

## HOW DOES CULTURE MATTER?<sup>1</sup>

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### 1. Introduction

Sociologists, anthropologists and historians have often commented on the tendency of economists to pay inadequate attention to culture in investigating the operation of societies in general and the process of development in particular. While we can consider many counterexamples to the alleged neglect of culture by economists, beginning at least with Adam Smith (1776, 1790), John Stuart Mill (1859, 1861), or Alfred Marshall (1891), nevertheless as a general criticism, the charge is, to a considerable extent, justified.

This neglect (or perhaps more accurately, comparative indifference) is worth remedying, and economists can fruitfully pay more attention to the influence of culture on economic and social matters. Further, development agencies such as the World Bank may also reflect, at least to some extent, this neglect, if only because they are so predominately influenced by the thinking of economists and financial experts.<sup>2</sup> The economists' scepticism of the role of culture may thus be indirectly reflected in the outlooks and approaches of institutions like the World Bank. No matter how serious this neglect is (and here assessments can differ), the cultural dimension of development requires closer scrutiny in development analysis. It is important to investigate the different ways - and they can be very diverse - in which culture should be taken into account in examining the challenges of development, and in assessing the demands of sound economic strategies.

The issue is not whether culture matters, to consider the title of an important and highly successful book jointly edited by Lawrence Harrison and Samuel Huntington.<sup>3</sup> That it must be, given the pervasive influence of culture in human life. The real issue, rather, is how - not whether - culture matters. What are the different ways in which culture may influence development? How can the influences be better understood, and how might they modify or alter the development policies that seem appropriate? The interest lies in the nature and forms of the connections and on their implications for action and policy, not merely in the

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<sup>1</sup> I draw, in this essay, on three earlier presentations on related themes, respectively at a World Bank meeting on development in Tokyo on 13 December 2000, at the Pardee Center of Boston University on 4 February 2002, and at the University of Mumbai on 26 February 2002. [Acknowledgments to be added.]

<sup>2</sup> Interesting insights on how institutions think can be found in Douglas (1987), North (1990) and Blau (1993).

<sup>3</sup> Harrison and Huntington (2000), which contains a number of engaging essays.

general - and hardly deniable - belief that culture does matter.

I discuss these "how" questions in this essay, but in the process I must also take up some "how not" questions. There is some evidence, I shall argue, that in the anxiety to take adequate note of the role of culture, there is sometimes a temptation to take rather formulaic and simplistic views of the impact of culture on the process of development. For example, there seem to be many supporters of the belief - held explicitly or by implication - that the fates of countries are effectively sealed by the nature of their respective cultures. This would be not only a heroic oversimplification, but it would also entail some assignment of hopelessness to countries that are seen as having the "wrong" kind of culture. This is not just politically and ethically repulsive, but more immediately, it is, I would argue, also epistemic nonsense. So a second object of this essay is to take up these "how not" issues.

The third object of the paper is to discuss the role of learning from each other in the field of culture. Even though such transmission and education may be an integral part of the process of development, their role is frequently underestimated. Indeed, since each culture is often taken, not implausibly, to be unique, there can be a tendency to take a somewhat insular view of culture. In understanding the process of development, this can be particularly deceptive and substantively counterproductive. Indeed, one of the most important roles of culture lies in the possibility of learning from each other, rather than celebrating or lamenting the rigidly delineated cultural boxes in which the people of the world are firmly classified by muscular taxonomists.

Finally, while discussing the importance of intercultural and intercountry communication, I must also discuss the threat - real or perceived - of globalization and the asymmetry of power in the contemporary world. The view that local cultures are in danger of destruction has often been expressed, and the belief that something should be done to resist this can have considerable plausibility. How this possible threat should be understood and what can be done to address - and if necessary counter - it are also important subjects for development analysis. That is the fourth and final issue that I intend to scrutinize.

## 2. Connections

It is particularly important to identify the different ways in which culture can matter to development.<sup>4</sup> The following categories would seem to have some immediacy as well as far-reaching relevance.

(1) Culture as a constitutive part of development: We can begin with the basic question: what is development for? The furtherance of well-being and freedoms that we seek in development cannot but include the enrichment of human lives through literature, music, fine arts, and other forms of cultural expression and practice, which we have reason to value. When

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<sup>4</sup> See Wolfensohn (2000) and Rao and Walton (2002).

Julius Caesar said of Cassius, "He hears no music: seldom he smiles," this was not meant to be high praise for Cassius's quality of life. To have a high GNP per head but little music, arts, literature, etc., would not amount to a major developmental success. In one form or another, culture engulfs our lives, our desires, our frustrations, our ambitions, and the freedoms that we seek.<sup>5</sup> The freedom and opportunity for cultural activities are among the basic freedoms the enhancement of which can be seen to be constitutive of development.<sup>6</sup>

(2) Economically remunerative cultural activities and objects: Various activities that are economically remunerative may be directly or indirectly dependent on cultural facilities and more generally on the cultural environment.<sup>7</sup> The linkage of tourism with cultural sites (including historical ones) is obvious enough.<sup>8</sup> The presence or absence of crime or welcoming traditions may also be critical to tourism and in general to domestic as well as cross-boundary interactions. Music, dancing and other cultural activities may also have a large commercial - often global - market. The presence of centres of such artistic activities can, in addition, help to attract people to particular countries or regions, with various indirect effects.

There can, of course, be room for doubt as to whether cultural - including religious - objects or sites should be used for the purpose of earning money, and it may well be decided that in some cases, in which the significance of the objects or sites are threatened by commercial use, the opportunity of earning an

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<sup>5</sup> Important illustrations of different aspects of these pervasive connections can be found in Eliot (1948), Douglas (1970, 1992), Coleman (1977), Douglas and Isherwood (1979), McCloskey (1985), Appadurai (1986), Inglehart (1990), Adorno (1991), Mosseto (1993), Greif (1994), Appiah and Gates (1995), Jessor, Colby and Shweder (1996), Klamer (1996), Landes (1998), Throsby (1999), Eagleton (2000), Platteau (2000). See also UNESCO (1998, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> Cultural capabilities are among the major components of substantial freedoms; on the nature and use of the perspective of capabilities, see Alkire (2002a, 2002b). See also Sen (1982, 1985a, 1985b, 1999), Griffin and Knight (1990), Nussbaum (1993, 2000), Nussbaum and Sen (1993), Nussbaum and Glover (1995), Pattanaik (1998), Appadurai (2001), Arizpe (2001), Osmani (2001), among other contributions.

<sup>7</sup> There is a vast literature on the connections between economic rewards and cultural pursuits; see, for example, Baumol and Bowen (1966), Peacock and Weir (1975), Blaug (1976), Towse (1993, 1997), Peacock and Rizzo (1994), Throsby (1994, 2001), Klamer (1996), Hutter and Rizzo (1997), Bowles (1998), Cowen (1998), Avrami, Mason and de la Torre (2000), Caves (2000), Frey (2000).

<sup>8</sup> On the interconnection between the cultural and economic aspects of tourism, see Boniface (1995), Herbert (1995), Hutter and Rizzo (1997), Avrami, Mason and de la Torre (2000), Throsby (2001), among other contributions.

income should be forgone. But even after excluding commercial uses that can be threatening, there will tend to remain plenty of other opportunities to combine economic use with cultural pursuits. Furthermore, people who come to visit well administered sites of cultural or religious importance, without any direct commercial involvement, could still, indirectly, boost the tourist trade of the country or region as a whole.

(3) Cultural factors influence economic behaviour: Even though some economists have been tempted by the idea that all human beings behave in much the same way (for example, relentlessly maximize their self-interest defined in a thoroughly insulated way), there is plenty of evidence to indicate that this is not in general so. Cultural influences can make a major difference to work ethics, responsible conduct, spirited motivation, dynamic management, entrepreneurial initiatives, willingness to take risks, and a variety of other aspects of human behaviour which can be critical to economic success.<sup>9</sup>

Also, successful operation of an exchange economy depends on mutual trust and implicit norms. When these behavioural modes are plentifully there, it is easy to overlook their role. But when they have to be cultivated, that lacuna can be a major barrier to economic success. There are plenty of example of the problems faced in precapitalist economies because of the underdevelopment of basic virtues of commerce and business.

The culture of behaviour relates to many other features of economic success. It relates, for example, to the prevalence or absence of economic corruption and its linkages with organized crime. In Italian discussions on this subject, in which I was privileged to take part through advising the Anti-Mafia Commission of the Italian parliament, the role and reach of implicit values was much discussed.<sup>10</sup> Culture also has an important role in encouraging environment-friendly behaviour.<sup>11</sup> The behavioral contribution of culture would vary with the challenges encountered in the process of economic development.

(4) Culture and political participation: Participation in civil interactions and political activities is influenced by cultural conditions. The tradition of public discussion and participatory interactions can be very critical to the process of

<sup>9</sup> On this see Sen (1973, 1982), Basu (1980), Hirschman (1982), Margolis (1982), Akerlof (1984), Frank (1985, 1988), Granovetter (1985), Elster (1986), Mansbridge (1990), Ostrom (1990, 1998), Greif (1994), Brittan and Hamlin (1995), Fukuyama (1995), Zamagni (1995), Becker (1996), Hausman and McPherson (1996), Frey (1997), Ben-Ner and Putterman (1998), Akerlof and Kranton (2000), Throsby (2001), among many other contributions.

<sup>10</sup> See Anti-Mafia Commission of the Italian Parliament (1993). My paper ("On Corruption and Organized Crime") in this collection analyses the interdependences between culture, values and institutions, in influencing the prevalence of corruption. See also Zamagni (1993, 1995).

<sup>11</sup> See Ostrom (1990, 1998); also Sen (1973, 1993).

politics, and can be important for the establishment, preservation and practice of democracy. The culture of participation can be a critical civic virtue, as was extensively discussed by Condorcet, among other leading thinkers of European Enlightenment.<sup>12</sup>

Aristotle did, of course, point out that human beings tend to have a natural inclination towards civil interaction with each other. And yet the extent of political participation can vary between societies. In particular, political inclinations can be suppressed not only by authoritarian rules and restrictions, but also by a "culture of fear" that political suppression can generate. There can also be a "culture of indifference" drawing on scepticism that turns into apathy. Political participation is critically important for development, both through its effects on the assessment of ways and means, and even through its role in the formation and consolidation of values in terms of which development has to be assessed.<sup>13</sup>

(5) Social solidarity and association: Aside from economic interactions and political participation, even the operation of social solidarity and mutual support can be strongly influenced by culture. The success of social living is greatly dependent on what people may spontaneously do for each other. This can profoundly influence the working of the society, including the care of its less fortunate members as well as preservation and guardianship of common assets.<sup>14</sup> The sense of closeness to others in the community can be a major asset for that community. The advantages flowing from solidarity and supportive interactions have received much attention recently through the literature on "social capital."<sup>15</sup>

This is an important new area of social investigation. There is, however, a need to scrutinize the nature of "social capital" as "capital" - in the sense of a general purpose resource (as capital is taken to be). The same sentiments and inclinations can actually work in opposite directions, depending on the nature of the group involved. For example, solidarity within a particular group (for example, long-term residents of a region) can go with a less than friendly view of non-members of that group (such as new immigrants). The influence of the same community-centred thinking can be both positive for intra-community relations and negative in generating or sustaining exclusionary tendencies (including violent "anti-immigrant" sentiments and actions, as can be observed in some regions of impeccable "within community" solidarity). Identity-based thinking can have dichotomous features, since a strong sense of group affiliation can have a

<sup>12</sup> Condorcet (1795). See also Hume (1777) and Smith (1790).

<sup>13</sup> These issues are discussed in Sen (1999).

<sup>14</sup> See Ostrom (1990, 1998) and Putnam (1993).

<sup>15</sup> See particularly Putnam (1993) and Putnam, Leonardi and Nanetti (1993), and also Lowry (1977), Coleman (1977), Ostrom (1990, 1998). The concept of social capital and its uses receive attention in UNESCO (1998, 2000), Dasgupta and Serageldin (2000), Blau (2001a), and Throsby (2001).

cementing role within that group while encouraging rather severe treatment of non-members (seen as "others" who do not "belong"). If this dichotomy is right, then it may be a mistake to treat "social capital" as a general-purpose asset (as capital is, in general, taken to be), rather than as an asset for some relations and a liability for others. There is, thus, room for some searching scrutiny of the nature and operation of the important, but in some ways problematic, concept of "social capital."

(6) Cultural sites and recollection of past heritage: Another constructive possibility is the furtherance of a clearer and broader understanding of a country's or community's past through systematic exploration of its cultural history. For example, by supporting historical excavations, explorations and related research, development programmes can help to facilitate a fuller appreciation of the breadth of - and internal variations within - particular cultures and traditions. History often includes much greater variety of cultural influences and traditions than tends to be allowed by intensely political - and frequently ahistorical - interpretations of the present. When this is the case, historical objects, sites and records can help to offset some of the frictions of confrontational modern politics.

For example, Arab history includes a long tradition of peaceful relation with Jewish populations. Similarly, Indonesian past carries powerful records of simultaneous flourishing of Hindu, Buddhist and Confucian cultures, side by side with the Islamic traditions. Butrint in Albania as a historical site shows flourishing presence of Greek, Roman and later Christian cultures, as well as Islamic history. The highlighting of a diverse past that may go with the excavation, preservation and accessibility of historical objects and sites can, thus, have a possible role in promoting toleration of diversity in contemporary settings, and in countering confrontational use of "monocultural" readings of a nation's past.

For example, the recent attempt by Hindu activists to see India as just a "Hindu country," in which practitioners of other religions must have a less privileged position, clashes with the great diversity of Indian history. This includes a thousand years of Buddhist predominance (with sites all over India), a long history of Jain culture, conspicuous presence of Christians from the fourth century and of Parsees from the eighth, Muslim settlements of Arab traders in South India from about the same time, massive interactions between Muslims and Hindus all over the country (including new departures in painting, music, literature and architecture), the birth and flourishing of Sikhism (as a new Indian religion that drew on but departed from previous ones), and so on. The recollection of history can be a major ally in the cultivation of toleration and celebration of diversity, and these are - directly and indirectly - among important features of development.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Often many different arguments can point in the same direction, in terms of needed action. For example, there has been

(7) Cultural influences on value formation and evolution: Not only is it the case that cultural factors figure among the ends and means of development, they can also have a central role even in the formation of values. This in turn can be influential in the identification of our ends and the recognition of plausible and acceptable instruments to achieve those ends. For example, open public discussion - itself a cultural achievement of significance - can be powerfully influential in the emergence of new norms and fresh priorities.

Indeed, value formation is an interactive process, and the culture of talking and listening can play a significant part in making these interactions possible. As new standards emerge, it is public discussion as well as proximate emulation that may spread the new norms across a region and ultimately between regions. For example, the emergence of norms of low fertility rates, or non-discrimination between boys and girls, or wanting to send children to schools, and so on, are not only vitally important features of development, they may be greatly influenced by a culture of free discussion and open public debate, without political barriers or social suppression.<sup>17</sup>

### 3. Integration

In seeing the role of culture in development, it is particularly important to place culture in an adequately capacious framework. The reasons for this are not hard to seek. First, influential as culture is, it is not uniquely pivotal in determining our lives and identities. Other things, such as class, race, gender, profession and politics also matter, and can matter powerfully. Our cultural identity is only one of many aspects of our self-realization and is only one influence among a great many that can inspire and influence what we do and how we do it. Further, our behaviour depends not only on our values and predispositions, but also on the hard facts of the presence or absence of relevant institutions and on the incentives - prudential or moral - they generate.<sup>18</sup>

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only partial excavation of the ruins of the ancient Buddhist university of Nalanda in India, which had come to its end in the twelfth century about the time when Oxford University was being founded (after having flourished for many hundreds of years, and having attracted scholars from abroad as well as within India - Hsuan Tsang from China in the 7th century was one of the most prominent alumnus of Nalanda). Further investment in Nalanda's excavation, accessibility and facilities will not only encourage tourism, and generate income in one of the poorest parts of India, but can also help to generate a fuller understanding of the diversity of India's historical traditions.

<sup>17</sup> See Basu (1992), Sen, Germain and Chen (1994), and Drèze and Sen (1995, 2002).

<sup>18</sup> See North (1981, 1990), Sen (1984), Ostrom (1990, 1998), Douglas (1992), Blau (1993), Goody (1996), Bowles (1998), Platteau (2000), Arizpe (2001), among other contributions.

Second, culture is not a homogeneous attribute - there can be great variations even within the same general cultural milieu. Cultural determinists often underestimate the extent of heterogeneity within what is taken to be "one" distinct culture. Discordant voices are often "internal," rather than coming from outside. Since culture has many aspects, heterogeneity can also arise from the particular components of culture on which we decide to concentrate (for example, whether we look particularly at religion, or at literature, or at music, or generally at the style of living).<sup>19</sup>

Third, culture absolutely does not sit still. Any presumption of stationarity - explicit or implicit - can be disastrously deceptive. To talk of, say, the Hindu culture, or for that matter the Indian culture, taken to be well defined in a temporally stationary way, not only overlooks the great variations within each of these categories, but also ignores their evolution and their large variations over time. The temptation towards using cultural determinism often takes the hopeless form of trying to fix the cultural anchor on a rapidly moving boat.

Finally, cultures interact with each other and cannot be seen as insulated structures. The isolationalist view - often implicitly presumed - can be deeply delusive.<sup>20</sup> Some times we may be only vaguely aware how an influence came from outside, but it need not be unimportant for that reason. For example, while chili was unknown in India before the Portuguese brought it there in the sixteenth century, it is now a thoroughly Indian spice.<sup>21</sup> Cultural features - from the most trivial to the most profound - can change radically, sometimes leaving little trace of the past behind.

Taking culture to be independent, unchanging and unchangeable can indeed be very problematic. But that, on the other hand, is no reason for not taking full note of the importance of culture seen in an adequately broad perspective. It is certainly possible to pay adequate attention to culture, along with taking into account all the qualifications just discussed. Indeed, if culture is recognised to be non-homogeneous, non-static, and interactive, and if the importance of culture is integrated with rival sources of influence, then culture can be a very positive and constructive part in our understanding of human behaviour and of social and

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<sup>19</sup> There are, as a consequence, considerable difficulties in finding suitable indicators of "cultural development," on which see Pattanaik (1998) and Alkire (2002).

<sup>20</sup> On this see Goody (1996) and Throsby (2001).

<sup>21</sup> Since I don't like chili, I have much practical experience of how hard it is to escape this foreign import in many parts of India. I also frequently encounter the comment that my culinary taste must have become corrupted by my spending a lot of time in the West. To this I have to reply, "No, it is pre-colonial - what we Indians ate prior to Western imperialism messed up our eating habits." There seems to be little memory left in India of its pre-Portuguese, pre-chili taste.



economic development.

#### 4. Bigotry and Alienation

However, the "how not" issue does deserve extremely serious attention, since rapid-fire cultural generalizations can not only undermine a deeper understanding of the role of culture, but also serve as a tool of sectarian prejudices, social discrimination, and even political tyranny. Simple cultural generalizations have great power in fixing our way of thinking, and often enough they are not just harmless fun. The fact that such generalizations abound in popular beliefs and in informal communication is easily recognized. Not only are these underexamined implicit beliefs the subject matter of many racist jokes and ethnic slurs, they sometimes surface as pernicious grand theories. When there is an accidental correlation between cultural prejudice and social observation (no matter how casual), a theory is born, and it may refuse to die even after the chance correlation vanishes altogether.

For example, concocted jokes against the Irish (such crudities as "how many Irishmen do you need to change a light bulb"), which has had some currency in England for a long time, appeared to fit well with the depressing predicament of the Irish economy, when the Irish economy was doing quite badly. But when the Irish economy started growing astonishingly rapidly - indeed faster than any other European economy (as it did, for many years) - the cultural stereotyping and its allegedly profound economic and social relevance were not junked as sheer and unmitigated rubbish. Theories have lives of their own, quite defiantly of the phenomenal world that can be actually observed.

As it happens, cultural prejudice did play a role in the treatment that Ireland received from the British government, and had a part even in the non-prevention of the famines of the 1840s, which killed a higher proportion of the population than in any other recorded famine. Joel Mokyr (1983) has discussed the contribution of cultural alienation in London's treatment of Irish problems.<sup>22</sup> As Lebow has argued, while poverty in Britain was typically attributed to economic change and fluctuations, Irish poverty was widely viewed in England as being caused by laziness, indifference and ineptitude, so that "Britain's mission" was not seen as one "to alleviate Irish distress but to civilize her people and to lead them to feel and act like human beings."<sup>23</sup>

The cultural roots of the Irish famines extend, in this sense, at least as far back as Spenser's Faerie Queene, published in 1590, and perhaps even earlier. The art of blaming the victims, plentifully present in the Faerie Queene itself, survived through the famines of the 1840s, and the Irish taste for potato

<sup>22</sup> In Why Ireland Starved, Joel Mokyr argues that "Ireland was considered by Britain as an alien and even hostile nation" (Mokyr, 1983, p. 291).

<sup>23</sup> See Mokyr's (1983, pp. 291-2) balanced assessment of this line of diagnosis.

was added to the list of the calamities which the natives had, in English view, brought on themselves. Charles Edward Trevelyan, the Head of the Treasury during the famines, expressed his belief that Britain had done what it could for Ireland, even as the famine - with little public relief - killed rampantly, and even as ship after ship, laden with wheat, oats, cattle, pigs, eggs and butter, sailed down the Shannon, bound for England (which had greater purchasing power than starving Ireland and could buy what the Irish - hit by the potato blight - could not afford). Trevelyan also pointed to some remarkable cultural explanations of the hunger, including: "There is scarcely a woman of the peasant class in the West of Ireland whose culinary art exceeds the boiling of a potato."<sup>24</sup>

The connection between cultural bigotry and political tyranny can be very close. The asymmetry of power between the ruler and ruled can be combined with cultural prejudices in explaining failures of governance, as is spectacularly observed through the Irish famines of the 1840s.<sup>25</sup> Similar use of cultural prejudice for political irresponsibility (or worse) can also be seen in the history of European empires in Asia and Africa. Winston Churchill's famous remark that the Bengal famine of 1943 was caused by the tendency of people there to "breed like rabbits" belongs to this general tradition of blaming the colonial victim, and it had a profound effect in crucially delaying famine relief in that disastrous famine.<sup>26</sup> Cultural critiques of the victims can be used by the rulers to justify hugely inefficient - as well as deeply iniquitous - tyrannies.

##### 5. Cultural Determinism

While the marriage of cultural prejudice and political asymmetry can be quite lethal, the need to be cautious about jumping to cultural conclusions is more pervasive. It can even influence the way experts see the nature and challenges of economic development. Theories are often derived from fairly scanty evidence. Half-truths or quarter-truths can grossly mislead - some times even more than straightforward falsity, which are easier to expose.

Consider, for example, the following argument from the influential and important book jointly edited by Lawrence Harrison and Samuel Huntington called Culture Matters (to which I referred earlier), and in particular from Huntington's introductory essay in that volume called "cultures count":

In the early 1990s, I happened to come across economic data on Ghana and South Korea in the early 1960s, and I was

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<sup>24</sup> See Woodham-Smith (1962), p. 76.

<sup>25</sup> On this see Woodham-Smith (1962), Mokyr (1983), O Grada (1989), and Eagleton (1995).

<sup>26</sup> Churchill also explained that his job in governing India was made difficult by the fact that Indians were "the beastliest people in the world, next to the Germans" (see Roberts 1994, p. 213).

astonished to see how similar their economies were then. ....Thirty years later, South Korea had become an industrial giant with the fourteenth largest economy in the world, multinational corporations, major exports of automobiles, electronic equipment, and other sophisticated manufactures, and per capita income approximately that of Greece, Moreover it was on its way to the consolidation of democratic institutions. No such changes had occurred in Ghana, whose per capita income was now about one-fifteenth that of South Korea's. How could this extraordinary difference in development be explained? Undoubtedly, many factors played a role, but it seemed to me that culture had to be a large part of the explanation. South Koreans valued thrift, investment, hard work, education, organization, and discipline. Ghanians had different values. In short, cultures count.<sup>27</sup>

There may well be something of interest in this engaging comparison (perhaps even a quarter-truth torn out of context), and the contrast does call for probing examination. And yet, as used in the explanation just cited, the causal story is extremely deceptive. There were many important differences - other than their cultural predispositions - between Ghana and Korea in the 1960s when they appeared to Huntington to be much the same, except for culture. First, the class structures in the two countries were quite different, with a very much bigger - and pro-active - role of business classes in South Korea. Second, the politics were very different too, with the government in South Korea willing and eager to play a prime-moving role in initiating a business-centred economic development in a way that did not apply to Ghana. Third, the close relationship between the Korean economy and the Japanese economy, on the one hand, and the United States, on the other, made a big difference, at least in the early stages of Korean development. Fourth - and perhaps most important - by the 1960s South Korea had acquired a much higher literacy rate and much more expanded school system than Ghana had. The Korean changes had been brought about in the post-second-world-war period, largely through resolute public policy, and it could not be seen just as a reflection of age-old Korean culture.<sup>28</sup>

On the basis of the slender scrutiny offered, it is hard to justify either the cultural triumphalism in favour of Korean culture, or the radical pessimism about Ghana's future that the reliance on cultural determinism would tend to suggest. Neither can be derived from the over-rapid and underanalyzed comparison that accompanies the heroic diagnostics. As it happens, South Korea did not rely just on its traditional culture. From the 1940s onwards, it deliberately followed lessons from abroad to use public policy to advance its backward school education.

And it has continued to learn from global experience even today. Sometimes the lessons have come from experience of failure

<sup>27</sup> Harrison and Huntington (2000), p. xiii.

<sup>28</sup> See McGinn et al (1980).

rather than success. The east Asian crisis that overwhelmed South Korea among other countries in the region brought out some of the penalties of not having a fully functioning democratic political system. When things moved up and up together, the voice that democracy gives to the underdog may not have been immediately missed, but when the economic crisis came, and divided they fell (as they typically do in such a crisis), the newly impoverished missed the voice that democracy would have given them to use for protest and to demand economic redress. Along with the recognition of the need to pay attention to downside risks and to economic security, the bigger issue of democracy itself became a predominant focus of attention in the politics of economic crisis.

This happened in the countries hit by the crisis, such as South Korea, Indonesia, Thailand, and others, but there was also a global lesson here about the special contribution of democracy in helping the victims of disaster, and the need to think not only about "growth with equity" (the old Korean slogan), but also about "downturn with security."<sup>29</sup>

Similarly, the cultural damning of the prospects of development in Ghana and other countries in Africa is simply over-hasty pessimism with little empirical foundation. For one thing, it does not take into account how rapidly many countries - South Korea included - have changed, rather than remaining anchored to some fixed cultural parameters. Misidentified quarter-truths can be dreadfully misleading.

There have, of course, been various earlier attempts at cultural determinism in explaining economic development. Indeed, a century ago, Max Weber (1930), the great sociologist, had presented a major thesis on the decisive role of Protestant ethics (in particular, of Calvinist ethics) in the successful development of a capitalist industrial economy.<sup>30</sup> Weberian analysis of the role of culture in the emergence of capitalism drew on the world as he had observed it in the late nineteenth century.<sup>31</sup> It is of particular dialectical interest in the contemporary world in light especially of the recent success of market economies in non-Protestant and even non-Christian societies.

Max Weber was particularly clear that Confucianism was quite unsuited for a dynamic industrial economy. "The Calvinist ethic," Anthony Giddens summarizes Weber, "introduced an activism into the believer's approach to worldly affairs, a drive to mastery in a quest for virtue in the eyes of God, that are altogether lacking in Confucianism," adding: "Confucian values do not promote such rational instrumentalism."<sup>32</sup> In sharp contrast with this view,

<sup>29</sup> On this see Sen (1999).

<sup>30</sup> Max Weber, Protestant ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (1904-5).

<sup>31</sup> See, however, Goody's (1996) powerful critique of this reading of history.

<sup>32</sup> Anthony Giddens, "Introduction" in Weber (1930), p. xvi. See also Weber (1951).

many writers in present-day Asia make the opposite claim that Confucian ethics is particularly suited for success of industrial and economic progress, as illustrated by the performance of east Asia. There have, in fact, been several different theories seeking explanation of the high performance of east Asian economies in terms of local culture. Michio Morishima (a great economist) has traced the roots of "the Japanese ethos" to the special history of its feudal system; Ronald Dore (a great sociologist) has emphasized the contribution of "Confucian ethics"; Eiko Ikegami (a brilliant young Japanese historian) has focused on the influence of the "Samurai code of honour."<sup>33</sup>

There is much to learn from these theories, and the empirical connections they have brought out have been insightful. And yet it is also remarkable how the specific aspects of cultural explanations, based on observing the past, have often foundered in the light of later experience. Indeed, theories of cultural determinism have often been one step behind the actual world. By the time Max Weber's privileging of "protestant ethics" (based on nineteenth century experience) was getting widely recognised, many of the Catholic countries, including France and Italy, were beginning to grow faster than protestant Britain or Germany. The thesis had to be, then, altered, and the privileged culture was taken more generally to be Christian and Western, rather than specifically Protestant.

However, by the time that Eurocentric view of the culture of development got established, Japan was growing much faster than the West. So Japan had to be included in the privileged category, and there was useful work on the role of Japanese ethos, Samurai culture, etc. But, by the time the specialness of Japan was well understood, the East Asian economies were growing very fast, and there was a need to broaden the theory of Japan's specialness to include the wider coverage of "Confucian" ethics and a wider and a more spacious regional tradition, fuzzily described as "Asian values." However, by the time that "Confucian" theory had become well established, the fastest growing economy in the world was Thailand, which is a Buddhist country. Indeed, Japan, Korea, China and Taiwan too have much Buddhist influence in their culture. The grand cultural theories have a propensity to trail one step behind the world of practice, rather than serving as a grand predictive device.

This record need not, however, be seen as one of embarrassment, since we have learned many things from a closer understanding of the cultural linkages emerging from these specialized studies. But attempts to view culture as a singular, stationary and independent source of development have not - and could not have - worked.

Just to illustrate, consider Korea again, which is often seen as a quintessential exemplification of the power of "Asian values"

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<sup>33</sup> See Morishima (1982), Dore (1987), and Ikegami (1995), among other investigations of the cultural aspects of Japanese economic success.

and of the reach of Confucian ethics in industrial development. Confucianism has indeed been a major cultural influence in this country, but there have been many different interpretations of Confucianism. For example, in the fifteenth century onwards, the "Neo-Confucian literati" (Sarim) challenged the earlier readings of Confucianism, and interpretational disputes were powerfully pursued by the different sides. Neo-Confucians themselves divide into different schools, according to different lines of division, including the classic Chinese distinction between li and ch'i (called, I understand, i and ki in Korea). In the seventeenth and early eighteenth century, the contest between the "Old Doctrine" (Noron), led by Song Si-yol, and the "Young Doctrine" (Sorun), led by Yun Chung, related in part to different views of good behaviour and of good social arrangements. Confucianism does not speak in one voice, and the particular emphasis on li (or i, in Korean) in the authoritarian interpretations of Confucius is by no means the only claim that obtains loyalty.

There are also influences other than Confucianism. Buddhism, as was mentioned before, has been a major force in Korea, as it has been in China and Japan. From the seventh century when Buddhism became the state religion, it has had political ups and downs, but a constant cultural presence in this country. Christianity too has had a major presence in Korea, and from the eighteenth century, regular intellectual confrontations can be seen between the creed of so-called "Western learning", which disputed Confucian orthodoxy, along with other challengers, such as the individualist doctrines of the Wang Yang-ming school of Neo-Confucianism, and of course various theorists of Buddhism. The richness and diversity in Korea's cultural past cannot be reduced into a simple story of cultural determinism, woven around an allegedly homogeneous Confucian ethics, or the overarching role of an ill-defined "Asian values."<sup>34</sup>

## 6. Interdependence and Learning

While culture does not work in isolation from other social influences, once we place culture in adequate company, it can greatly help to illuminate our understanding of the world, including the process of development and the nature of our identity. Let me refer again to South Korea, which was a much more literate and more educated society than Ghana in the 1960s (when the two economies appeared rather similar to Huntington). The contrast, as was already mentioned, was very substantially the result of public policies pursued in South Korea in the post-second-world-war period.

To be sure, the post-war public policies on education were also influenced by antecedent cultural features. It would be surprising had there been no such connection. In a two-way relation, just as education influences culture, so does antecedent culture have an effect on educational policies. It is, for example, remarkable that nearly every country in the world with a

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<sup>34</sup> See Han (1971), Henthorn (1971), and Lee (1984).

powerful presence of Buddhist tradition has tended to embrace widespread schooling and literacy with some eagerness. This applies not only to Japan and Korea, but also to China, and Thailand, and Sri Lanka. Indeed, even miserable Burma, with a dreadful record of political oppression and social neglect, still has a higher rate of literacy than its neighbours in the subcontinent. Seen in a broader framework, there is probably something here to investigate and learn from.<sup>35</sup>

It is, however, important to see the interactive nature of the process in which contact with other countries and the knowledge of their experiences can make a big difference in practice. There is every evidence that when Korea decided to move briskly forward with school education at the end of the second world war, it was influenced not just by its cultural interest in education, but also by a new understanding of the role and significance of education, based on the experiences of Japan and the West, including the United States.<sup>36</sup>

There is a similar story, earlier on, of interaction and response in Japan's own history of educational development. When Japan emerged from its self-imposed isolation from the world from the beginning of the seventeenth century, under the Tokugawa regime, it already had a relatively well developed school system, and in this Japan's traditional interest in education would have played a significant part. Indeed, at the time of Meiji restoration in 1868, Japan had a higher rate of literacy than Europe, despite being economically quite underdeveloped. And yet the rate of literacy in Japan was still low (as indeed it was in Europe too), and no less importantly the Japanese education system was quite out of touch with knowledge and learning in the industrializing West.<sup>37</sup> When, in 1852, Commodore Mathew Perry chugged into the Edo Bay, puffing black smoke from the newly designed steamship, the Japanese were not only impressed - and somewhat terrified - and were driven to accept diplomatic and trade relations with the USA, they also had to re-examine and re-assess their intellectual isolation from the world. This contributed to the political process that led to the Meiji restoration, and along with that came a determination to change the face of Japanese education. In the so-called "Charter Oath," proclaimed also in 1868, there is a firm declaration on the need to "seek knowledge widely throughout the world."<sup>38</sup>

The Fundamental Code of Education issued three years later,

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<sup>35</sup> Given the importance that is attached in Buddhism to the ability of people to read religious and philosophical discourses, there is even a prima facie motivational connection here that can be cogently examined and critically scrutinized. Indeed, one of Buddha's criticisms of Hinduism in his time was that the scriptures were in Sanskrit, which made them inaccessible to the common people of India.

<sup>36</sup> See McGinn et al (1980) and Lee (1984).

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, Cummings (1980), chapter Two.

<sup>38</sup> Cummings, Education and Equality in Japan, p. 17.

in 1872, put the new educational determination in unequivocal terms:

There shall, in the future, be no community with an illiterate family, nor a family with an illiterate person.<sup>39</sup>

Kido Takayoshi, one of the most influential leaders of that period, put the basic issue with great clarity:

Our people are no different from the Americans or Europeans of today; it is all a matter of education or lack of education.<sup>40</sup>

That was the challenge that Japan took on with determination, and things moved rapidly forward.

Between 1906 and 1911, education consumed as much as 43 per cent of the budgets of the towns and villages, for Japan as a whole.<sup>41</sup> By 1906, the recruiting army officers found that, in contrast with late nineteenth century, there was hardly any new recruit who was not literate. By 1910, it is generally acknowledged that Japan had universal attendance in primary schools. By 1913, even though Japan was still economically very poor and underdeveloped, it had become one of the largest producers of books in the world - publishing more books than Britain and indeed more than twice as many as the United States. Indeed, Japan's entire experience of economic development was, to a great extent, driven by human capability formation, which included the role of education and training, and this was promoted both by public policy and by a supportive cultural climate (interacting with each other). The dynamics of associative relations are extraordinarily important in understanding how Japan laid the foundations of its spectacular economic and social development.

To carry the story further, Japan was not only a learner but also a great teacher. Development efforts of countries in East and South-east Asia were profoundly influenced by Japan's experience in expanding education and its manifest success in transforming society and the economy.<sup>42</sup> There is a fund of cultural and economic wisdom there from which the world can draw lessons in development. India today may be immensely more advanced technologically and even economically than Japan in the Meiji period, and yet India is paying a very heavy price for ignoring the cultural lessons on the critical role of basic education that emerged so profoundly in the economically poor and politically primitive Meiji Japan.<sup>43</sup>

Cultural interrelations within a broad framework does indeed provide a useful focus for our understanding. It contrasts both

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<sup>39</sup> See Passin (1965), pp. 209-11; also Cummings, p. 17.

<sup>40</sup> Quoted in Kumon and Rosovsky (1992), p. 330.

<sup>41</sup> On these see Gluck (1985).

<sup>42</sup> The role of education in the economic development of East and South-east Asia is extensively discussed in World Bank (1993).

<sup>43</sup> On this see Drèze and Sen (1995, 2002).



with neglecting culture altogether (as some economic models do), and also with the privileging of culture in stationary and isolated terms (as is done in some social models of cultural determinism). We have to go well beyond both and integrate the role of culture with other aspects of our life.

### 7. Cultural Globalization

I turn now to what may appear to be a contrary consideration.

It might be asked, in praising inter-country interactions and the positive influence of learning from elsewhere, am I not overlooking the threat that global interrelations pose to integrity and survival of local culture? In a world that is so dominated by the "imperialism" of the culture of the Western metropolis, surely the basic need is, it can be argued, to strengthen resistance, rather than to welcome global influence.

Let me first say that there is no contradiction here. Learning from elsewhere involves freedom and judgment, not being overwhelmed and dominated by outside influence without choice, without scope for one's volitional agency. The threat of being overwhelmed by the superior market power of an affluent West, which has asymmetric influence over nearly all the media, raises a different type of issue altogether. In particular, it does not contradict in any way the importance of learning from elsewhere.

But how should we think about global cultural invasion itself as a threat to local cultures? There are two issues of particular concern here. The first relates to the nature of market culture in general, since that is part and parcel of economic globalization. Those who find the values and priorities of a market-related culture vulgar and impoverishing (many who take this view belong to the West itself) tend to find economic globalization to be objectionable at a very basic level.<sup>44</sup> The second issue concerns the asymmetry of power between the West and the other countries, and the possibility that this asymmetry may translate into destruction of local cultures - a loss that may culturally impoverish non-Western societies. Given the constant cultural bombardment that tends to come from the Western metropolis (through MTV to Kentucky Fried Chicken), there are genuine fears that native traditions may get drowned in that loud din.

Threats to older native cultures in the globalizing world of today are, to a considerable extent, inescapable. It is not easy to solve the problem by stopping globalization of trade and commerce, since the forces of economic exchange and division of labour are hard to resist in an interacting world. Globalization does, of course, raise other problems as well, and its distributional consequences have received much criticism recently.

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<sup>44</sup> For various assessments of market-oriented cultures, arguing in different directions, see Hirschman (1977, 1982), Brittan and Hamlin (1995), Griffin (1996), Klamer (1996), Appadurai (1996), Bowles (1998), Cowen (1998, 2002), Landes (1998), UNESCO (1998, 2000), Arizpe (2000), Blau (2001b), Throsby (2001).

On the other hand, it is hard to deny that global trade and commerce can bring with it - as Adam Smith foresaw - greater economic prosperity for each nation. The challenging task is to get the benefits of globalization on a more shared basis. While that primarily economic question need not detain us here (which I have tried to discuss elsewhere, particularly in Sen 1999), there is a related question in the field of culture, to wit, how to increase the real options - the substantive freedoms - that people have, by providing support for cultural traditions that they may want to preserve. This cannot but be an important concern in any development effort that brings about radical changes in the ways of living of people.

Indeed, a natural response to the problem of asymmetry must take the form of strengthening the opportunities that local culture can have, to be able to hold its own against an overpowered invasion. If foreign imports dominate because of greater control over the media, surely one counteracting policy must involve expanding the facilities that local culture gets, to present its own ware, both locally and beyond it. This is a positive response, rather than the temptation - a very negative temptation - to ban foreign influence.

Ultimately, for both the concerns, the deciding issue must be one of democracy. An overarching value must be the need for participatory decision-making on the kind of society people want to live in, based on open discussion, with adequate opportunity for the expression of minority positions. We cannot both want democracy, on the one hand, and yet, on the other, rule out certain choices, on traditionalist grounds, because of their "foreignness" (irrespective of what people decide to choose, in an informed and reflected way). Democracy is not consistent with options of citizens being banished by political authorities, or by religious establishments, or by grand guardians of taste, no matter how unbecoming they find the new predilection to be. Local culture may indeed need positive assistance to compete in even terms, and support for minority tastes against foreign onslaught may also be a part of the enabling role of a democratic society, but the prohibition of cultural influences from abroad is not consistent with a commitment to democracy and liberty.

Related to this question there is also a more subtle issue that takes us beyond the immediate worry about bombardment of mass Western culture. This concerns the way we see ourselves in the world - a world that is asymmetrically dominated by Western preeminence and power. Through a dialectic process, this can, in fact, lead to a powerful inclination to be aggressively "local" in culture, as a kind of "brave" resistance to Western dominance. In an important paper, called "What Is a Muslim?", Akeel Bilgrami has argued that the confrontational relations often lead people to see themselves as "the other" - defining their identity as being emphatically different from that of Western people.<sup>45</sup> Something of this "otherness" can be seen in the emergence of various self-

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<sup>45</sup> See Bilgrami (1995).

definitions that characterize cultural or political nationalism and religious assertiveness or even fundamentalism. While belligerently anti-Western, these developments are, in fact, deeply foreign-dependent - in a negative and contrary form. Indeed, seeing oneself as "the other" does less than justice to one's free and deliberative agency.<sup>46</sup> This problem too has to be dealt with in way that is consistent with democratic values and practice, if that is taken to be a priority. Indeed, the "solution" to the problem that Bilgrami diagnoses cannot lie in "prohibiting" any particular outlook, but in public discussion that clarifies and illuminates the possibility of being alienated from one's own independent agency.

Finally, I should mention that one particular concern I have not yet discussed arises from the belief - often implicit - that each country or collectivity must stick to its "own culture," no matter how attracted people are to "foreign cultures." This fundamentalist position not only involves the need to reject importing Macdonalds and beauty contests to the non-Western world, but also the enjoyment there of Shakespeare or ballets or even cricket matches. Obviously enough, this highly conservative position must be in some tension with the role and acceptability of democratic decisions, and I need not repeat what I have already said about the conflict between democracy and the arbitrary privileging of any practice. But it also involves an additional philosophical issue about the labelling of cultures on which Rabindranath Tagore, the poet, had warned.

This concerns the issue whether one's culture is to be defined by the geographical origin of a practice, rather than by its manifest use and enjoyment. Tagore (1928) put his argument against regional labelling with great force:

Whatever we understand and enjoy in human products instantly becomes ours, wherever they might have their origin. I am proud of my humanity when I can acknowledge the poets and artists of other countries as my own. Let me feel with unalloyed gladness that the all the great glories of man are mine.

The criteria of understanding and assessment are important, but - as Tagore rightly noted - the inert place of origin has no right to alienate us from what we enjoy and have reason to cherish. Culture, after all, is more than mere geography.

#### 8. Concluding Remarks

To conclude, I have tried to discuss, first of all, how - in many different ways - culture interacts with development. There are complex epistemic, ethical and political issues involved in identifying the ways in which culture may or may not influence development. Some specific lines of connection have been identified, particularly related to the demands of assessment and

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<sup>46</sup> On a related issue, in the context of Indian identity, see Sen (1997).

policy.

Second, the acknowledgement of the importance of culture cannot be instantly translated into ready-made theories of cultural causation. It is evidently too easy to jump from the frying pan of neglecting culture into the fire of crude cultural determinism. The latter has caused much harm in the past (and has even encouraged political tyranny and social discrimination), and it continues to be a source of confusion which can seriously mislead assessment and policy in the contemporary world.

Third, what is needed is not the privileging of culture as something that works on its own, but the integration of culture in a wider picture, in which culture, seen in a dynamic and interactive way, is one important influence among many others. Attempts at integration have to pay particular attention to heterogeneity of each broadly defined culture, the interdependence between different cultures, and the vibrant nature of cultural evolutions.

Fourth, there has been much focus, in this essay, on the positive contributions that cultural influences across borders can make. But I have also discussed the cultural provocation that global asymmetry of power generates. There are good arguments for not being overwhelmed by this asymmetry - neither in the form of submissive supplication, nor in the dialectical and negative form of redefining oneself as "the other" (in contrast with "the West"), which makes one lose one's independent identity. Both these reactions can be contrasted with reliance on free and informed choice, aided by public discussion, critical scrutiny, and a participatory political environment.

There is no particular "compulsion" either to preserve departing life styles, or alternatively, to adopt the newest fashion from abroad, but there is a need for people to be able to take part in these social decisions. This gives further reason for attaching importance to such elementary capabilities as reading and writing (through basic education), being well-informed and well-briefed (through a free media), and having realistic chances of participating freely (through elections, referendums and the general use of civil rights). There are institutional demands for cultural democracy.

A democratic commitment is consistent with assisting local cultures to compete in comparable terms, but does not encourage the arbitrary elimination of options on grounds of their foreign origin or a priori unacceptability. The ultimate test is the freedom of the citizens to exercise their free agency and choose in an informed and participatory way. If that foundational value has priority, then other concerns have to be integrated with its preeminence.

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