

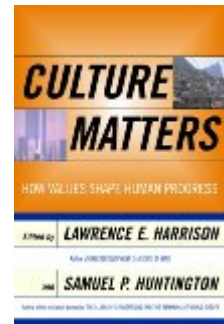
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Lawrence E. Harrison, Samuel P. Huntington, eds. *Culture Matters: How Values Shape Human Progress*. New York: Basic Books, 2000. xxxiv + 348 p. \$35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-465-03175-7.

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“Culture matters,” but how much the twenty-some contributors to this volume do not agree on. For a symposium at Harvard participating scholars, journalists, and practitioners did, however, agree to define culture as “the values, attitudes, beliefs, orientations, and underlying assumptions prevalent among people in a society.” And by “human progress” they mean “movement toward economic development and material well-being, social-economic equity, and political democracy.”

The introduction contends that the few countries that have risen out of the Third World since World War II have done so for cultural reasons. That it’s culture that matters in these successes is reinforced, it is asserted, by the contrasting achievements of different groups, like the Chinese and the Mexicans, in the same U.S. economy. (Though as a later contributor rightly points out, it is important to look at the subgroups of immigrants—are they elites, like many Indians, or are they uneducated peasants?) Moreover, even though the American Anthropological Association deemed the UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights “ethnocentric” in 1947, 50 years of communications revolution have made progress in the Western sense almost a universal aspiration. How and why such an aspiration has or has not been achieved is debated in seven sections.

In the first, “Culture and Economic Development,” Max Weber’s cultural argument that Protestantism generalized such values as rationality, diligence, productivity, as well as literacy and timeliness from the family to the population at large predominates. Somewhat ironically, all three contributors from less developed countries follow this Weberian vein and blame their home cultures’ resistance to change. A dissenter credits geogra-

phy, showing that almost all the wealthy countries are in the temperate zone and have good neighbors.

In “Culture and Political Development” we see empirical support for the Weberian vein as well as for the “modernization” view which links industrialization with shifts away from traditional values, shifts which, moreover, enhance democratic institutions and practices. But that Weberian “social capital” is needed to trust others with economic capital is demonstrated in the section on “The Asian Crisis” which resulted from overreliance on familism or personalism. Its “crony capitalism” raised those Asian “tigers” and then left them weak kittens when the business sector overextended itself, falsely relying on its crony, government, to bail it out. As Weber observed, under different circumstances the same values can produce entirely different results.

>From “The Anthropological Debate” we learn that most radical cultural relativists have recanted since 1947. If we define a “genuine” culture “as a way of life that is defensible in the face of criticism from abroad,” a claim that, say, genital mutilation is “useful” is simply objectionable. Americans have made way, as stressed in the section on “Culture and Gender,” for many new lifestyles that the large influx of different cultures has brought us, but we resist practices that restrict the lives of girls. It is bad enough that we have large proportions of African-American children suffering paternal abandonment as a result of the severe historical restrictions of slavery and Jim Crow, as is argued in the “Culture and American Minorities” section, but whether this is due to culture or economics remains debatable.

In the final section on “Promoting Change” poor countries are counseled to develop “competitive advan-

tage” by emphasizing human knowledge capital, meritocracy, and productivity, and called upon to teach progressive values, build organizations (like nonprofits) that in turn build social capital and trust, and thus produce the desired democratization.

These are the merest highlights of an exceedingly rich collection, and culture patently matters. But there are other factors, as the very examples of moving out of Third World status cited in the introduction illustrate. Hong-Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan are indeed geographically challenged and without great neighbors, but in Hong-Kong British legal and business practices, in South Korea and Taiwan Japanese and American influence, respectively, and in Singapore economic develop-

ment by diktat have surely mattered a great deal. And these examples suggest that modernization matters as well in that the adoption of “thin” aspects of global culture (like technology) may actually lead to the expansion of certain “thick” values (individualism, egalitarianism, human rights). But how much culture matters is perhaps best illuminated by the old joke: How many psychologists does it take to change a light bulb? Just one, but the bulb really has to want to change.

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