

# CULTURE AND DEVELOPMENT

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Discourses on culture and development vary according to their conceptions of culture and of development and according to their standpoint. The 'culture and development' problematic has typically: (1) arisen from a conception of 'culture' as a relatively fixed, homogeneous set of mental programmes (categories, frameworks, images, values, norms) shared by members of a population; (2) contained an instrumental concern with how far such 'cultures' impede or promote 'development', largely conceived of as economic growth; and (3) involved outsiders looking at another group or country and seeking relatively simple explanations for perceived development success or failure. All three features are problematic. Alternatives exist, however, in each respect.

This entry refers to conceptions of culture, discourses about the implications of cultures and cultural dynamics for development, and ethical issues that arise when values clash and the value-content of 'development' is seen as dependent on culture. It questions the style of discourse in which developers seek to encapsulate the nature of 'others' yet rarely treat their own culture(s) so simply.

Cultural diversity is quite often ignored in social science, not least in development economics. People are presumed to be everywhere the same in perceptions and values, or those are considered superficial phenomena with expressive but not causal roles. Most conceptions of culture are less shallow than this, but vary in their degree of adequacy. Culture discourses reject the theory that all people behave identically as calculating acquisitive individuals, and treat sceptically claims that there are universally attractive and appropriate methods of governance and management. Van Nieuwenhuijze inverted economists' presumption and proposed that 'everything must be taken as culture-specific until it is proven to be general' (1986, p. 107) rather than the reverse.

## Conceptions of culture

We encounter diverse definitions of 'culture'. It may refer to, for example: (1) learnt rather than genetically inherited thoughts and behaviour; (2) a distinctive set of practices, a 'way of life'; (3) a system of values and attitudes that sustains a way of life; (4) more dynamically and openly, the shared learnt malleable rules, values, ideas and methods through which members of a group creatively deal with their environment. In development agency discourse and even in much development studies and everyday usage, 'culture' often more crudely refers to (5) the 'non-economic': whatever is marginal to or beyond the traditional categories of economics. Overall, 'culture' in 'culture and development' discourse can refer thus to numerous diverse matters, such as arts, religion, language, nationalism, minorities, identity and stereotyping, communities and communalism, 'social capital' and social networks, gender relations, and forms of generating, expressing, pursuing and managing conflicts (Schech and Haggis, 2002).

*Culture as a system of practices.* In some conceptions, culture includes artefacts, practices and institutions, perhaps as well as ideas and values. This has merits, but raises issues in

explaining and assessing change: does every change in practices imply a change in culture? Other conceptions use the hypothesis that practices stem from ideas and values while taking into account various conditions which can change; thus some changes in practices derive only from new external conditions and not from supposedly more fundamental changes of mentality.

*Culture as a system of values and attitudes.* A widespread approach for trying to understand and cope with cultural differences may be described as 'culture defined for management purposes'. It takes 'culture' as a type of mental programming/ information-processing system which is distinct from species-wide programming and from person-specific qualities (learnt or inherited). Group-specific qualities and their 'programmes' are the group's culture. People within a 'culture' are presumed to share many major values and mental tools, which mould and even dictate their behaviour in numerous important ways. The programming is deep for it comes largely during the intense and formative first two decades of a human life, by socialisation in a group or groups. In fact, nearly everyone interacts and is socialised within a number of groups (family, schools, work groups and peer groups, locality, nation, etc.) and hence belongs to a number of cultures. Much current discussion focuses on national units and national differences, which reflects not only the power of this level but the management purposes of multinational corporations (Hofstede, 1991; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1997) and the ongoing concerns of empire. Comparisons are made between the declared values and attitudes of Japanese, Americans, Germans, and nowadays also Chinese, Iraqis and any other national group.

This stress on distinct, diverse, dominant mental packages often leads to notions of 'other cultures' as obstacles (to economic growth or Westernisation) that need drastic reform, but sometimes to viewing them as resources. Such notions are prone to periodic inversion, as seen in the evolution of commonplace views about the instrumental efficacy of Chinese or Japanese cultures. The about-turns in intellectual fashion suggest that the underlying conception of culture is oversimplified. Amartya Sen (e.g. 2004) warns against 'freeze-frame theorizing': extrapolating from present discrepancies in performance to assert fundamental and enduring cultural differences.

*Culture as one source of influences on creative actors.* The image of culture as a package of mental programmes is too rigid and crude, argue most anthropologists and practitioners of cultural studies, an interdisciplinary field which has arisen since the 1960s (During, 1993; Schech and Haggis, 2000). Most of our shared mental programming is rather general, not highly determinant. Behaviour is influenced by some shared ideas at various levels, but such ideas are frequently ambiguous, plural and often contested within life spheres, and in competition across overlapping life spheres. And they evolve, especially in an interconnected globalized world; frequently in unexpected, even dramatic, ways.

Most cultural analysts now use a more complex, flexible and active concept of culture, as an evolving network of meanings, a language for engaging in experience. People make and remake meanings, groups and identities. This takes us back towards the original sense of culture as cultivation (as in 'agriculture'). Culture is constantly being contested and remade, not an exact and immutable set of programmes. While interpretation, re-interpretation and evolution are not excluded in the conception of culture as a system of values and attitudes, the activist conception of culture emphasises them far more. Dictation by culture appears to be more stressed the more remote that authors are from the diverse reality.

### **Some studies of culture and development**

Work continues on possible barriers to economic growth formed by cultures in poor groups and countries, sustaining what in the 1950s and 1960s was a predominantly North American tradition with a social psychology slant. Leading exemplars were David McLelland's theories of achievement motivation and Oscar Lewis's idea of a 'culture of poverty', which was reduced sometimes to a notion of a supposedly unitary pattern of 'escapism, impulse gratification, despair and resignation'. Robert Putnam et al.'s (1992) interpretation of 'social capital' is perhaps the leading current exemplar of barriers-and-keys work, and adds a stress on networks as well as norms. It has been taken up by the World Bank as a possible 'missing link' to explain or excuse why structural adjustment programmes imposed in Africa, Latin America and the former Soviet Union in the past 25 years, based on narrow economic models, were frequently disastrous (Dasgupta and Serageldin, 2000). Critics consider the attempt to reduce culture to another factor of production to be fatuous (Fine, 2000).

Kabeer (2000) provides an exemplary empirical and theoretical study of Bengali women workers in London and Dhaka, which sifts and synthesizes various explanatory strands. Women engaged actively in labour market choices, influenced by remuneration, the requirements of the work, and various evolving concerns, including for autonomy, affiliation, esteem and stimulation; within a field of choice delimited by ideas about what is and is not admissible. These predominant values varied however according to people's home-region in Bangladesh, and were also differently interpreted and weighted by different women and variously negotiated or contested with their families and peers. Choices were influenced by other contextual factors too; in London, for example, the availability of free schooling and health care reduced the pressure to earn, and together with widespread racism in the 'host' English culture group contributed to the prevalence of working from home. In both London and Dhaka, the Bengali women were not culture-less, gender-less 'economic men'; nor were they 'cultural dopes', cast and constrained in a single mould.

Other work starts from observed cultural energies and dynamics, including but not only in the arts, and considers their roles in social change. Amongst the most important work of this type are studies of communalism and nationalism, notably on the invention of 'traditions', national myths and national identities (e.g. Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983). Various authors suggest that nationalism is a modern formation, that motivates and sustains the painful introduction of modern impersonal large-scale systems by mobilizing the languages and emotions of supposed traditional community (e.g. Gellner, 1983; Kaviraj, 1992).

### **Dominant discourses of culture and development**

Why are such varied matters lumped together as 'cultural'? In many languages this sort of concept has not existed. It has arisen, firstly, in reaction to the modern idea of a universal 'economic man' and 'a world view according to which man as the subject deals with the reality surrounding him in a subject-object relationship: more precisely, in such a way that maximal returns are drawn from systematic effort' (van Nieuwenhuijze, 1986, p. 97). The concept of 'culture' has become used to stress aspects of life that are downgraded or ignored in that conception. Secondly, whereas in the West the concept of 'social' became the main repository for 'the jumble of non economic concerns that play second fiddle to the economic preoccupation' (ibid., p.101), for low-income countries 'culture' acquired that role, perhaps because the immediate means are lacking with which to match the scope of 'social policy' and 'social services' in the Western welfare state. More importantly, the power hierarchy and distance in

relation to the West have encouraged a stereotyping, generalising discourse from the West about others. It arises especially when the West's other generalising discourse of 'economic man' has not fitted well – 'the label "cultural" serves to indicate matters that are sensed rather than identified, apprehended rather than understood' (ibid., p.103) – or when claiming that extending equal opportunities to others would be pointless or somehow unfair to the West.

Edward Said and others have indicated how European and American 'Orientalist' authors built and sustained, since the eighteenth century or earlier, essentialist, hostile and self-idealising representations of 'the Orient' (Said, 1978; 1994). Ironically, the simplified generalisations not only generated resentful reactions but helped to create some of the unities which they posited. Some authors have investigated further the cultures of purported developers and historical under-developers. Kiernan's *The Lords of Human Kind* (1972) and Davis's *Late Victorian Holocausts* (2001) are seminal, dismaying accounts of widespread European imperial-era arrogance and inhumanity; for example in British rulers' self-congratulation on civilising late nineteenth century India while presiding with planned neglect over a series of ameliorable mega-famines. Thinkers like Theodore Roszak (1972) present dominant modern culture in the West as the systematised exploitation of all environments, human and non-human, based on reduction of everything to appetites and resources. They argue that this degrades the exploiters too and jeopardises everyone's flourishing and sustainability. Others suggest that nowadays values of doing and having dominate values of being (Fromm, 1978). Another stream of work investigates ethnographically the cultures of present-day development agencies and professionals (e.g. Crewe and Harrison, 1998; Hobart, 1993; Porter et al., 1991; Quarles van Ufford and Giri, 2003). Characteristic findings concern the power of agencies' own convenience and of myths which legitimise their style of operation. More such research is required on cultures not of the weak but of the strong, and on the obstacles those can form for human development.

### **Value differences**

If cultures centrally include values, even if with some internal disagreement; if cultures differ; and if development centres on choices, action and change, then central to discussion of culture and development must be consideration of value differences and disagreements (Gasper, 2004). 'Development', understood as economic growth, was earlier seen as a neutral tool that could promote whatever one's culture's goals were; but gradually the content, purposes and manner of development have been recognised as deeply normative matters, involving cultural and ethical choices. Many disagreements concern the relations between individual rights and group authority and rights; and many involve gender relations, since regulated group practices often concern reproductive life – matters of marriage, inheritance, family property and child custody (Okin et al., 1999; Nussbaum and Glover, 1995). In such discussions, crude conceptions of culture – as fixed, uniform and determinant – can reinforce the power of existing or aspirant elites.

Even positions which are uncomfortable with ethical debate and adopt a normative relativism – that values are purely culture-specific, not universal – often espouse a universal value that all cultures should be able to determine their own notion of and path to development rather than let stronger culture-groups impose their ideas. Declared universal values, such as that one or in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, might be grounded in various ways: in a proposed theory, or a demonstrable area of consensus between diverse traditions (as argued in e.g. Küng, 1997), or a mixture of the two methods. The World Commission on Culture and Development

(WCCD, 1995) used a mixture, employing both the near-universally endorsed Universal Declaration and the theoretical perspective of 'Human Development' from Sen and the UNDP.

Development studies and practice sorely need culturally aware approaches in explanation and prescription, but not the misconception of cultures as 'wired-in', fixed, consensual behavioural programming. Sen's normative framework is one attempt to be appropriately culturally sensitive and flexible within a universalist normative perspective (Sen, 1999). The 'cultural theory' of Mary Douglas and her school (e.g. Hood, 1998) shows an attempt at cultural analysis as a methodology for investigating differences and commonalities, rather than as an apparatus for simplistically pigeonholing other people.

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