Reprint: Conflicts and Clashes are the Social Norm

Sun Liping
China Beat checks in regularly with Xujun Eberlein at her blog Inside-Out China, and we've run pieces by Xujun in the past. In early April, she ran another in her series of translations of Chinese materials. We thought this continuation of her translation of Professor Sun Liping's works on social protest was interesting enough to reproduce in full (with Xujun's permission).

By Sun Liping (translated by Xujun Eberlein)

Note: About a month ago I translated an essay from Prof. Sun titled "The Biggest Threat Is not Social Unrest but Societal Breakdown." His rational and perceptive view attracted wide interest from readers, and that post was linked by many influential websites, including WSJ's China Journal and Danwei.org. For further discussion, I here translate another, more recent article from Prof. Sun. Note his none-confrontational language in treating a confrontational subject, which makes his arguments much easier to consider by different sides. Just one little quibble from me: he makes the US sound too perfect. :-( -- Xujun

[In translation]

Looking back at the mass incidents over the recent few years, one can find a fluctuating curve: Before 2005 it trended upward, was down a bit in 2006 and 2007, and rose again in 2008. What can we make of these trends?

Faced with the same facts, different judgments lead to different paths. For example during the global economic crisis of the 1930s, the situation in the US was the most severe, with very sharp and prominent social conflict. However the Roosevelt administration carried out a series of changes and saved America’s democracy and prosperity. Under the same economic crisis however, German, Italy and Japan turned to fascism.

A system needs an easy spirit
The first problem that needs to be resolved is how to view and position social conflict; this is a more important issue than social conflict itself.

A system is not a dead thing; it too has a thinking process, but it is different from that of an individual. Something that everyone understands in everyday life might not be comprehensible by the system. For example during the Cultural Revolution, when a person accidentally broke Chairman Mao’s statue, everyone knew he was just being careless, but the system did not have the vocabulary for “accidental behavior.” You broke Chairman Mao’s statue, you must receive punishment.

Several years ago a serious mass incident occurred in Sichuan. The cause was a simple one: the construction of a power station occupied some farmland, and the conflicting interests evolved into a mass incident. At the beginning, the local government viewed the incident as a farmers’ armed riot, and treated it rigidly, which intensified the conflict. Later the central government re-evaluated the incident and gave farmers compensation, thus easily resolving the conflict. This shows that how the system views social conflict is very important.

There exist various conflicts and clashes in society, such as political, ideological, religious, and cultural ones. But the majority are conflict of interest. This actually is a most rational kind of conflict, but our positioning is often problematic. We are accustomed to political, ideological viewpoints, therefore when treating conflict the government is excessively tense and often overreacts.

A system is like a person, and it can be overcautious. Think about it: if it is all-day heavy-hearted, miserable, tense and unsmiling, how can it solve problems well? A system needs an easy spirit. This expression came from football commentary: Watching Chinese playing football, sometimes an early loss can lead to a final win, but leading first will surely cause a final failure. Why? Because the team
becomes overcautious. When facing social conflict, we need also to have a normal mentality, an easy spirit. The "easiness" comes from accurate positioning. Only when positioned accurately, can problems be properly solved.

**A system needs more self-confidence when facing social conflict**

The biggest achievement in the 30 years of reform and opening-up is the establishment of a market economy. Whether a market economy is a "good" one, I think there are three measures: first, whether the system itself is healthy and complete; second, whether there is a good judicial basis; third, whether there is a supporting mechanism to balance interests. The third point is especially important.

Fundamentally, in a society different classes, groups and individuals should have a balanced capacity to fight for their own interests; their rights should be equal. In the past, China used an economic model of redistribution, for example the state designated a person's salary as level one or level two, so there were no fights between people. A market economy is different; people have to fight for their interests by themselves.

During the 1930s recession in the United States, a new policy of the Roosevelt administration was to have unions play a role, thus establishing an interest balancing mechanism, which effectively solved the labor relations problem, and alleviated various conflicts. After that, the entire social situation had a fundamental transformation.

However we should note one point: it is not that, once an interest balancing mechanism is in place, the poor can become the rich, the powerless can become the powerful. An interest balancing mechanism is only a basic condition for a "good market economy." China's reality is that a market economy is established, but an interest balancing mechanism has yet to be.

Take the example of mass incidents, the majority of them are rightful expression of interest. It's like when children run into unsolvable problems, they cry to call their parents' attention. There must be a mechanism to let people express their demands. In this situation, we should have a new understanding of social conflict.

First, social conflict and clashes are part of social normalization. To depend on strict guardianship and the elimination of problems at their embryonic stage is not going to work any more. The government needs to gradually adjust to a society with conflict and clashes.

Second, don't always regard social conflict and clashes as negative factors. On a certain level they also play a positive role. One is as a safety valve: through demonstration etc, people's discontent and stress get released, thus avoiding a direct impact on social stability. Another is as a means to problem discovery. For example when migrant workers wages were held in arrears, at the worst time the unpaid amount reached 100 billion nation-wide. Why in the end did the Premier have to demand the wages for migrant workers be paid? If demonstrations were regarded normal, and migrant workers were able to walk on the streets and talk about their demands at an earlier stage, the situation might not have evolved to such a severe level. When there is no mechanism to uncover problems, the government is not able to keep abreast of developments and to respond, and problems will accumulate to an irresolvable level until mass incidents break out.

Third, we need to form a new concept: the distinction between a good system and a bad one, or a good society and a bad one, is not whether there are conflict and clashes. Rather it should be (1) whether the system or society has the capacity to contain conflict, and how big that capacity is; (2) whether it can institutionalize a mechanism to resolve conflict. A good social system is self-confident when facing social conflict. Otherwise it's seized with panic when conflict is still at an embryonic stage.

In the United States, millions demonstrated on the streets to object to the war on Iraq. Did anyone think American society unstable? No. Then why, when a few dozen migrant workers demand unpaid wages on the streets, does the Chinese government act as if it is being attacked by a giant enemy? This shows a lack of self-confidence.
"Rigid stability thinking" needs to be abandoned

If we analogize social conflict to water, then there are no worries in the US, because the water there is running in a channel. Which direction it runs to, where it makes turns, where it’s swift, where it’s slow, all are predictable. But in China there is not a channel; when water comes, no one knows where it will run to, thus the only defense is to build dams everywhere. For this, the only solution is to build a channel, that is, to establish rules and procedures, to enhance institutional construction.

At the beginning of 2008, the China Eastern Airline’s pilot strike was a typical “flood disaster,” in the end there was no winner: the pilots had a heavy loss, their professional integrity was in doubt; the airline also had a heavy loss, tickets were forced to be discounted as was its reputation.

As a matter of fact, pilot strikes are common in other countries, but there are rules and procedures – pilots must first negotiate with the airline; if agreement is not reached, pilots submit a strike petition to the union; after a voting process that passes the petition, then the strike can begin. That is, there is a procedure for strikes. In this sense, China doesn’t have such a thing as "strike.” What the Eastern Airline’s pilots did was called "stop flying,” and what the taxi drivers did was called "stop driving.”

If the legitimacy of strikes is not acknowledged, then there will be no way to regulate them, and no way to set up a resolution method. Today the Eastern Airline’s strike is still unsolved, because no one knows who led the strike, thus there is no way to talk.

Why so far are we still unable to set up institutionalized solution methods and interest balancing mechanism under a market economy? Because we are held back by one thing: the “rigid stability thinking.” The debate on the “Labor Contract Law” is a good example. The contact protects labor interest, and presses for the interest balancing mechanism, that much is agreed to. But the enterprises are all bitterly complaining about this law. Is this simply because of the selfishness of the capitalists? No, the fundamental problem is: this law is an attempt to use government-set regulations to replace equality in the game between interest bodies.

In fact, under a market economy, the government only needs to manage three things: one, set and hold a baseline; two, set up and guard game rules; three, adjust or mediate when the game reaches a deadlock. The agenda for the negotiation is set by the sides. However, our present situation is that the government is most afraid to let the sides talk among themselves, fearing the talk would hurt social stability. "Stop talking, I’ve set the agenda for you.” The government always keeps its hand on the market economy.

In the decades before reform, we always overrated the situation of class struggle. Now, some officials overrate the nature of mass incidents, and this forms the "rigid stability thinking.” But did stability overpower corruption or counterfeiting? No. In the end, it is our ability to express rightful interest that is overpowered.

Bottom line: one of the tools used by some vested interest groups is to distort the concept of "stability.” In addition, some scholars think the social crisis is very serious, possibly able to cause big unrest, but that is a baseless worry. Using a normal mentality to factually judge and position the present social conflict and clashes, and solve them using an institutionalized approach, that is the real way out.

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