



# THE CITIZEN AND 'ASABIYYAH (TRIBALISM/ GROUP CONSCIOUSNESS) AN EXAMINATION OF THE CRISIS OF THE STATE AND ARAB SOCIETY

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“In modern societies there is the citizen and the State. However, in the Arab world you will find the citizen and a number of traditional institutions that stand between him and the State such as tribe, clan, religious group etc. Recently those institutions have become so influential that they have come to dominate the State itself, which has consequently become weakened and bloated. The appropriate response is not to empower those institutions which rob the citizen of his identity, but to rebuild the State as a modern, democratic entity that protects the rights of citizenship and provides a pluralistic context that will enable different citizens to seek to improve their quality of life – politically, economically, socially and culturally”.

## 1 - A citizen's capital

In every modern society there are three basic components – traditional institutions, the State and civil society. The interaction between them determines the

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extent of that society's social capital – i.e. the values of solidarity, trust and mutual respect in the relations that exist between its members.

By “traditional institutions” we mean those social institutions whose members do not have the option of choosing whether or not to belong to them. More precisely, membership of them is obligatory and is determined by a person's birth – such as membership of a family, tribe, clan, religious group etc. These institutions are characterized by a high level of what we may call an “exclusivist tendency”, since they comprise everybody who fulfils the conditions of membership, while closing the door to anyone who does not, thus ensuring that membership is not open to those we may refer to as “outsiders”. Those members who do belong to them are under a permanent obligation to conform to their values, traditions, customs and conventions and any failure to do so will result in punishments ranging from social censure to physical harm.

The State is the supreme sovereign institution with exclusive authority over a particular geographical region, so it is natural that membership of a State should be inclusive of all those who hold its nationality, regardless of differences in colour, religion, gender or race. In the modern era this inclusiveness is referred to as the citizenship bond in the nation-state.

Civil society institutions are non-government, non-hereditary bodies that fill the space between the family and the State and aim to serve the interests of their members in a peaceful, civilized manner. They include political parties, trade unions, non-government organisations, clubs, professional societies, musical associations, etc. There are, of course, certain conditions for membership, but – essentially – they do not exclude people on the grounds of colour, gender, race or belief, though they do not accept members from outside their particular field or those who do not share their common interests. The members of all these bodies have common aims, regardless of family, religious or other affiliations.

Michael Woolcock<sup>1</sup> proposes a model for measuring social capital

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<sup>1</sup> M. Woolcock: *Social Capital and Economic Development: Towards a Theoretical Synthesis and Policy Framework*, *Theory and Society*, Vo. 27, No. 2, 1998, Pp. 161-168.



by monitoring the type of interaction between the three components referred to above and classifying the interaction in two separate social capital categories – “bonding” and “bridging”. This thesis was previously put forward by the famous American social scientist Robert Putnam.

### **a – Bonding social capital**

The word “bonding” is used to mean sticking together in the face of outsiders – i.e. others who are different. This social capital category serves as a mutual social safety net and includes social institutions whose members are people of the same colour, gender, religion or race; alternatively, membership might consist of people with the same school, academic or career background, as in the case of scientific, academic and professional bodies. As the term indicates, members of “bonding” social organisations enjoy an extremely close relationship and a strong sense of commitment to each other, based on an “exclusivist” identity, and it is not considered acceptable to go against the rules and conventions. Some researchers maintain that this model of membership can only be found in institutions that imbue all their members with a feeling of solidarity and equality, which inevitably produces a sense of mutual obligation and commitment<sup>1</sup>. Examples include racial and tribal groups, religious and women’s associations, race-based institutions, clubs and scientific, academic and professional associations whose members comprise society’s financial, cultural, scientific and academic elites. In some instances a “high intensity” of bonding capital can lead to a breakdown in interaction and dialogue between different social groups. This was noticed by one researcher when observing the attempts of some religious establishments with an Anglo-Saxon membership to prevent new members of African origin

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**1** Margaret Gilbert makes a distinction between personal commitment and a shared commitment creating a sense of solidarity. In the case of personal commitment the source is an actual commitment on the part of the person concerned; however, shared commitment is outside the control of the group as individuals, while every person in the group has a right to a fair share of support and to the information emanating from the institutional entity.

Margaret Gilbert: *Sociality and Personality: New Essays in Plural Subject Theory*, New York, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1999, P. 40, P. 87, Pp. 52-53.



from joining them, despite the fact that they all belonged to the same religious community<sup>1</sup>.

### **b - Bridging social capital**

The word “bridging” applies to a situation in which people meet, communicate and interact. Individuals mix with each other, as do groups from different cultures, races, religions, sects and colours. As the term indicates, membership of associations in this social capital category is “open” and differences in the culture, social background and economic circumstances of their members are respected. Examples include civil rights groups, organisations that promote inter-cultural dialogue, youth clubs, human rights organisations, etc.

While the first social capital category – the bonding model – offers compatibility and homogeneity, the second – the bridging model – offers “social diversity”, “cultural pluralism” and “integration” on a basis of mutual respect. In other words, the first model offers strong ties that provide its members with protection and a sense of common identity, while the second consists of less “cohesive” ties, though it provides its members with the opportunity to exchange information and meet socially.

According to Robert Putnam, who has studied both types of social capital, modern societies need both of them. Woolcock, who has examined the two types in combination, has tried to develop an analytical framework for defining the degree of linkage and overlap between them, as well as the role they play in modern societies<sup>2</sup>.

In this connection Cooke believes that a greater degree of both bonding and bridging social capital (which represents the ideal situation) gives society two things: firstly, cohesiveness and, secondly, social opportunities

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1 W.R. Mark, J. Phillip Thompson and S. Susan: *The Role of Social Capital in Combating Poverty*, in W.R. Mark, J. Phillip Thompson and S. Susan (eds.) *Social Capital and Poor Communities*, New York, Russell Sage Foundation, 2001, Pp. 10-11.#

2 For more details see M. Woolcock: *Social Capital and Economic Development*, Op. cit. Pp. 151-208 and M. Woolcock, M. and D. Narayan, *Social Capital: Implications for Development Theory, Research and Policy*, World Bank Research Observer, Vol. 15, No. 2, 2000, Pp. 225-249.



as a result of the volume and flow of information and the fact that there is openness between different groups. This is precisely what modern industrial societies require in order to cope with the rapid pace of life and the present-day trend towards materialism, which generates a constant need for factors that can produce cohesion and harmony.

If there is a rise in bridging social capital and a fall in bonding social capital, society becomes more open-minded. There are freer exchanges of information and greater interaction between different social groups, yet at the same time there is less social cohesion and there are a larger number of what one might term “social rodents” feeding off the social fabric. Narrow personal interests prevail at the expense of the wider public interest and the individual feels isolated because the groups he would normally turn to for help in time of need are unable to provide the necessary support. This has been the case in most Eastern European societies during the radical economic and political changes that began in the 1990s, and it is also true in one form or another of several developing societies which are still in the process of being transformed - economically towards a market economy and politically towards a democratic system.

A fall in both bonding and bridging social capital leads to extreme selfishness and a situation verging on social breakdown in which crime rates soar and violence becomes widespread. This has happened in some African societies as a result of the social disintegration produced by structural adjustment policies in the 1980s and 1990s, which were applied unthinkingly without taking into account the fact that there are cultural differences between different societies.

Finally, a rise in bonding social capital and a fall in bridging social capital leads to closed societies that exclude all but their own members. While there are fewer social opportunities available, individuals feel a strong sense of solidarity in their relations with each other, but it is a negative kind of solidarity which harbours feelings of hostility towards outsiders, or “the different others”<sup>1</sup>.

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1 David Halpern: *Social Capital*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2005, Pp. 19-22.



## 2 - The awakening of 'asabiyyah in the Arab world

In his important analysis Robert Cooke concludes that a rise in bonding social capital at the expense of bridging social capital makes societies introspective and leads to conflict between different groups and an atmosphere of mutual suspicion.

In the Arab context the State is on the decline and civil society is becoming weaker. Religious, sectarian and racial groups are on the rise and this has had the effect of depriving Arab society of bridging social capital while producing a surplus of bonding social capital, which frequently has a negative impact. We find this in many societies where there are clashes between majority populations and religious or racial minorities; some societies have become fragmented as a result of “destructive” racialism, as has happened in Somalia, while others are battling with the pervasive problems of disintegration and division that threaten the social fabric.

The basis of the relationship between the State and its subjects is “citizenship”, while the basis of the relationship between civil society’s institutions and their members is “free commitment”. Previously, the relationship between the “traditional dominant element” and the individual may be said to have been based on “compliance” or “allegiance”.

In Arab society the “traditional dominant elements” have been religious, sectarian, tribal and clan groups. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – or more precisely, from the fall of the Ottoman Empire (1918) and the decline of Western Imperialism (1940-1960) – the traditional system began to break down and civil society organisations began to appear in the form of “non-government associations”, “political parties”, “trade unions” etc. After the end of imperialism these developed into what became known as the “nation-state”, in which the relationship between its citizens was based on “citizenship”. Consequently the dominance of traditional society went into decline, but only for a time.

The modern nation-states made “equality before the Law”, regardless of gender, creed, colour or origin, one of the cornerstones of their



constitutions. However, tensions and clashes occurred in various countries for a number of reasons and sometimes developed into armed conflicts that have continued from the time of independence to the present day. (Iraq, Sudan and Somalia are three examples).

If racism or '*asabiyyah*' was not the cause of all these tensions and clashes, then it was an accompanying factor or consequence. Individual and collective human rights were violated to varying degrees, and expulsion, murder on the grounds of identity, suicide attacks and mass bombings became daily occurrences. They shocked the public at first, but as time went by people got used to them, their psychological and emotional impact abated and they were regarded as being in the same class as road accidents or weather reports.

Society's traditional institutions have come to the fore again in recent years and the voices of the religious, sectarian and clan groups are becoming more widely heard and listened to. There has been a decline in the authority of the nation-state, which is based on the principle of citizenship; while constitutions speak of citizenship, in reality there are numerous glaring examples of violations of citizens' rights.

The question is: What has caused this relapse? Why have citizens reverted to the "dominant elements" of earlier times, while their sense of affiliation to the State has become weaker?

- The disintegration of the nation-state is not just something that is happening at the moment. It has in fact been taking place in several different stages, beginning from the failure of its development efforts, then an inability to satisfy the population's needs, causing them to turn to their religious and sectarian communities to meet those needs, then the spread of corruption, rotting the bones of the State, followed by the abandonment of half-hearted democratisation measures and, finally, measures to dissolve the existing government structures.
- For many decades the Arab State has exploited "religion" and "sect" to legitimise itself with the public and offset its failures.



Consequently the religious and sectarian groups became politicised and found themselves major players in the political arena, since the State had become weak and flabby.

- Many Arab States have been unable to achieve genuine national integration between their different religious and racial groups. This has led them to adopt “bad” policies for managing religious and sectarian diversity which have helped exacerbate the problems and historic hatreds and create new generations who feel encouraged to defy the ruling elites – and possibly even challenge the followers of the religions and sects to which those elites belong.
- The rise of political Islam – as a religion-based political movement – does not pose a challenge to the nation-state, though it (i.e. political Islam) does face a challenge from other religious and sectarian groups. One major reason for this is the Islamist attitude (and here I include all the different Islamist groups) towards other religions; this remains ambiguous and gives a religious flavour to their concept of citizenship, which sees non-Muslims as second-class citizens or *dhimmis*. Here it should be noted that in order to attract support and acquire legitimacy as the representative of the Muslim community, Islamists encourage religious minority communities to play an active part in politics.
- Political changes in the Arab world in recent years – particularly since 2003 – have failed to produce any political elites or forces, or any social groups, capable of producing a transformation to democracy. All that has happened is that the weaknesses of the political and social classes have been exposed, so that all that remains is the State and the religious groups, in the broadest sense.
- The civil society institutions are of recent vintage and incapable of mobilising the masses on the basis of “interest” rather than “sectarian affiliation”. They have also been “corralled” by the Arab regimes. This means that they have been unable to generate any genuine social capital, while the sectarian forces have been able to



create religious capital and mobilise their followers. On some occasions the civil society institutions have become agents of religious sectarianism; this can be seen in the behaviour of the professional associations in Egypt.

- One side-effect of what has been called the War on Terror has been to give credence to the idea of the Western Global Conspiracy, which is inspired by religious statements – mainly emanating from America – against Islam and Muslims. This is bound to affect relations between Muslims and Christians in Arab societies.

### 3 - Why has *'asabiyyah* been successful?

If the above gives some explanation for the rise of *'asabiyyah* and the decline of the notion of citizenship in the Arab region, how should we interpret the success of the “extremist” religious or sectarian groups?

The basic factor here is their exceptional ability to capitalise on the traditional ties that existed in Arab societies before the age of modernisation. They have also been able to benefit from the communications and information revolution, helped by the fact that they are well funded, well organised and accepted as legitimate by their members. Here a closer examination would be appropriate.

**Firstly**, since their leaderships are accepted as legitimate, they do not face any internal power struggles. Moreover, they are well placed to direct and mobilise effectively.

**Secondly**, the organisations they control have deep roots. Despite their structural and organisational problems they continue to be productive and efficient. They are successful recruiters and able to respond effectively at times of crisis.

**Thirdly**, the fact that they are well funded means that they are always able to take the initiative and achieve their objectives, even if those objectives are minimal. This has enabled them to retain the support of their followers.



**Fourthly**, they have a coherent religious discourse and know how to get their message across to the public. One new element is their brilliant ability to use globalisation for their own ends. This is demonstrated by the following:

1. They have set up religious satellite channels which present programmes that take an extremely hard line towards other religions. They also air religious debates on creedal issues that attack other beliefs and encourage people to insult each other.
2. They have set up thousands of internet websites that have proved to be extremely cunning at circumventing legal publication restrictions. These sites provide unreliable and intemperate religious information, much of which takes a fanatical attitude towards other groups.

The question here is:

What has *'asabiyyah* done for the Arabs?

- It has given them a badge of social identity after the notion of regional national identity lost credibility; this was due to the fact that the nation-state suffered repeated defeats and there was a rise in corruption and despotism and a widening gap between the citizen and the State.
- It provides them with a social safety net when responding to a situation in which the State exists in theory but is absent in practice (this is the case in several Arab countries) or where the State exists neither in theory nor in practice (as is the case in Iraq, Somalia and possibly Lebanon). One thing worth noting here is that the more an Arab State suffers defeat when confronting challenges from outside, the more violent it becomes towards its own citizens within its borders. This inevitably gives rise to a need for a social safety net to provide the individual with some protection.
- It helps give people confidence in the future. If the world is falling to pieces and the process of disintegration extends to the region and a person's immediate environment, then an Arab individual



has the alternative option of reverting to a narrower set of affiliations which have still retained their original status, rules, sources of funding and inclusive discourse and whose leadership – religious or sectarian – continues to be relatively respected or revered.

So what is the price demanded of the citizen in return? Consider this:

- Narrow loyalty to a religious or sectarian group and seeing it as one's future, one's goal and the centre of one's existence is not solely a religious or sectarian loyalty. Although this may be the declared loyalty, it is fundamentally a political one and reflects political-sectarian affiliations ranging from the Maronite political parties to the Shi'ah movements and the Qutbites in Egypt.
- If people maintain a nominal link to the State, while at the same time disengaging themselves from it in practice, it is not surprising that the two main sectarian groups in the region – in the Islamic-Christian context – should both reject the concept of "Nation" even if they claim otherwise. One of them speaks of "Islamic internationalism" which only recognises the "Islamic Nation", since Islam is both creed and country, while there are Christians who see their "country" as merely a transitional stage towards a "more profound" Nation – the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth. The motives of the two groups may differ, but the goals are the same – disengagement from the nation-state in the interests of sectarianism.
- Denying the right of others to religious or sectarian diversity, either in one's heart (covert hatred) or by incitement (overt hatred) or insults (direct action), or through extermination (physical denial) – all these are classic symptoms of sectarianism. In brief, all that a "bigoted" citizen actually needs to do is to give his allegiance to his religious or sectarian group and declare that outsiders are its enemies.

But what has actually been the effect of this *'asabiyyah*?



Consider the following:

1. Usurpation of the public space and turning it into a battleground for religious or sectarian disputes. This is the same public space that was created to allow freedom of debate, critical thought and free discussion such as one might find in British coffee houses and French salons. It evolved in parallel with the development of the concept of civil society.

This public space is being hijacked in the interests of the ruling authorities - who keep it restricted for their own benefit - and bigoted religious or sectarian groups who seek to monopolise it for their own ends or, alternatively, exploit it to adopt absolutist positions in the event of a clash of views. Both these the rulers and the bigots have plenty of cannon-fodder – i.e. the public.

2. Restricting freedom of expression so that the “sacred space” is extended to cover not only religion or sect but also “religious” political ideas and the “religious institutions” themselves, with the result that criticising them becomes a no-go area. This transforms the sectarian citizen into a political subject of the State as well as a religious “subject” at the heart of the religious or sectarian body to which he belongs.
3. Restriction of freedom of political action. The religious institutions I have mentioned dictate the nature of the individual’s engagement in politics so that he converts his religious or sectarian bigotry into “political activity”, in the form of either opposition or support for a particular political group.

The real problem is that Arab societies are infected with the virus of disintegration. The force that breeds it is religious and sectarian extremism, nurtured by a sectarian upbringing and fed by the media and the educational system. In response, the “wounded” nation-state in the Arab region has turned to the religious authorities in an attempt to gain legitimacy and reinforce its power base, with the result that its citizens find themselves being ruled by a sort of sectarian system by proxy, at the expense of either the country’s domestic political forces or external political factors.



## 4 - Rebuilding the State

Yielding to sectarian pressure is “suicide par excellence” and will kill the modern State. The only hope is to rebuild the State as a democratic institution based upon the principles of citizenship and freedom for all its citizens.

According to Peter Evans – a writer who has tackled the question of strengthening the State’s role in society and examined the factors that help promote a closer partnership between government and civil society in the interests of social development – some researchers favour excluding any role for the State in building up social capital. This is because they have a firm belief that development can best be achieved through the “magic of the market” – a view which has been popular since the 1970s. However, two major changes have taken place since then that have caused this view to lose some of its sparkle.

Firstly, many people in the industrial-capitalist countries – not the poor developing States - have voiced strong criticism of the lack of strong social relationships in their societies and the spread of a consumerist recreational culture, and many of those voices have spoken of the need to enhance their social capital. Secondly, South-East Asia’s development programmes have been successful despite the fact that the State has been increasingly involved in them. Countries like Taiwan and South Korea have achieved high rates of growth; it is therefore unacceptable to persist in adopting a negative view of the role of the State in generating social capital, since it has played a direct role in enabling individuals and local communities to release their potential and establish institutional and social relations based on mutual trust, respect and solidarity<sup>1</sup>.

Other researchers have produced additional evidence of the importance of the State’s role in creating social capital. In one of his recent books Tuong Vu maintains that there is no evidence to support the belief which prevailed during the last two decades of the second millennium about a reduced role for the State. Following the end of the Cold War, the fall of the

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Evans: *Introduction: Development Strategies across the Public-Private Divide*, World Development, Vol. 24, No. 6, 1996, Pp. 1033-1037.



Soviet Union, the wave of democratisation and the new trend towards a market economy in Eastern Europe, books written by apologists for globalisation have been based on the general assumption that the State's sovereignty is on the wane and that it is playing an increasingly less significant role, particularly in the light of the rise of major organisations and institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and multinational companies such as McDonald's, CNN and Microsoft that are not bound by cultural barriers or international borders.

However, only a few years later there was a radical rethink on the role of the State in even the most arrogant of the industrial-capitalist countries in the wake of a succession of economic and financial crises. The State found itself intervening to regulate the market and government bureaucracy now has a major part to play in protecting industrial societies from economic crises. Hence the concept of the "Development State" now occupies centre stage once again – not in the old socialist sense, but in a way that recognises the State's pivotal role in society. Its new role is not repressive, but operates under democratic rules based upon partnership, accountability, transparency and respect for human rights. This is bound to have positive consequences for the quality of people's lives<sup>1</sup>.

Any discussion of the role of State institutions in building up social capital must inevitably raise the fundamental question of consensus over the extent to which State intervention can help achieve that process. At present no such consensus exists.

At this point we need to take a closer look at the question of democracy. The State needs to play a proactive part in developing social capital through its ability to build a true democratic society. In this connection many researchers have observed that autocratic governments destroy the foundations of social capital by restricting the right to organise, spreading a culture of doubt and suspicion among political, cultural and intellectual circles (and sometimes even among members of the public), and mobilising a broad section of civil society from among their supporters (including

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1 Tuong Vu: *Paths to Development in Asia: South Korea, Vietnam, China and Indonesia*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, Pp. 249-251.



members of pro-government political parties, trade unions and non-government organisations); such bodies are easy tools for confronting independent civil society organisations. The striking thing here is that, particularly in developing countries, the State is usually seen in a negative light, since it is regarded as a major factor in obstructing the growth and development of civil society through its reliance on an arsenal of laws and statutes that shackle individual initiative. This view may indeed be justified with regard to developing countries. However, if it is, it is due to illegal State interference in society's affairs rather than to pervasive laws regulating relations within the community. Evidence for this can be seen in the countries of Scandinavia, where the State plays a major role in supporting voluntary organisations and helping them to work alongside the government in providing social welfare<sup>1</sup>.

The Scandinavian countries offer a perfect example of the State's contribution to the creation of social capital. In all of them the State's involvement in society's affairs – by providing general services and benefits for its citizens – means that it is able to respond to the people's needs and create a feeling of mutual trust and solidarity. This proves that “big government” is not bad in itself, as some maintain; it all depends upon whether or not it behaves in accordance with the principles of good governance such as accountability, responsibility, transparency and a commitment to the rule of law. According to the United Nations Development Programme's report for 2002 the Scandinavian countries have the lowest levels of corruption, are the most committed to human rights and respect the rule of law. These qualities have made them a prime source of investment in social capital.

Francis Fukuyama believes that rebuilding the State is a top priority for the twenty-first century, because failure or weakness on the part of the State seriously exacerbates the major human problems such as poverty and the spread of AIDS and terrorism. In his view rebuilding the State needs to be the main political objective rather than a reduction in the role of the State. If there are restraints such as financial considerations

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<sup>1</sup> Dietlind Stolle: *The Sources of Social Capital*, Op. cit. Pp. 30-34.



hampering the rebuilding of the State, this should not allow us to be diverted from structural problems in

the developing countries such as a lack of political creativity or a lack of qualified people capable of putting good policies into practice.

There are four areas in which the State is ripe for rebuilding: organisational structure, political legitimacy, good governance and – finally – what Fukuyama calls “cultural and structural factors”. In this connection we should consider the important part the State has to play in enhancing social capital; in Fukuyama’s view there is a process of “mutual sustenance” between the State and the formation of social capital’s basic values. Firstly, social capital values help contribute to the rebuilding of the State; Japan after the Second World War is a good example of a country that owed its institutional effectiveness not only to the fact that it had a strong technical or technological base, but also because of the dynamic culture with which the dominant political and managerial elites infused its public corporations and institutions. Moreover, effective State institutions also contribute positively to social capital values, since the fact that public bodies of this kind are accountable and transparent means that they help promote positive values in all society’s institutions – both government and non-government. Public behaviour also has an important role to play in instilling social capital values<sup>1</sup>.

Also on this topic, Archon Fung believes that the social capital stocks of any society are an essential condition for good government based on the principles of accountability and participation by the people in public affairs. This is because if there is no culture of participation in civil institutions, this will be an obstacle to effective engagement, government accountability and the development of a spirit of co-operation in relations between the country’s citizens<sup>2</sup>.

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1 Francis Fukuyama: *State Building, Governance and World Order in the Twenty-first Century*, London, Cornell University Press, 2004, Pp. 39-41.

2 Archon Fung: *Empowered Participation: Reinventing Urban Democracy*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2006, Pp. 119-120.