
How Important is Cultural Dependence?

Editorial

Amongst the central questions being discussed at IDS is 'dependence'. This used to be thought of mainly in economic terms. One reason for this was the realization in former colonies that political independence had a limited significance so long as the economy was tied closely to that of the former colonial power and other industrial countries. The emphasis on economic factors was reinforced by the dominance of economics within the social sciences, due (apparently) to an analytical framework which permitted extensive quantification of variables and their elaborate manipulation. Another influence was the Marxist theory that the economic base of a society determines other phenomena, which form the 'super-structure'.¹

The economic links may well be of greater significance, in some sense, but clearly some of the other phenomena can be both powerful and persistent. Educational systems, for example, can play an autonomous role in shaping the patterns of a country's history. And all over the world nationalism and racialism show remarkable vitality. (To argue that these are the products of 'false consciousness' is just to say that they cannot be comfortably fitted into a materialist ideology).

In analysing international affairs, too, one may have to search far for the economic determinants: repeated (and still continuing) attempts of successive United States governments to impose their will on Vietnam go well beyond what would be justified by any economic cost-benefit analysis. Indeed as far as Vietnam itself is concerned few would deny the impact at least in the short-term of military alignments in all fields, including the modes of production.

Other non-economic influences work across national boundaries. Transfers of the forms and styles of administration, systems of law and land tenure, may be attributable ultimately to the technical capacities of different countries (though even here it is not easy to disentangle cause and effect), but they acquire a considerable momentum of their own. It is several centuries since the

kingdoms of Spain and Portugal were rich and powerful enough to conquer the majority of the American continent, but the fact that they once did so still reverberates. Not merely do administrative and legislative patterns persist, but also the conquerers' religion and languages (which open up access to Iberian literature and have profound implications for the structure and style of thinking). These transmit from generation to generation the role which women should play and also, to take another example, the place of American Indians and blacks. It is true that United States influence has been very powerful in the past century and a half, as is strikingly evident in patterns of household and military expenditure, but in no Latin American country can a serious analysis, even of 'purely economic' problems, ignore the lingering effects of the Spanish and Portuguese inheritance.

Intangible influences of this kind—on attitudes, values, perceptions, tastes—can be summed up in the word 'cultural'. There is an old tradition, rooted in anthropology, which makes 'culture' cover in addition, institutions, techniques, rituals, etc., but this definition is so wide as to make it virtually useless for analysis.

The instruments that mould 'culture' in the more restrictive sense are numerous and powerful. Imported films, imported television programmes, imported novels, imported magazines and imported educational systems, have a greater significance than has been accorded to them in the past by economists. In all countries consumer demand is influenced in some degree by emulation of foreigners. But in countries where markets and research facilities are limited, patterns of consumption, and therefore of production, are not so much influenced as determined by foreign example. So is the choice of technology. The fact that a country is short of both capital and energy might be expected to discourage the purchase of consumer and producer machinery, e.g. cars and automatic textile plants. But purchases are often considerable, and may even absorb scarce foreign exchange.

It is not surprising that a rich person in a poor country may want to buy a motor car—to understand this there is no need to involve cultural imperialism. Nor is it odd that the manager of

¹ It is only fair to add that many latter-day Marxists would disown this view, at least in its more extreme forms, by calling it, rather conveniently, 'vulgar' Marxism.

a textile company should prefer labour-saving techniques to strikes. What is not so easy to explain is why import licences and foreign exchange allocations are available for such purposes, or why 'development' plans explicitly or implicitly allow for them.

At least part of the explanation lies in the forces shaping the way in which political leaders perceive their country's problems. A very strong current has been flowing, through both Right and Left channels, in favour of 'catching up with the West', 'closing gaps', 'modernization', 'bringing the countryside into the twentieth century', etc. Unselective mimicry of foreign technology in both consumption and production is not surprising if the lust for modernity dominates the political leadership. This is not often effectively challenged even by the social scientists—after all, their views are formed by imported texts, whether written by Karl Marx or Paul Samuelson.

Much of the research at IDS deals in one way or another with the cultural influences which flow between rich countries and poor—in fields such as education, health, and law, in particular. In addition an inter-disciplinary group has been studying not only the content of such influences but also the mechanisms through which they are transferred.² Rita Cruise O'Brien will, during 1975, be carrying out pilot studies in Senegal and Algeria for her research project on broadcasting systems in developing countries, specifically the technology transfer, the models of organization and the training involved. Keith Smith has been preparing a study of the relationship between the book-publishing industries in Britain and in Anglophone Middle Africa.

This area of cultural transfers is of course a professional minefield. As soon as the social scientist treats himself as part of any field of study in the social sciences (instead of acting like a metallurgist, say, who is a detached observer of that field) basic philosophical problems arise. These are compounded politically in the development field, especially at a British development institute. Once we see our position as purveyors of foreign (and at least partly irrelevant) culture, should we stop working on development problems? Are those in Britain who discuss cultural dependence acting as agents of a more subtle form of dominance?³

² See *IDS Bulletin*, vol. 6 no. 4.

³ I am not going to explore these questions further here—some aspects were discussed in my speech "What business it is of ours?" at the Ghent conference of the European Association of Development Research and Training Institutes, published in the conference proceedings.

The first article in this issue, by Susantha Goonatilake, raises such questions—though much more politely. He criticises the foreign influences on social scientists and policymakers in Sri Lanka—a case study, but one which opens up the issues of cultural dependence in the social sciences. Michael Lipton replies, stressing the basic universality of these sciences and the contribution which can be made by foreigners especially to the problems of small countries. (We would welcome further contributions on this crucial question).

It would be possible to interpret the somewhat unusual behaviour of General Amin in terms of 'psychological colonization' (following Otare Mannoni), specifically the tensions set up by imposing a Sandhurst training on an upbringing in a rural village. There are indeed often severe stresses on those whose lives straddle the traditional and foreign sectors, which can help explain tyrannical tendencies, not merely in Uganda. But Teddy Brett seeks the explanation of Uganda's turmoil in the struggles of social forces over resources which do not expand sufficiently quickly, a conflict aggravated by external pressures. Just as Michael Lipton raises questions about 'cultural dependence' from a position which, though personal, is within the mainstream tradition, Teddy Brett reminds us of the power of Marxist analysis, starting with the economy and the class structure.

Carlos Fortin deals with a classical form of dependence—on a multinational corporation for extraction of minerals and the supply of foreign exchange. Because of the common interests between corporations and governments, this means dependence also on the government of the country where the corporation has its headquarters. This important paper examines the historical context of the decision by the tragically aborted administration of Allende in Chile to take over the US-owned copper mines in Chile with rather nominal compensation. It is still unclear how much the *putsch* by General Pinochet and his fellow conspirators owed to efforts by the ITT and the CIA to 'destabilize' a government which was so unfriendly to foreign business. But the compensation agreements signed by the junta and analyzed by Carlos Fortin vividly reveal certain fundamental realities of dependence.

This issue of the *Bulletin* also contains reviews of some recent major studies of the world context of development. Hans Singer draws on more

than two decades of work with the United Nations to assess, on the whole favourably, the trenchant criticism which another former staff member, Shirley Hazzard, has made of the United Nations—its lack of independence, authority and efficiency, following the onslaughts of 'McCarthyism'. In a more political critique, Cheryl Payer has attacked the IMF as an instrument of imperialist domination; disguised as an international organization; Michael Kuczynski, formerly on the Fund's staff, defends it here from a conservative viewpoint. Ruth Pearson criticizes an earlier but still very influential work, Fritz Schumacher's **Small is Beautiful**, essentially because it concentrates so heavily on ideological

dependence and on the related growth-oriented strategies, rather than on the economic, social and political context. One can see a connection between her approach and Brett's.

The same theme reappears in a different form in the review of **The Homeless Mind**, in which Peter and Brigitte Berger and Hansfried Kellner extend the sociology of knowledge into the international field. Richard Stanton concludes that it is a fundamental error to divorce study of consciousness from study of the structure and dynamics of society. That is perhaps the message of this issue as a whole.