

How and Why Does Culture Matter?

Culture and Public Action, edited by Vijayendra Rao and Michael Walton; Stanford University Press, 2004; pp 435, \$ 60 (hardcover).

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'Culture', which Raymond Williams described as one of the most awkward words in the English language because of its many shades of meaning, is an idea that is centrally significant in the social sciences. It has not, however, figured very prominently in the work of economists, or those concerned with economic and social development until relatively recently. One notable instance is in the work of the Harvard historian David Landes, who concludes his magisterial book *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations* (1998) by saying "if we learn anything from the history of economic development, it is that culture makes all the difference" – though he also points out that "culture does not stand alone... monocausal explanations will not work" (1998: 516). On this point, as in other ways, Landes follows Max Weber, who, contrary to popular perceptions, also argued in his classic *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* that culture does not stand alone. Landes was, nonetheless, a contributor to a book edited by Lawrence Harrison and Samuel Huntington, titled *Culture Matters: How Values Shape Human Progress* (2000). This is strongly inclined towards cultural determinism, as the title suggests, arguing in effect that some societies are saddled with cultures that inhibit them from functioning effectively in the modern world. The book, which includes essays by some of America's outstanding public intellectuals of the moment, like Francis Fukuyama and Samuel Huntington, was a best-seller in the World Bank Bookshop in Washington. Rao and Walton's *Culture and Public Action*, however, though it is

the product of a programme of work actually carried on in the World Bank, develops a remarkably different approach both to the conceptualisation of culture and the understanding of its role – primarily in regard to the poverty and inequality. A collection of essays by economists, anthropologists and political scientists, the book robustly critiques cultural determinism. It also marks a critical departure from ideas (such as the particular conception of social capital it has fostered) that have been dominant in the World Bank for quite some time.

The conception of culture in the Harrison-Huntington volume is static, whereas the approach that underlies the work contained in Rao and Walton's book is one where culture is inherently dynamic, always in process, always subject to contestation. Their understanding deserves to be quoted in full. Though they say that they "hesitate to privilege one definition over another", they take the view that culture is essentially about *relationality*:

... the relationships among individuals within groups, among groups, and between ideas and perspectives. Culture is concerned with identity, aspiration, symbolic exchange, coordination and structures and practices that serve relational ends, such as ethnicity, ritual, heritage, norms, meanings and beliefs. It is not a set of primordial phenomena permanently embedded within national or religious or other groups, but rather a set of contested attributes, constantly in flux, shaping and being shaped by social and economic aspects of human interaction (p 4).

As Arjun Appadurai says in his chapter in the book, one important development in cultural theory is "the idea that dissensus of a sort is part and parcel of culture and that a shared culture is no more a guarantee of complete consensus than a shared platform in a democratic convention" (p 61). Another of the contributors to the book, Timur Kuran, emphasises the point that the defining concepts or patterns of thought and action of different cultures

are usually laid down by "self-appointed cultural spokespersons", who are sufficiently powerful to suppress the voice of others in their societies. There may, for instance, be a liberal majority in Islamic societies that is silenced by the voices of a radical minority. The majority is more or less constrained to engage in 'preference falsification', though its members sometimes express their true preferences through their actions (by choosing to migrate, perhaps). Preferences are actually malleable, and it is for this reason that Kuran argues (as in the title of his chapter) that cultural obstacles to economic development are "often overstated, usually transitory". But ideological hegemony is often more complete than this formulation seems to allow, and people do actually participate in their own repression, accepting ideas and values that are imposed upon them, as seems to have been the case at some times amongst dalits in India. Culture therefore affects as it is affected by power relations within a society, and so is "fundamentally linked with the perpetuation of inequality" (p 30). This position recalls for me Steven Lukes's statement of the need for a 'three-dimensional view' of power, one that offers "the prospect of a serious sociological and not merely personalised explanation of how political systems prevent demands from becoming political issues or even from being made" [Lukes 1974: 38].

It is for this reason, Rao and Walton argue in a brief but extremely important passage, that the principle of equality of opportunity is inadequate for guiding public policy towards inequality and discrimination. Their fundamental point is that cultural capacity, which differs between groups of people, should be recognised as an element in their capabilities. This is why 'culture matters'. They bring together Sen's capabilities approach and the idea of cultural capital developed by Bourdieu – the idea that cultural, social and symbolic resources are drawn on by people to maintain or enhance their positions in the social order. The prominence given to these ideas of Bourdieu's is one of the several ways in which this book departs significantly from previous works coming from the World Bank. In all the bank's prolific publications on 'social capital' especially, Bourdieu's

formulation of this idea was largely, and apparently studiously ignored [Fine 2001; Harriss 2001]. Bourdieu recognised that the resources that are inherent in certain social relationships ('social capital'), and the ability to deploy particular symbols or other cultural traits ('symbolic and cultural capital') are an important aspect of the field of power in any society, and play a part in the reproduction of class relationships. In effect, they do constitute a kind of 'capital' and are the objects of struggle. Cultural capital may be used as an instrument of domination and in this case those who are subordinated are subjected to symbolic violence (as dalits are).

Rao and Walton argue, therefore, that 'a group's cultural capital forms part of its capability set' (p 28); and, following ideas expressed by Arjun Appadurai in his contribution to their book, they recognise that *aspiration*, or the capacity to aspire to a better future, should be recognised as an important feature of cultural capacity. People, then, from social groups that are subject to the symbolic violence of dominant discriminatory ideologies – in the way that dalits have been by brahmanical Hinduism – "may have 'constraining preferences' that restrict their 'capacity to aspire'" (p 29). This is why public action to tackle poverty and exclusion based on the idea of equality of opportunity is insufficient. Even if people are granted the same access to human and physical capital (the 'level playing field' interpretation of equality of opportunity), and even if they are not discriminated against (the non-discrimination interpretation) they may still be constrained by ideological and cultural factors that are beyond their control and that restrict their 'capacity to aspire'. Thus a "cultural lens...leads us to a different principle – 'equality of agency' – which builds on 'equality of opportunity' but takes into account as well the impact of the relationality of individuals, the social and cultural contexts within which they operate, and the impact of these processes on inequality and poverty" (p 29).

The argument depends significantly on Appadurai's chapter, which is probably the most important in the book (notwithstanding Amartya Sen's excellent treatment of the ways in which culture matters in development, and his persuasive arguments against cultural determinism). The 'capacity to aspire', like other human capacities, is developed through practice, through repetition. It is not that poor people have no capacity to aspire (as is implicit in the old and discredited notion of the

existence of a 'culture of poverty'), but that poor people have less opportunity than those who are wealthier to explore the relations between a wide range of means and ends. Their lack of opportunities means that they have 'a more brittle horizon of aspirations'. In what ways is this situation changed? Appadurai argues on the basis of his ethnographic research in Mumbai with a coalition of three local partners – SPARC, an NGO; the National Slum-Dwellers' Foundation and Mahila Milan, an organisation of poor women – which constitutes the Mumbai chapter of a global network of community-based housing activists, that change comes about as a result of the exercise of 'voice' by the poor. This helps to build cultural capacity, and the development of the capacity to aspire in turn extends the exercise of voice by the poor. The mobilisation of poor people in the alliance and in the three member organisations, and the repertoire of activities that it has developed, has brought about change in the 'terms of recognition' of poor people – change, that is, in the ways in which they are perceived and how they perceive themselves, and so, finally, in the ways in which they interact with others in the social hierarchy. Housing exhibitions and toilet festivals, for example, organised by the alliance, enable poor people to participate in performances – for instance, involving interactions with World Bank officials over the design of cheap toilets – through which they develop a stronger sense of their own agency, of their capacities to plan, to explore the connections of means and ends. They come, in this way, to change the terms of recognition, and to establish – in effect – greater equality of agency.

The 'cultural lens', in the hands of Appadurai and of some others who contribute to the book opens up questions about power that have been rather systematically evaded in the World Bank discourses on 'participation' and 'empowerment', and in the particular ways in which the bank has used the idea of 'social capital' (this was the subject of my book, *Depoliticising Development: The World Bank and Social Capital* (2001). See also Fine (2001). Where poor groups of people experience "adverse terms of recognition from dominant groups or state structures, there is ... an inhospitable environment for the development of a capacity to aspire... and the potential for increasing effective agency is limited". Changing this in practice must often involve 'an explicit and direct confrontation with powerful elites' (p 25). The point is rather an obvious one,

perhaps, but it is unusual to find it expressed so clearly in publications emanating from the World Bank. In this regard, the chapter in the book by Jean-Philippe Platteau and Anita Abraham, on 'participatory development', is greatly to be welcomed in a context in which ideas about 'participation' and 'empowerment' are deployed so uncritically – as they often are by the World Bank and by other development agencies, and by national governments. There are indeed many good reasons for favouring decentralised development, involving the participation of people, and for believing that such an approach can be empowering. Platteau and Abraham are certainly not against participation. Their point is, however, that in many circumstances elites are able to capture resources 'and use them to further client-patron relations with poorer groups'. The point is that, "Passing resources to local communities presents a particular development challenge and is likely to have disappointing effects in accelerating development and reaching the poor unless it is designed in a way that takes account of the challenge posed by cultural embedded hierarchies" (p 25).

Culture and Public Action includes a number of other chapters, in addition to those highlighted here, on different aspects of culture and development. As a whole, it marks quite a major departure from ideas that have been given prominence and currency by the World Bank. To give just one more instance of this, as against the uncritical views of 'civil society' that are still prevalent, this book refers to the need for "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 the umbrella" (p 362). The book carries, therefore, a considerable challenge to much in current development orthodoxy. It is hard to imagine the shift, however, to the kind of deliberative approach that the book favours, in the absence of political movements that are able to shake up 'the terms of recognition' of the poor and to challenge the powerful. [47]

References

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 Harriss, J (2001): *Depoliticising Development: the World Bank and Social Capital*, LeftWord, Delhi.
 Lukes, S (1974): *Power: A Radical View* (a new and revised edition has been published in 2004), Macmillan, London .