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'.

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 ex-
plain 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 sur-
prising 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 develop-
ment 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

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 uni-
versality 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
'physiological 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 tradi-
tional and foreign sectors, which can help explain
tyrrannical 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 head-
quarters. 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 Pino-
chet 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.

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