as 'typically Asian' too, given the sense of wholeness felt within communities in Asia.

Having travelled from far away places to Bangkok, the members of the workshop came to an agreement that there are perhaps more similarities than differences between them. Any differences can indeed be exposed, that is not to say that all differences would, or could, be washed away. Be that as it may, the members became much closer and after two days of intensive meeting there a solidarity emerged among the members which, I am quite sure, will spur on more intensive and varied collaborations in the future. ◀

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