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# The Significance of Culture for Development Studies

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Culture does not, on the whole, seem to occupy a strategic, or even a minor but assured, place in most serious thinking about the sources and conditions of development. Economists tend to relegate it to the limbo of 'non-economic' factors. Marxists and radically inclined thinkers regard it as smoke-screen and rationalization or as a mere effect of the real phenomena, the structures of exploitation. It tends to get left to the moral exhortations which accompany the presentation of budgets and five-year plans, or else the private reflexions of planners. Yet it finds expression in a widespread feeling among laymen that a people's religious traditions, 'national character' and 'way of life' must have *some* effect, though an indeterminate one, on their material development.

It is easy enough to find reasons for the neglect of culture for 'harder' factors like the terms of world trade, the structure of control over key resources, etc.<sup>1</sup> The typical 'cultural' explanation has been a variant of either Weber's argument about the partial responsibility of Calvinism for capitalism or a psychologistic thesis which relates economic backwardness to the prevalence of an anti-modernizing personality.<sup>2</sup> There are two well-founded lines of objection to most theories of this kind. Firstly, they tend to be logically circular or ill-demonstrated. Behaviour alleged to be anti-developmental is explained with reference to a personality type governed by certain values and those values in turn are merely inferred from the anti-developmental behaviour. Alleged religious values, such as Islam's fatalism or Hinduism's other-worldliness, are usually not adequately connected at the empirical level to the behaviour they are held to explain, and it is rarely established how much of an *independent* variable the culture is. Secondly, such theories are largely ideological. Their function is to assign the blame for under-development to the peoples of the Third World themselves: the fault lies within their souls, as it were, and only conversion to the ideals of one of Samuel Smiles' (or Everett Rogers')

heroes will enable them to overcome their backwardness. This diagnosis remains unrelated to an examination of the context of underdevelopment as a social system which is historically engendered. More serious still is the implication that the true path to development lies through the spread of the entrepreneurial attitudes and managerial skills typical of the capitalist West—though this is very likely an option on which history has foreclosed.

But the weakness of these arguments does not oblige us to dismiss culture as a feature of no consequence for the process of development. Culture does not just mean 'values' or personality, but rather the great corpus of techniques, knowledge, models of social organization, ideals and aspirations, specific to a society, which is handed down and learned in each generation and enables a particular form of social life to take place. Culture is a 'way of life', rather than the actual observable pattern of living at any one time. It consists of ideal elements: people's notions about what exists and about the conditions of their existence, about what they would like to see for themselves and their society and about how they might achieve them.<sup>3</sup> If we begin the explanation of social change by delineating the context in which it occurs, we can only complete it by relating it to the ideas of the people who confront that context as a given.

## Cultural ends and cultural means

Development—and here I mean what Institutes of Development Studies think they are contributing to, rather than what an evolutionary cultural anthropologist may conceive to be the pattern of centuries of history—must be seen as a culturally shaped process in a more precise and strong sense. Such direction as there has been in the history of human society—secular increases in productivity, population density, scale and complexity of political organization—has been teleonomic rather than teleological. Individuals, groups and societies have acted purposively with respect to particular problems, and some outcomes have thus been the results of their purposes. But any directionality of the whole has been the sum of the unintended consequences of this. But since the Enlightenment articulated the goal of mankind's perfectability, the hope has been that

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1 See J. D. Y. Peel, "Cultural Factors in the Contemporary Theory of Development", *Archives Européennes de Sociologie* XIV, 1973, for a survey and critique of much of the literature.

2 S. N. Eisenstadt's collection of readings *The Protestant Ethic and Modernisation*, 1968 presents a fair sample of typical arguments. On the psychological side, see the well-known works of E. E. Hagen, D. C. McClelland and R. A. Levine.

3 For a sophisticated series of statements about culture, especially in relation to developing countries, see C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 1973.

change for the better might be engineered beyond the horizon of the immediate problems. Development rests on the conviction that humanity can really turn history into a process of universal, self-sustaining improvement of its condition: a genuine teleology. This may be the sheerest self-deluding hubris—not least because such a conception requires a collective subject when, in fact, the national collective actors appear to have radically opposed interests—but it does seem to me that this is what our concept of development presupposes. Development is about the relation of means (which are actions) to ends (which are cultural ideals), and development studies are essentially concerned with formulating criteria (themselves cultural elements *par excellence*) for the evaluation of actions directed towards attaining those ends.

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So expressed, in merely general terms, this seems unexceptionable, with no obvious implications for a different practice. Culture may seem not to matter either because ends vary randomly (and so cancel one another out) or because there is such unanimity about them. Men, it is argued, are motivated by the same sorts of things and respond to stimuli in the same sort of way, so that there is a great measure of agreement about what the end of development is: basically, higher living standards for individuals (evenly higher, if possible), and greater power and effectiveness at the national level. Development studies—whatever their ideological leaning—tend systematically to deny that the ends of development are other than universalist or that these universalist elements are significantly adulterated by any accompanying particularism—say of a religion like Islam or a national tradition like the Japanese. Above all it is this attitude which sociology and anthropology, in stressing the significance of culture, set out to challenge in development studies. For even *universally-desired* goals of development are always desired in a context of other kinds of end.<sup>4</sup> For it must be wealth and power for a *particular* kind of society that is desired; and action to obtain these ends is further qualified by the role of culture in selecting the means to attain them. It is often assumed that the universalism of development entails the sacrifice of cultural particularity. It seems to be so in part, but people do not initially accept it and abandon their particularities reluctantly; for they want the universals of wealth and power to preserve their particularities. They want it both ways, and we can-

<sup>4</sup> This is explored with some sensitivity in P. L. Berger, *Pyramids of Sacrifice*, 1974, esp. Chap. 6.

not say they won't have a measure of success in achieving it.

This comes out very clearly if we look at the development attempts of a particular civilization, such as Islam, over a good historical sweep. Beginning with the Ottoman realization, in the sixteenth century, of Western Europe's technical and economic superiority,<sup>5</sup> these entered a new phase with Mohammed Ali in the early nineteenth, and are clearly of major international significance today. The actions of a Colonel Ghaddafi or a King Hassan are significantly shaped both by Islamic ends and by the institutional means provided by their societies, and must remain inexplicable except in terms of this history and culture. The great world religions have been very potent sources of cultural determination, but not primarily as the source of a distinct 'social psychology' which would operate on adherents to make them more or less prone to social action of a particular kind. There is that in Max Weber, which has led to the feeble psycho-social theories of development I have criticized. More significant are the institutional frameworks which the world religions, once socially embodied, have built up. These are not the once-given reproduction of theological 'genes' (as Parsons' unfortunate simile has it)<sup>6</sup> but the precipitate of a whole history, not absolutely fixed but still influential as the source of what people collectively aim at and of how they set about trying to get it.

### The 'culture' in structure

Thus, few 'hard' factors have been accorded such significance for the course of development as the patterns of land ownership. To the extent that state ownership of land was a feature of North Indian society (let us leave the 'Asiatic Mode of Production') it seems to have been a consequence, as Marx was partially aware, of Islamic doctrines of land tenure, introduced by the Moghuls in the course of establishing a Muslim state structure.<sup>7</sup> That doctrine itself was a heritage from the Bedouin early bearers of Islam (reinforced by later ruling groups of Turkic nomad origin), applied by them to the peasant populations they conquered. Built into a syndrome of social institutions characteristic of Islam, it becomes part

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean . . . in the Age of Philip II*, Second edn. 1966, Fontana edn. 1973, Vol. II, pp. 798-801.

<sup>6</sup> *Societies: Comparative and Evolutionary Perspectives*, 1966, p. 6. The analogue of "code", used for both, reduces genes and symbolic systems, like language and culture, to the same basis.

<sup>7</sup> Angus Maddison, *Class Structure and Economic Growth: India and Pakistan since the Moghuls*, 1971, Chap. 2, and Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State*, 1974.

of the social blueprints or organizational repertory most available—and appealing—to Muslim rulers.

An organizational form, distinctive of a particular culture, may be important less as an end in itself than as a convenient means for attaining some more universalist goal—but a means which, coming to shape a new emergent order, is not *just* a means. Thus the Senegalese economy today is permeated by the operations of the Mouride religious fraternity, and though this emerged because it was able to provide quite universalist benefits (mainly land for a warrior class displaced by the French conquest in 1886), it could only do so through using two locally available cultural models of organization: the Muslim *tariqa* and the Wolof co-operative work group.<sup>8</sup> The synthesis effected by the Mourides is not just the superficial dress for quite universalist exploitation, but an essential component of the total situation upon which development plans in Senegal must work. Even where the flexibility of culture to any new demands put upon it is stressed (as with the adoption of cocoa-cultivation among the Akan of Ghana), the comparison with areas with different pre-adoption histories and cultures shows how much the chosen options were governed by particularist cultural considerations which endure. Compare the very high levels of productivity of the Akan with the lower levels among the Yoruba, the other great cocoa producers of West Africa.<sup>9</sup> Akan men were able to concentrate exclusively on cocoa, subsistence agriculture being undertaken by women, whereas the Yoruba farmers, since women play such a small role in agriculture, need to devote time to subsistence as well as cash-crop production. We can say little about the origin of these differing sex-roles in the economic organization of the two peoples. The rationality they each have is not a universal one, but a particularist one,<sup>10</sup> and it is as part of culture that it has continued to shape contemporary performance.

In emphasising the importance of culture, I am urging that we need to analyse the historical roots of the conjuncture in which development is

sought. Any given element of culture—an aspiration, an organizational model, or beliefs about the external world—that influence how people respond to a situation, is a precipitate of their history, even when they do not consciously see it as 'part of our traditional culture'. But of some elements they are conscious, and these are likely to be especially important. Above all, what people think about the nature and conditions of progress in the past is inevitably a powerful source of what they will undertake in the future.

#### The contingent meaning of 'development'

It is, therefore, surprising that so little work has been done on indigenous ideas about development itself. Indigenous historical ideas have been quite widely investigated, it is true, but mostly only from an interest in their role as legitimating charters (significantly, a viewpoint which reduces them to being the effect of structural pressures)<sup>11</sup>. Other aspects of culture—social roles, moral preferences, cosmological ideas, the local distribution of power and resources so far as these are culturally shaped—have all been looked at for their bearing on development. But if people are to be regarded as the subjects, rather than the objects, of development processes, any proposals for their future must be adequately related to what they perceive of their past.

Here I shall give a single example drawn from recent research on the social history of a sizeable Yoruba town.<sup>12</sup> Development—in the sense of state-endorsed plans for raising the whole level of social production—was inaugurated by a local ruler just at the onset of the colonial epoch, and can now be said to be a subject on which nearly everyone, including farmers not literate in English, has opinions, which it is not hard to elicit. At one level it is synonymous with the acquisition of individual and collective consumption goods which are quite universally valued. Various indigenous terms exist, translatable as 'progress', 'improvement', etc. One of these, usually rendered 'enlightenment', is of more interest as it carries with it a theory about the nature and conditions of development. It makes it dependent upon contact with the outside world especially through Western literary education. This notion has much historical validation: traditionally state power was derived from control of external linkages and knowledge, rather than land, was the key scarce resource. More recently it is validated through the personal

8 D. B. Cruise O'Brien, *The Mourides of Senegal, 1971, and Saints and Politicians: Essays in the Organisation of a Senegalese Peasant Society*, 1975.

9 P. Hill, *Migrant Cocoa-farmers of Southern Ghana*, 1962, and S. S. Berry, *Cocoa, Custom and Socio-Economic Change in Rural Western Nigeria*, 1975.

10 This pace a remark of P. Hill's (*Studies in Rural Capitalism in West Africa*, 1970, p. 12) that "division of labour between men and women is based on economic good sense, not on mysterious traditional sex-roles." These are not mutually exclusive, however, and it is mysterious (in the sense that no-one has been able to explain) why, say, the Yoruba division of labour by sex is distinct from that of their neighbours who share the same ecological and historical parameters. Cf. further, E. Bosrup, *Woman's Role in Economic Development*, 1970, Chap. 1.

11 For example, A. F. Robertson, "Histories and Political Opposition in Ahafo, Ghana", *Africa*, XLIII, 1973.

12 Fieldwork for the project, entitled "A Sociological History of Ilesha: the incorporation of a Yoruba community into wider social, political and economic units, 1895-1975", was undertaken in 1973-75, financed by a grant from the SSRC.

advancement of educated individuals and the community's need of its educated sons to sponsor its interests at higher levels. Policy at the highest level—through complex processes of interplay between ordinary people, communal leaders, state officials and policy makers—has been shaped by these ideas, which underlie the key role accorded to education in official development plans from the 1950s until today. Plans for educational investment were also decked out with internationally current arguments about the need to invest in manpower but, whatever *their* validity, it is hard not to believe that these were convenient justifications for policies which were rooted in prevalent local assessments of the causes and conditions of development.

This seems to be the most fundamental argument for us to take the culture of the subjects of development seriously—especially for those of us who are not citizens of the less developed countries themselves. Academics produce culture. Who for? Insofar as it is for our own countries and governments, it is outside my present concern,

though the same general arguments apply. For the rest, the culture produced is intended to affect in some way development in the Third World. A sustained conversation or the mutual translation of culture is the nature of our activity, rather than some kind of social engineering.<sup>13</sup> If our good faith is granted, it is, in the vital instance, the ideas of the subjects of development with which we must engage. If our activity is to have any consequences for ongoing processes of change, we must synthesize our own ideas with theirs, or invoke the criteria implicit in them or, if need be, try to show that they are mistaken in the assessment of their historical experience. Unless they are sensitive to the culture of the subjects of development, theorists of development will hardly fail to achieve the absurd posture of being, as it were, authors of plays which nobody is interested in performing.

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<sup>13</sup> P. L. Berger *et al.* treat briefly of this in *The Homeless Mind*, 1973, Chap. 7; a much more sophisticated handling of it is N. Daniel's *The Cultural Barrier: Problems in the Exchange of Ideas*, 1975.