

Conclusion: Implications of a Cultural Lens for Public Policy and Development Thought¹

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The articles in this book have provided ways of constructing an inter-disciplinary dialogue on culture and public action. Those by economists - Sen, Kuran, Abraham and Platteau, Klamer, and Alkire show that incorporating cultural notions within an economic framework can lead to new ways of linking economic and social thought, that go beyond simplistic notions of culture as a constraint on Development. The anthropologists and sociologists - Appadurai, Douglas, Arizpe, Das Gupta and colleagues, Davis, Harragin, Jenkins, and Calderon-Szmukler demonstrate the potential for a more practical social science which engages constructively with policy and public action, providing both competing and complementary perspectives to more conventional Development policy frameworks. While there are disagreements stemming from different paradigms and perspectives in the book, there is broad agreement that this approach involves two fundamental changes in the way we think about Development policy:

- from a focus on individuals to a recognition that relational and group-based phenomena shape and influence individual aspiration, capabilities, and agency.

We label this a shift from equality of opportunity to “equality of agency”;

¹ We are grateful to Rajiv Rao for helpful comments on an earlier draft. The points of view expressed in this paper are those of the authors and not necessarily shared by the World Bank or its Executive Directors.

- to provide for debate and decision-making when there are several distinct culturally determined perspectives, and in particular, assure that poorer, subordinate groups have voice and opportunities for redress.

How does a cultural lens relate to ongoing policy and intellectual debates, especially around the role of the state and markets? These debates have primarily gone beyond state *versus* markets, to questions of understanding the conditions under which both states and markets can effectively support inclusive Development in a globalized world. Cultural factors lie at the heart of the functioning of formal and informal institutions that determine non-market outcomes in policy decision-making, service provision, participation, and conflict management. A theme of almost equal importance, less emphasized in the book but touched upon in Sen's contribution and in other work (see Bowles 1998, and Gudeman, 2002), is the contribution of culture to the working of markets via norms of interaction, influences on the competitiveness of firms, and the extent to which market relationships are tilted unequally to groups with "higher" social and cultural capital.

This book acknowledges that cultural diagnoses cannot provide universally applicable answers. Culture is part of the story—part of the formation of agency, of effective markets and institutions—but is often left out. As Sen emphasizes, an integrated account will be necessary for both diagnosis and policy design. In this particular sense, culture is ignored at our peril, in terms of both Development effectiveness and understanding. In

this chapter we examine some implications of this for “Public Action” and then for the “World of Thought.”

Implications for public action

A “cultural lens” has many implications for the world of action especially when addressing problems of inequality and empowerment. It implies that interventions need to be shaped in ways that recognize the relative disempowerment of weaker or subordinate groups in cultural, economic and political terms. This approach involves understanding how context matters in ways that are conditioned by such inequalities² and the need to design public action in ways that foster greater “equality of agency” with respect to social hierarchies, including those involving public, private and international actors

Policy design

At the level of the policymaker, a point of departure is the recognition that actions occur within unequal social, cultural and political structures. A diagnostic process could involve a range of mechanisms, including socio-economic assessments, ethnographic investigation, participatory engagement, and ways of discovering the ‘true’ views and preferences of subordinate groups (see Kuran this volume). Since a core concern is the lack of influence or agency of poorer or excluded groups, policy choices to compensate for this are likely to be an important element of strategy.

To understand local conceptions of well-being, and to incorporate “common sense” and “voice” into the design of an intervention, the recipients of public action need to be

² It is consistent with Scott’s (1998) emphasis on use of “common sense” as an alternative to the top-down development designs beloved of “high modernism”, but puts more emphasis on cultural dynamics and inequalities.

engaged as central agents³. This acknowledgement implies that the theory and practice of Development is more difficult and, necessarily, more participatory. However, it also implies that participation alone is no panacea, precisely because of the social inequities inherent within group-based relations (Abraham and Platteau this volume, Cooke and Kothari 2001, Mansuri and Rao, 2003). This point is illustrated by debates on appropriate ways of combating exclusion, political cultures of clientelism, and inequality. One view is that this is best dealt with by a form of “participatory development” or “deliberative democracy”. An alternative view is that participation will only work in exceptional cases because of the existence of culturally embedded elites who will capture increased resources at local levels. If so, approaches from above that are rules and rights based, such as the Federal intervention in the civil rights movement in the United States, or the rural social security policy of Brazil, may be more effective⁴. The approaches are opposite, but the diagnostic lens for both arguments is fashioned from a recognition of the cultural factors – particularly the nature of Appadurai’s “terms of recognition” - that matter to achieve the policy objective. We are consequently led to a proposal that should be self-evident, but is rarely put into practice in multi-lateral agencies: social and historical analysis should inform policy design just as much as economic analysis, and they should be placed on an equal footing (Kanbur 2002, Harriss 2002).

³ This is precisely the point made by advocates of participatory development (Chambers 1997)

⁴ Empirical analysis shows this has highly positive poverty reducing and targeting properties.

Policy implementation

Developing social agency/the capacity to aspire

How policies are implemented is as important as the design. Building the “capacity to aspire” of subordinate groups—in the specific sense of the concept developed by Appadurai—is a direct implication of a cultural perspective. The capacity to aspire is a forward-looking cultural capacity that is unequally distributed, with the rich having a greater capacity than the poor. Equalizing the capacity to aspire, and changing the terms of recognition, involves creating an enabling environment to provide the poor with the tools, and the “voice”, to navigate their way out of poverty. A number of activities and processes would fall into this, notably targeting interventions collectively by encouraging the active participation of the poor. This may require the development of “rituals” that help support social agency, such as “toilet festivals,” or “participatory budgeting,” and the identification of key agents--internal and external--who can facilitate the process of connecting the poor to policy makers. The methods with which such action is undertaken, however, should be shaped by an understanding of the cultural dynamics of groups, in ways that recognizes potential sources of conflict, and the importance of protecting individual agency. The role of government will sometimes be quite specific—for example in curriculum design in schooling, and in the formal recognition of grassroots organizations. At other times it will be essentially facilitatory, since the real public action will take place amongst the groups involved (as in the interactions of the interlinked associations in Mumbai that Appadurai has documented in his chapter).

How does “civil society” fit within this? Civil society covers a multitude of organizational forms and cultures, from single-issue activist groups, to broad-based membership associations, to groups concerned with mobilizing difference for destructive purposes, to profit-maximizing organizations whose primary aim is to tap into the gold-mine of Development aid . Fashioning an important role for civil society groups is intrinsic to building a forward-looking, “aspirational”, development orientation for subordinate groups. It is also plays a central role in providing checks and balances on state action, increasing the “terms of recognition” and countering the lack of recognition of abuse by the state and other powerful groups. However, this has to be done with a deep recognition of the heterogeneity of civil society groups, an “unpacking” of the term, and a careful understanding of the spectrum of interests that fall under that umbrella. The goal would be to foster desirable cultures of grassroots engagement, representative approaches to pluralism, and a “federation” between organizations with similar goals.

Learning by Doing and the Incorporation of Context

Culturally informed public action is not easy. The process requires paying close attention to context in shaping interventions both globally and locally. It therefore argues against the idea of “best practice” -- that an intervention that worked wonders in one context would do the same in another. Good interventions are very difficult to design ex-ante. A cultural lens thus teaches us that public action, particularly when it is participatory, aspiration-building and aware of “common-sense”, requires an element of experimentation and learning. Ironically the best practice may be the absence of a best practice (Rao and Mansuri, 2003, Pritchett and Woolcock, 2003).

Projects need to be closely monitored and evaluated, not just in terms of the impact but also in the processes that led to that impact in order to understand how they can be shaped and modified in a manner that matches the diversity inherent in the local cultural context. All projects will make mistakes, but so long as these mistakes are recognized and the lessons from them incorporated into the next stage of design, this helps incorporate common sense into the Development process. This may require the integrated use of qualitative and quantitative methods of evaluation since qualitative methods, typically, are not best suited to assess changes in outcomes for large populations, while quantitative methods are ineffective gaining a contextual understanding of the processes that lead to particular outcomes (Rao and Woolcock, 2003).

A key lesson is that Development is not easy. It is, at its core, a social and cultural process that requires a slow process of learning from the ground-up in order to be

effective and sustainable. A Development culture that forces projects to be completed in 2 or 3 years before they are either rapidly and meaninglessly scaled up, or abandoned, is not conducive to social change or to learning-by-doing. A short term horizon in most circumstances would make it impossible to incorporate a cultural lens. Most interventions that attempt to change the terms of recognition or build the capacity to aspire, therefore, require long-term horizons -- sustained efforts spread over many years.

Greater emphasis on quality, behavior and training of street-level workers:

Another dimension of incorporating context and “common-sense” into project design is the training and behavior of project facilitators and street-level workers. Careful attention to nitty-gritty ground-level detail necessarily places greater emphasis on these actors, yet they have been neglected as a subject of research and in budgetary allocations – they are, in fact, among the worst paid workers in the Development hierarchy. Poorly trained and compensated street level workers will tend to be corrupt, poorly motivated and even abusive. Yet, context sensitive Development can place an unduly heavy burden on them – expecting them to be charismatic leaders, trainers, anthropologists, engineers, economists, and accountants⁵. The danger here is that as Development shifts to becoming more participatory and bottom-up, it does so without recognizing that old mechanisms and models of service delivery and bureaucratic control have to be radically modified lest we end up in simply a new form of “seeing like a state” that Tandler and Serrano (1999) have described as “supply-driven demand driven Development.”

⁵ Mansuri and Rao (2003) survey the literature that highlights many problems with facilitation in participatory projects.

Shaping institutions to manage difference

The recognition that societies consist of different groups, often structured in hierarchies, with unequal social and cultural capital, suggests that mechanisms of inter-group exchange and deliberation need to be set up in a manner that changes the “terms of recognition.” In this area, as in many others, there are no magic institutional solutions, as Peter Evans (2002) has warned. One possibility is to employ the “deliberative democracy” favored by Calderon and Szmukler, as in the participatory budgeting process developed in Porto Alegre in Brazil—but this has some preconditions. The promotion of democracy is key, but in order for democracy to work at the grass-roots, local institutions need to be transparent even to people at the lowest rungs of society.

Similarly, effective education initiatives may need multi-cultural designs with curricula that are tailored to reflect the reality and lingua-franca of students rather than of elites who tend to design curricula. Comparable arguments can be made for the design of health projects, commons management, etc. The recognition that sub-groups can often have conflictual interactions leads to the need for effective methods of conflict management – for instance, mechanisms for inter-group dialogue and opportunities for social and cultural interaction, and fair and effective courts that can adjudicate differences and which poor communities can easily access.

It is useful at this point to consider two potential dangers where the state may be implicitly involved in the affirmation of existing cultural practices or group-based

identities. The first involves social movements which mobilization of difference to the detriment of others—as starkly seen in fundamentalist movements and inter-group conflicts. The second involves the state itself (or powerful actors within the state) as an active agent in the manipulation of difference in the interest of certain groups. This has been a sadly common feature of history, whether in the form of Serbian nationalism in the former Yugoslavia, religious fundamentalisms encouraged by states around the world for narrow political advantage, or in “tribal” battles for the control of the state (as in the Tutsi-Hutu conflict). These dangers are precisely why the theme of recognition of different groups with what Charles Taylor (1995) calls the “presumption of equal value⁶” is fundamental. This approach also implies the need for controls on the state, typically through a mixture of constitutional and legal protections—linked to independent judicial and court proceedings, and a vigorous civil society. Closely related to this is understanding how interactions between diverse cultures within a society need to be managed democratically and in a manner that allows for free and fair debate, an important theme of the contributions by Sen and Douglas in this volume.

As Das Gupta et al show, however, state intervention may be a good thing – to change culturally influenced forms of discrimination by gender, caste or race for instance. There may also be cultural practices that are troubling – such as female genital mutilation, or forms of slavery. It is within the capacity of the State to implement policies that tackle such practices – whether through affirmative action, directed education interventions, or legislation. However, an important question is who decides whether a particular practice is offensive since one person’s offensive practice may be another’s sacred belief. There

⁶ Which Taylor (1995) emphasizes is not the same thing as the *recognition* of equal value.

is always dissension on this point and, as in any disruption of a social equilibrium, changing such practices may result in conflict and hardship and may involve social and economic costs. In such circumstances, the perspective in this book is that, ideally, these normative questions should be decided by a process of internal democratic deliberation. However, processes of internal dialogue can easily be dominated by elites – for reasons of Kuran’s “preference falsification” or “constraining preferences” or Bourdieu’s “symbolic violence.” The process of decision making may be itself subject to cultural inequities. Change may thus have to come from outside, via international agencies. In this case, it is important, however, that this is preceded by a clear international consensus, determined via a democratic international dialogue, on the status of the cultural “bad” in question.

International policy and the behavior of external agents

How can international action become more culturally attuned? The issue is most commonly framed in terms of the policies and cultures of international agencies, such as the World Bank, the IMF, and the World Trade Organization, though it also applies to the whole range of external actors, from bilateral donors, to UNESCO, international non-government agencies such as OXFAM and multinational companies. In this volume Alkire explores some of the ethical and practical implications of this. We touch on four areas here.

Supporting Development design within countries.

The discussion of implications for local public action applies with equal force to the international sphere. Policy design needs to take account of local conditions, including the interaction between culture, power and economic structures. This does not mean eschewing generalization from international experience or giving up the documented lessons of history on economic and social change. Indeed a central function of such agencies should precisely be the sharing of knowledge - by understanding situations and processes by which policies can be made more effective in improving the conditions of the poor. However, the debate over what makes effective policy within a country has to be informed by a process of dialogue and deliberation within the country – rather than the mindless force-feeding of “best practice” guidelines that are little informed by the social and historical context. Development agencies have a key role to play in sharing the lessons of international experience with other countries, but decisions have to be made within those societies that are the intended beneficiaries of public action. Where feasible, mechanisms to foster ongoing and participatory debate over the consequences of interventions must also be facilitated.

International policy design. A cultural perspective is directly relevant to some areas of international policy. Trade liberalization and foreign investment are typically desirable for income and employment objectives, but the effects of enforced globalization on the living conditions and aspirations of workers can be complex. Typically the diagnostic frame of a cultural lens would not suggest reversing globalization, but strengthening the agency of adversely affected domestic groups to influence their capacity to influence, choose, or gain from the consequential economic changes. Thus in arguing for the

benefits that may accrue from more open markets, the seismic cultural shifts that would ensue should not be ignored, particularly when they may result in new forms of domination and control. This is not to say that cultural dimensions of integration are always either inequalizing or homogenizing -- cross-cultural interactions could also be enriching and productivity enhancing (Cowen, 2002).

Support for cultural products. Within the UN system support for the preservation of the world's cultural heritage is the mandate of UNESCO. Other bilateral donors may wish to channel assistance for this purpose if their citizens (who provide the taxes to pay for aid) value such assistance. But is there a general case for support for the production or preservation of cultural products by a Development agency? The perspective of this book suggests this depends on the relationship between such an activity and the promotion of greater equality of agency. As Sen and Klamer show, cultural products have many effects—they can be a source of affirmation of identity, celebration of a plural history or symbols of difference and dominance. They can also have employment and income effects, as with exports of artisanal production and tourism in cultural sites. All these factors need to be weighed in any assessment—keeping in mind that any investment in cultural goods could reduce investment in alternative means of promoting human agency such as health or education. . This can also play out at an international level. Indeed, an important aspect of international trade and legal arrangements is the development of mechanisms that assure that knowledge and production of indigenous/local aesthetic or scientific activities receives intellectual protection (as with

the intellectual property rights of inventions in the developed world that have now been integrated into international trading arrangements).

Institutional cultures. Last, but not least, we need to consider the cultures of the institutions themselves. Tales of arrogance in the interactions between international or bilateral agencies and their “clients” abound. Some would suggest the ease by which borrower countries adopt the ideological fashions of international Development agencies is an example of “symbolic violence” in Bourdieu’s sense. Small, less affluent countries eager for a loan are particularly vulnerable to this. However, there is an increasing self-awareness within the organizations of this issue. Recent policies in the World Bank and elsewhere have been seeking to change the asymmetry of dealings with client countries and enable a shift towards a culture of partnership and mutual learning with countries. But while cultures are dynamic, they also take time to change – especially when the power of the international agency is high.

Implications for the world of thought

A cultural lens also has implications for the world of thought. We have in various places referred to some of the developments in research. It would be foolhardy for us to even sketch a research agenda here. We would conclude with a few points about the *kinds* of questions that Developmentally oriented research can illuminate, and some of the methodological issues that may be faced in the process of investigation.

In terms of research questions, the essays open a range of themes that relate to the broad issue of how the relationality that is at the core of cultural processes interacts with economic processes. How do human beings construct and mobilize identity and how does this affect inequality and mobility? How do they organize collectively in ways that use cultural constructs to bind people into groups? How does culture work to create conflict in some instances and multi-cultural debate and dialogue in others? How are preferences formed and how do they react endogenously to material and social conditions? How, are notions of well-being and aspirations conditioned by cultural characterizations? How do cultural exchanges interact with economic exchanges as the world becomes more globalized? How do we measure cultural diversity and polarization? These are among the numerous questions raised by a cultural lens, which anthropologists and economists⁷, have been trying to answer.

⁷ As noted in the overview, there has been an explosion of interest by mainstream economists on how social and cultural factors relate to economic behavior. These include theories of bounded rationality and evolutionary games (e.g. Weibull, 1995.). Bounded rationality theorists model how culture influences behavior and how cultural norms emerge and are propagated through a society (e.g. Boyd and Richerson, 1985). Bowles (1998) provides a review of the relationship between culture and markets that also surveys his many contributions (along with Gintis) on the interactions between culture and economics. Durlauf (1997) surveys several empirically grounded models on what he calls “membership theories of inequality” which focus on relational aspects of poverty and income distribution. Esteban and Ray (1994) provide a conceptual foundation for the measurement of social polarization. In another vein, there is now a thriving Cultural Economics sub-discipline within Economics that focuses on the economics of cultural goods such as art and museums. Throsby (2000) provides an admirable survey.

In applications to Development Economics; Dasgupta (1993) provides an integrative perspective on the causes of destitution; Lal (1998) examines the long-run relationship between culture and economic growth; Basu (2000) makes an eloquent case for the social and political basis of economic behavior, and Basu and Weibull (2002) show that traits considered “cultural” such as a norm for punctuality could result from strategic interactions where people become punctual because others are punctual rather than an atavistic punctuality “preference”; and Francois (2002) develops a series of models on the interconnections between culture, trust, social capital and economic development. In empirical applications, there has been a long tradition in Development Economics that dates at least as far back as the work of Epstein (1962), followed by Bardhan and Rudra (1978), and Bliss and Stern (1982) of collecting primary data contextualized to reflect local cultures (Udry, 2003). More recent work has more explicitly studied the how culture affects economic action - Platteau (2000), applies an institutionalist perspective to a variety of phenomena in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia – with an explicit focus on the relationship between social and economic decisions; A series of experiments in different cultural settings by Henrich et. al. (2001) shows that the cultural context affected deviations from the canonical economic model of self-interested individual rationality. Several micro-development economists have recently addressed questions

In any Developmentally oriented research agenda we would suggest two cross-cutting aspects of these themes. First, and at the risk of repetition, interactions within and between groups have to be at the core of any culturally informed analysis. Dealing seriously with such relational issues implies a conceptual and empirical strategy that can integrate group-based influences with the tradition of individualistic analysis that has proved so powerful within economics. Second, from the perspective of having an influence on Development, it will be of great importance to link research on culture to the task of assessing, or disentangling, its influence on Development effectiveness. Carefully showing how, and how much, a cultural lens can make a difference to the diagnosis of deprivation and in the design of public action to tackle poverty will be the most powerful means of convincing researchers from different disciplines, policymakers, and Development agencies of the importance of the issues raised in this book.

Past work has often involved weak inter-disciplinary communication, especially between mainstream economics and anthropology. Work of economists that tries to take culture into consideration is, with a few notable exceptions, relatively ignorant of current thinking in anthropology, sociology and other related disciplines. Often when

of culture and ethnicity. For example, Munshi and Rosenzweig (2003) demonstrate how globalization has affected the relationship between caste and economic mobility differently for men and women in Mumbai; Banerji and Iyer (2002) demonstrate how laws implemented in colonial India have a path dependent effect on current agricultural productivity; Udry (1996) shows how farms managed by women in Ghana are less efficient than farms managed by men in a manner attributable to differences in their agency; Bloch and Rao (2002) develop and test an ethnographically grounded model of the link between dowry payments and domestic violence in rural India; Fafchamps and Minten (2001) study the informal enforcement of contracts among Malagasy grain traders; Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2001) explore the effects of providing quotas for women in village government in Indian.; and Smith et al. (2001) provided a contextualized analysis of risk assessment among East African pastoralists.

anthropologists are read and cited, the work is several decades old and is used because it fits easily within the hypotheses of the economist, rather than because it represents the best the discipline has to offer. Similarly, many anthropological critiques of economics base their understandings on simplistic “Economics 101” models rather than the more sophisticated thinking in the field. These are both undesirable outcomes that could be remedied by more respectful inter-disciplinary engagement. Future work may fruitfully be of a multi-disciplinary character, with economists and anthropologists collaborating in projects. However, there is no reason for this to be the only way forward. There can be gains from sticking within the training and discourse of one’s own discipline, but with a friendly ear open to the discourse of the neighboring discipline. This requires an equality of agency of disciplines – the social sciences do not have “queens” and “kings,” but many courtiers with diverse voices who may all have useful things to say.

As Development agencies have turned more participatory, anthropologists and sociologists have begun to have a bigger say in them. Cernea’s work (1985), is representative of longstanding efforts by Development anthropologists and sociologists to demonstrate how careful social thought can provide a fresh look on policy. Sillitoe (1998) makes a case for how bottom-up Development provides challenging opportunities for anthropologists to use ethnographic methods and understandings to contribute to policy design and evaluation. A crucial part of this is to learn how to speak to economists, engineers and natural scientists in ways that facilitate dialogue and collaboration instead of the name-calling that has been the norm for several decades. The anthropologists in this volume provide thoughtful examples of how this facilitatory

dialogue can be carried forward in various domains in ways that fundamentally rework how we think about policy. The sharply increased receptivity to such ideas by economists and Development practitioners in recent years has created the right moment for dialogue and understanding. This suggests the need for academic anthropologists and sociologists to move towards a research agenda that is less focused on critique than on constructive engagement.

At an empirical level there are important methodological issues, in part associated with different traditions of empirical investigation. Starting, at least, from the work of Bardhan and Rudra (1974) and Bliss and Stern (1980), several economists have begun to recognize the value of case-studies, and the integration of quantitative and ethnographic methods has become an important topic of research within Development (Bardhan 1989, Rao 2002, , White 2002, Kanbur 2003). Anthropology is perhaps more resistant to the use of statistical and econometric methods, but sub-fields such as Anthropological Demography have long recognized their utility (Kertzer and Fricke 1997, Obermeyer et. al 1997, Basu and Aaby 1998), and Sociology has diverse traditions, some highly quantitative, others more qualitative. In order to engage with Development policy, some element of quantitative empirical analysis is inescapable, because Development often deals with projects that impact a large number of people, and qualitative methods are ill-equipped to provide a valid and generalizable picture for large populations that can be reliably used by policy makers. On the other hand, quantitative scholars must do better in recognizing the inherent structures of power and control within statistical methodologies such as surveys and censuses (Hacking, 1990) and their tendency to provide data that

lack context and “common sense”. Integrating qualitative methods with survey methods has the potential value of obtaining both a contextualized understanding and findings that can be generalized.

Thus at a conceptual level, both theoretical and empirical, a cultural lens gives us directions in which Development scholarship should go, and which in many ways it has already begun to go. This will result in better informed, more contextualized, public action that will, we hope, be more immune to the perils of high-modernism.

The collection of essays in this volume are by no means the last word on the subject, and certainly not the first. Rather, they seek to represent a thoughtful dialogue across disciplines with the constructive goal of making Development policy more effective and inclusive. If the cultural lens teaches us anything, it is that Development is not easy, and in some ways will always be a game of blind-man’s bluff. But, blending an understanding of cultural and social dynamics into the mix of economics and politics that have traditionally dominated Development thought can shed a little additional light on how to do it better. If we are to adequately respond to the critiques of “top-down” Development – that the domination of Development by conventional economics has led to overly bureaucratized “cookie cutter”, “best practice” frameworks that have a tendency towards hegemonic control (Scott, 1998, Escobar 1995), we believe that the essays in this volume provide some direction . We expect that they will also generate debate.

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