

How Values Shape Human Progress

Como os Valores Modelam o Progresso Humano

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Abstract

What can explain authoritarianism and poverty in so many countries? We are engaged, in this essay, in demonstrating that culture values are the most important factors to be considered to answer this question. We also take into account that the number of people from academy, journalists and politicians, which write and talk about culture, as a crucial factor, have been increasing.

Key words: democracy; authoritarianism; culture; progress; social justice.

Resumo

O que pode explicar a persistência do autoritarismo e da pobreza em tantos países? Neste ensaio, Lawrence E. Harrison demonstra que a cultura é o fator mais importante que permite responder a questão. Ao mesmo tempo, observa que cresce o número de acadêmicos, jornalistas e políticos que escrevem e falam sobre cultura como fator crucial.

Palavras-chave: democracia; autoritarismo; cultura; progresso; justiça social.

The decades-old war on poverty and authoritarianism in the poor countries of Africa, Asia, and Latin America has produced more disappointment and frustration than it has victories. The deprivation and despair prevailing at mid-twentieth century persist in most of those countries, even after more than a decade during which the democratic politics and market economics that won the ideological war against socialism have stood unchallenged. Where democratically-elected chiefs of state have displaced traditional authoritarian regimes, a pattern most notable in Latin America, the experiments are fragile, and “democracy” often means little more than periodic elections.

What explains the persistence of poverty and authoritarianism? Why have they proved so intractable? Why have no countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America other than Japan and the East Asian dragons made their way into the elite group of affluent countries? The conventional diagnoses that have been offered during the past half-century – exploitation, imperialism, dependency, education and know-how shortfalls, lack of opportunity, lack of capital, inadequate markets, weak institutions – are now demonstrably inadequate. A crucial element that has been largely ignored is cultural values and attitudes that stand in the way of progress. Some cultures, above all those of the West and East Asia, have proven themselves more prone to progress than others. Their achievements as nations are reiterated when their people migrate to other countries, as in the case of the British in the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, and the Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans, who have flourished wherever they have migrated, including the United States.

The conclusion that culture matters is not easy to digest, particularly for anthropologists and economists. But a growing number of academics, journalists, and politicians are writing and talking about culture as a crucial factor. Federal Reserve chairman Alan Greenspan captured the shift recently when he said, in the context of economic conditions in Russia, that he had theretofore assumed that capitalism was “human nature.” But in the wake of the collapse of the Russian economy, he concluded that “it was not human nature at all, but culture” – a restatement of Max Weber’s thesis in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

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In the 1950s, the world turned its attention from rebuilding the countries devastated by World War II to ending the poverty, ignorance, and injustice in which most of the people of Africa, Asia, and Latin America lived. Optimism abounded in the wake of the stunning success of the Marshall Plan in Western Europe and Japan’s ascent from the ashes of defeat. Development was viewed as inevitable, particularly as the colonial yoke disappeared. Walt Rostow’s hugely influential 1960 book, *The Stages of Economic Growth*, suggested that human progress was driven by a dialectic that could be accelerated.

But as the century ended, the optimism had been displaced by frustration and pessimism, the consensus on market economics and democracy notwithstanding. A few countries – Spain, Portugal, South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore – and former British colony Hong Kong have

followed Rostow's trajectory into the First World, and a few others, for example, Chile, China, Malaysia, and Thailand, have experienced sustained rapid growth.

But the vast majority of countries still lag far behind. Of the six billion people who inhabit the world today, fewer than one billion are found in the advanced democracies. More than four billion live in what the World Bank classifies as "low income" or "lower middle income" countries. The quality of life in those countries is dismaying:

- Half or more of the adult population of 23 countries, mostly in Africa, are illiterate. One is in the Western Hemisphere – Haiti.
- Half or more of women are illiterate in 35 countries, including Egypt, India, and oil-rich Saudi Arabia.
- Life expectancy is below 60 years in 45 countries, most in Africa. Life expectancy is below 50 years in 18 countries, all in Africa. And life expectancy in Sierra Leone is just 37 years.
- Children under five die at a rate in excess of 100 per 1000 in at least 35 countries, most again in Africa.
- The population growth rate in the poorest countries is 2.1 percent annually, three times the rate in the high income countries. In some Islamic countries, the population growth rate exceeds three percent.
- The most inequitable income distribution patterns are found in the poorer countries, particularly in Latin America and Africa. As an example, the most affluent 10 percent of Brazil's population account for almost 48 percent of income.

Democratic institutions are commonly weak or non-existent in Africa and the Islamic countries of the Middle East and the rest of Asia. Democracy has appeared to prosper in Latin America in the past 15 years, and Argentina, Brazil, and Chile appear to be heading toward democratic stability after decades of military rule. But the fragility of the democratic experiments is underscored by recent events in Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, and Venezuela, among others. One must ask, Why after more than 150 years of independence has Latin America, an extension of the West, failed to consolidate democratic institutions? How is it possible that, in the year 2001, Marxist guerrillas threaten to topple an elected government in Colombia?

In sum, the world at the end of the twentieth century is far poorer, far more unjust, far more authoritarian than most people at mid- twentieth century expected it would be, and the expected fruits of the post-Cold War democratic-capitalist consensus have, with a few exceptions, yet to be harvested.

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Although the roots of the cultural emphasis are in the West, and particularly in the writings of Alexis de Tocqueville and Max Weber, the cultural explanation for the disappointingly slow progress of the past half century is increasingly being articulated by people from the Third World.

Many East Asians, Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew prominently among them, believe that "Confucian" values like emphasis on the future, work, education, merit, and

frugality have played a crucial role in the economic miracles in South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and now China itself. Several Latin Americans have written in recent years about the cultural causes of Latin America's poverty and authoritarianism. In 1979, Nobelist Octavio Paz explained the contrast between the two Americas this way: "One, English-speaking, is the daughter of the tradition that has founded the modern world: the Reformation, with its social and political consequences, democracy and capitalism. The other, Spanish and Portuguese speaking, is the daughter of the universal Catholic monarchy and the Counter-Reformation."

More recently, the celebrated Peruvian writer Mario Vargas Llosa has asserted that the economic, educational, and judicial reforms necessary to Latin America's modernization cannot be effected unless they are preceded or accompanied by a reform of our customs and ideas, of the whole complex system of habits, knowledge, images and forms that we understand by "culture." The culture within which we live and act today in Latin America is neither liberal nor is it altogether democratic. We have democratic governments, but our institutions, our reflexes and our mentality are very far from being democratic.

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Over the almost two decades that I have been studying and writing about the relationship between cultural values and human progress, and particularly as a result of a continuing dialogue with the Argentine intellectual and media celebrity Mariano Grondona, I have identified thirteen values, attitudes, or mindsets in which progressive cultures contrast sharply with static cultures that resist progress.

I appreciate that the word "progress" begs for definition. I have in mind the UN Declaration on Human Rights, which stresses not only material well-being adequate to escape poverty but also political rights and social justice.

The thirteen factors are:

1. Time orientation: The progressive culture emphasizes the future, the static culture the present or past. Future orientation implies a progressive world view: influence over one's destiny, rewards in this life to virtue, positive-sum economics in which wealth expands in contrast to the zero-sum psychology commonly found in poor countries.
2. Approach to life. The idea that "I can influence my destiny" is central to the progressive culture. Fatalism and resignation characterize the static culture.
3. Dissent is encouraged in the progressive culture, suppressed in the static culture as a threat to orthodoxy, as heresy.
4. Work and achievement are central to the good life in the progressive culture, of lesser importance in the static culture. In the former, work structures daily life, and diligence, creativity, and achievement are rewarded not only financially but also with satisfaction, self-respect, and prestige.

5. Competition nurtures excellence in the progressive culture. In the static culture, competition may be viewed as aggression.
6. Frugality is the mother of investment – and financial security – in progressive cultures, a threat to the egalitarian status quo in static, zero-sum cultures in which one person's gains are thought to be at the expense of others.
7. Education is the key to progress in progressive cultures, of lesser importance except for the elites in static cultures.
8. Merit is central to advancement in the progressive culture; connections and family are what count in the static culture. To be sure, connections also matter in progressive cultures – it is a matter of degree.
9. Community: The radius of identification and trust extends beyond the family to the broader society in the progressive culture. The family circumscribes community in the static culture. Societies with a narrow radius of identification and trust are more prone to corruption, nepotism, and tax evasion and are less likely to engage in philanthropy.
10. The ethical code tends to be more rigorous in the progressive culture. Every advanced democracy except Belgium, Taiwan, Italy, and South Korea appears among the 25 least corrupt countries on Transparency International's "Corruption Perceptions Index." Chile and Botswana are the only Third World countries that appear among the top 25.
11. Justice and fair play are universal impersonal expectations in the progressive culture. In the static culture, justice, like personal advancement, is often a function of whom you know or how much you can pay.
12. Authority tends toward dispersion and horizontality in progressive cultures, which encourage dissent, toward concentration and verticality in static cultures, which encourage orthodoxy.
13. Secularism: The influence of religious institutions on civic life is small in the progressive culture; their influence in static cultures is often substantial. Heterodoxy and dissent are encouraged in the former, orthodoxy and conformity are encouraged in the latter. Obviously, these thirteen factors are generalized and idealized, and the reality of cultural variation is not black and white but a spectrum in which colors fuse into one another. Few countries would be graded "10" on all the factors, just as few countries would be graded "1." Nonetheless, virtually all of the advanced democracies – and high-achieving ethnic/religious groups like Mormons, East Asian immigrants in the United States and elsewhere, Jews, Sikhs, and Basques – would receive substantially higher scores than virtually all of the Third World countries.

This conclusion invites the inference that what is really in play is development, not culture. The same argument could be made about Transparency International's corruption index. There is a complex interplay of cause and effect between culture and progress. But the power of culture is demonstrable, for example in those countries where the economic

achievement of ethnic minorities far exceeds that of the majorities as in the case of the Chinese in Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and the United States, and the Japanese in Brazil, Peru, and the United States.

The thirteen factors I have noted are not definitive. But they do at least suggest what in the vastness of "culture" may influence the way societies evolve.

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Growing numbers of people living in the Third World, particularly in Latin America, are coming to the same conclusions as many of the writers mentioned in this article. And these people are trying to change the traditional cultural values and attitudes that they perceive as obstacles to democracy, prosperity, and social justice.

Let me tell you the story of one of them.

Octavio Mavila is a Peruvian who was, in his youth, a South American motorcycle champion. A burly self-made man well into his seventies, Mavila was for three decades the Honda distributor in Peru. As a result, he visited Japan numerous times over the years. In the late 1980s, he came to the conclusion that the only really significant difference between Japan and Peru was that Japanese children learned progressive values while Peruvian children didn't.

In 1990, Mavila established the Institute of Human Development in Lima to promote "the Ten Commandments of Development": order, cleanliness, punctuality, responsibility, achievement, honesty, respect for the rights of others, respect for the law, work ethic, and frugality. The list is strikingly similar to Benjamin Franklin's thirteen keys to success. Franklin, as you may know, became a symbol of the Protestant Ethic for Max Weber.

More than two million Peruvian students have participated in courses sponsored by the Institute of Human Development, which has mobilized virtually all of its resources within Peru. And the Ten Commandments of Development are now being promoted in Mexico and Nicaragua by educational leaders in those countries.

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With the notable exceptions of East Asia and Iberia, human progress during the half-century since World War II has been disheartening. The principal reason for the shortfall is, I believe, the failure to take into account the power of culture to thwart or facilitate progress.

Culture is not the only force that shapes the destinies of nations, particularly in the short run. Moreover, culture changes. An observation by the American intellectual and politician Daniel Patrick Moynihan is apt: "The central conservative truth is that it is culture, not politics, that determines the success of a society. The central liberal truth is that politics can change a culture and save it from itself."

There are several key questions about the relationship between culture and progress and the possibilities of promoting cultural change for which we do not have adequate answers:

— Which values affect, for good or for bad, political, economic, and social development, and how important are they?

— What are the principal instruments of cultural transmission, and how susceptible are they to promotion of progressive values?

— What are the cause and effect relationships among culture, development, policies, and institutions?

These questions form a research agenda aimed at developing guidelines for cultural change that will be available to public and private institutions that conclude that cultural change must be addressed if the pace of human progress is to be accelerated.