

## **World Bank Conference on Culture and Public Action**

### **COMMENTARY ON SEN AND APPADURAI**

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I shall address the contribution by Amartya Sen first, then Arjun Appadurai's, before bringing the two together through the notion of the "base." By base I do not mean cultural capital, social capital or the commons; rather, the base provides the foundation for market and material activity. It changes over time, and varies by context, but culture and economy are always intertwined in the base.

Amartya Sen presents us with a sagacious, broad ranging view of the relations between culture and economy. As an anthropologist I was pleased to read an economist who thinks culture matters and has taken the time to explore how it might influence economy, economic policy and development issues. Sen's pragmatic and ethical commitments also provide a refreshing addition to anthropology.

Ever since E.B. Tylor put forward a definition of culture over a century ago<sup>1</sup>, the culture concept has been at the center of anthropological discussion. But if we polled one thousand anthropologists for a definition, I suspect that we might receive more than 1000 different responses. Anthropologists are a pluralistic bunch which may be related to the fact that we each study a different problem in a different place. Today, some anthropologists claim that the culture concept is dead, should be replaced by history, is a colonial concept, is closely linked to the rise of Western nationalism and statehood, is

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<sup>1</sup> "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (1871).

used to stereotype others, or has some other ill that renders it useless if not pernicious to employ in our battery of technical knowledge. Sen navigated these icebergs: culture, he urges, is not a homogenous, static whole but is made up of different voices, and it changes. He argues as well that cultures are mixes and overlap which is a point of importance for understanding not only today's events but the histories of cultures. He adds the useful point that people of different cultures can learn from one another. Anthropologists, in fact, have studied learning but mostly in the context of cultural transmission, socialization and child development. Long ago we studied the diffusion of customs, and today we grapple with issues of globalization and localization. But generally we have not been very interested in forms of knowledge acquisition such as learning-by-doing or learning from other cultures (except as diffusion). I suspect if we had taken a greater interest in humans as explorers and learners that we might earlier have broken away from our equilibrium views and tradition-preserving moods.

Throughout his discussion Sen amplifies many aspects of what we mean by culture: music, literature, dance, values, goals, sacred sites, motivations and subjectivities, solidarity and trust, participation and identity. I have reservations about emphasizing music and dance, for that view may posit a separation of the cultural from the non cultural - to the contrary, we are thoroughly cultural beings even in posture, hand gestures and ways of walking.

This said, with acknowledgement that many anthropologists would not embrace my use of the word culture or some of Sen's applications, I shall raise three questions that expand on Sen's themes; and at the end I shall suggest how we might think about culture and economy in a slightly different way.

First, I ask: in what sense is economy cultural? How are economy and culture interwoven, not as separate variables with changing weights and influences, but in the sense that economic life is a cultural making. Sen

recounts the Weberian hypothesis (about the relation of the influence of Protestantism on the rise of capitalism) largely to reject it on empirical grounds (what about Confucianism, Buddhism, Japan and other East Asian countries?). But the issues concerning culture and economy are more complicated than those included in the Weberian hypothesis.

Second, for purposes here, I should like to place greater emphasis on the idea of culture as meaning. I do not think that culture is only about meaning, and I do not mean that words or objects have little tags specifying what they mean and which taken together make up culture. Meaning partly lies in use, relations, and context, and it is shifty and interpreted, as well as contested and negotiated. So, part of the question becomes how is economy meaningful in practice?

The third issue is closely related, and I think that Sen would agree with this observation. We must bring the person, as agent, more completely into our picture. By agent, I do not mean a member of the FBI or - as in economics - someone who is acting on another's behalf. Rather, I mean the person-in-community and the community-in-the-person. This is a reflexive person who scans, learns, creates and interacts, so that the community or culture capacitates her just as she is in the community and changes it in a continuous loop. Cultural sharing is not a static end but a changing product of the person-in-culture and culture-in-the person.

Let me try to illustrate these questions and put them to work with three examples from ethnography: property, production, and distribution. First, consider property. We are often told that to hasten economic development a transparent system of private property rights must be constructed and set in motion. Without such a system, rights to property cannot be traded in the market, and a market system with its value of efficiency in allocation cannot be established. Nothing could be simpler. But culture does matter, and the cultural question I ask is how are rights to property established, not simply assigned - how is the connection between

person and "thing," such as land or another resource, justified or locally explained? In fact, we rather avoid this underlying question: Proudhon, as I recall, claimed that property is theft, whereas John Locke proposed a kind of imprinting, annexation view based on the misguided idea that the Americas were unoccupied, open territories.<sup>2</sup> (Locke's labor model of property was later developed by Adam Smith, Ricardo, Marx and others into a value model.) How do we justify or make sensible to ourselves the ownership of property prior to its being bought and sold in markets?

Ethnographically, such "original" rights are variously chartered. They may be explained as a right by covenant with God, by gift of God, spirits, or royal authority; by gift of nature; by first-come first serve; by theft; by labor embodied; by pact with the devil or benevolent spirits; by the ancestors who first arrived or emerged from the earth itself – to adduce a few examples. Sometimes the final justification remains obscure or contested. Regardless, understanding the meaning, rationale or use of these justifications is the stuff of anthropology and culture.<sup>3</sup> More pointedly, it offers one example of the way culture enters the very base of economy: culture is not a variable, not a dance, not a site but a presupposition of an economic system. And it matters, as today's events in the post socialist countries and in the Middle East demonstrate. How shall economics take account of this underpinning?

Much the same issue arises when we turn to production. Production I take to be the quintessence of an instrumental, means-to-ends activity, and it always occupies a large space in any economic account. In Aristotle's striking expression, production is done "for the sake of" something else.

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<sup>2</sup> By some estimates, there were over 100 million inhabitants when the Europeans arrived.

<sup>3</sup> For example, it may be said that people occupy land and have the right to use it by being descended from the ancestors who first arrived in the area, and opened the land and made it fertile. Such a conception of possession is not directly translatable to our system of property rights or our justifications. The connection is complex. The present day users are connected to the ancestors by lineal connection that itself is variously explained - by their spirit presence in descendants, by birth from a succession of wombs, and in other ways. And the ancestors are connected to the land by having used it, by having invented agriculture for it, by being buried there, and by offering continued fertility.

Ethnographically, however, we find that the category is not so clear cut, for production - such as agriculture or hunting - may (to continue with Aristotle's complementary category) also be done "for its own sake" as an act justified by itself for itself without pointing to something else that it achieves. Thus, when a people perform "agricultural rituals" to gain the goodwill of their ancestors in order to have fertility or to keep away plagues, they have a purpose but they are also maintaining community among themselves and with their predecessors.<sup>4</sup> Most economists, I suspect, would treat these "customs" as frictions or negative externalities. In the process of economic development they should be eliminated in the name of efficiency - or acts done for their own sake should be eradicated in the name of acts done for the sake of something else. Even if one draws on a broad view of the development process - as does Sen - complexities remain because choices may need to be made between incommensurate realms or values. But, again, the larger point I am underlining is that culture and economy here cannot be distinguished in production. Let me add that increasingly we are understanding the modern corporation as a cultural making and extended community; it may have non contractual, social connections with suppliers and "supplementors," it develops different forms of leadership and ways of interacting, and it tries to convince customers to join its way of life by purchasing its products. How shall economics take account of this interweaving of the cultural and the instrumental?

Finally, distribution raises much the same issue. Anthropologists have reported distributions that occur on different occasions, such as when personal breaches or accidental deaths occur, when animals are caught and killed, when domestic animals are butchered, or when personal services are performed. I distinguish these transfers from market payments, and call

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<sup>4</sup> One group on the island of Sarawak plants its central, sacred rice in the center of a field and then surrounds it with a series of concentric circles of less and less sacred strains. Rice illnesses are treated by rituals over the sacred rice which stands for continuity of the group. Such examples could be multiplied from the world over.

them allotment (for assignment of a permanent fund such as land), and apportionment (which is a flow from a stock). In these cases, it seems to me, the provider (such as a hunter) or the distributor (such as a the possessor of a sacrificed pig) is recognizing his connections to others and their entitlements to a share, because the object or service was not in the first instance the provider's private property.<sup>5</sup> Gaining a share in the game captured by lineage members, like tribute paid to a chief who embodies the ancestors and makes offerings for their goodwill, signals participation in community. Such sharing is not an exchange or transfer of property between disconnected individuals for services rendered but the assertion of connections that define a person's place and identity in community. I emphasize that this sharing is done on various grounds: equal per capita, equal per household, by need, by social position, by age and gender, and more. Moral and social values enter into the distribution of the fruits of economy; and values are a part of culture. So, it is not enough to speak of distribution by age or gender; we must explicate the rationale or "story" behind these different weights. I would not reduce them to abstract, individual preferences. How shall shared moral values enter our conception of economy?

Enough said. Culture may saturate economy at its base. How are we to fit this interweaving of culture and economy with the notion of development? For example,

- Following Sen, should we think of development as more than economic growth?
- Should we try to de-link the cultural from the economic? Or,
- Can we think about culture at the base as a resource? I return to this suggestion after turning to Arjun Appadurai's important contribution.

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<sup>5</sup> For example, among some African groups, the success of the hunter depends on his skills and on peaceable relations being kept in the lineage whilst he is on the hunt, for lineage amity helps persuade the ancestors to make the game available. Furthermore, the hunter's

Economics has sometimes been known as the dismal science. If so, anthropology must be the gloomy discipline, because our literature is filled with dire predictions and sadness for the worlds we have lost. Against this backdrop, Appadurai presents a fresh view, in a surprising way, for in a context of terrible poverty and disgraceful conditions he is discovering a people's capacity to make a future rather than regret the past. His key notion is aspire which certainly means to desire or want but also to strive and work for a new outcome. Appadurai offers not only an uplifting view of culture but returns us to grander visions of humans. I mark the irony that Appadurai locates this capability in an uprooted people who are living in the most dire and dreadful conditions. If development means anything, it surely means accepting the moral obligation to nourish this capability which is precisely the conclusion that Appadurai draws from the arguments of Charles Taylor and from Sen.

I direct your attention as well to his fine ethnography that illuminates this perspective. His focus is housing and the way an alliance of an NGO, a foundation and a women's group are working with slum dwellers in Mumbai (India) to achieve changes. Securing improved housing implicates a fan of needs, such as electricity, transportation and proper sanitation. The humiliation of being forced to defecate in public makes a telling story, and Appadurai neatly shows how this single mortification is made into a public, "ritual" performance, used to persuade resource holders of their ethical obligations. Culture, to make the obvious point, matters even among the destitute, and Appadurai uses his anthropological skills not to provide a neutral, objective account that can be stored in an archive buried deep in a university library but to strengthen the aspirations of others.

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skills are learned and honed within a legacy that is the community's. What the hunter secures, then, is not his but a product of his actions within a community.

Now, let me try to link the two essays in a way that I hope does them justice. I want to think in terms of a community's base. I have always been suspicious of the word community, because communities are not atomic isolates, because they have fuzzy and porous boundaries, because the category may be a Western invention, and because the term surely suffers other ills and misuses. Yet, I do think that humans are social beings, that our capacities are eminently social. As "agents" we are persons-in-community and community-in-persons; we are composed of relations to others, and we make these relations. We live in multiple communities, we combine and juxtapose them, and we switch among them. These aggregations are the nesting ground of culture and ourselves.

With this perspective, I would "re-embed" economy in culture, not to return all economies to earlier formations but because economy itself includes more than markets, self-interested trades, externalities, and countable (commensurate) goods and services. It includes the "base" of a community or communities. I draw the term base from my experience in Latin America. The base comprises the shared "material" interests of a people - sometimes contested, sometimes negotiated, often unvoiced. It changes by context and over time. The base may consist of resources, such as water, land or space for housing; it may include tools or food stored; certainly, it is a legacy of knowledge and skills, and it may be social relations, rituals and performances of the type I mentioned or Appadurai describes. Base can also be the agreed rules for material interactions. It is a living combination and provides the footing for human control and mastery. As people in rural Latin America remark: "you have to have a beginning." Economists often refer to my notion of the base as cultural capital and social capital, or the commons; I do not use these terms because they "marketize" or make the base, which consists of incommensurate things, into a commodity or resource endowment that actors bring to the bar of exchange. I do not think the changing base can be captured or understood in this way.

Let me introduce a further suggestion about base that I draw from my Latin American work but also from classical writers, such as Adam Smith: the distinction between needs or necessities and wants or luxuries. Both are locally defined. In rural Panama, people would say that salt is a necessity but money from the cash crop sugar cane buys luxuries.<sup>6</sup> I suppose that in the United States a house, car, television and telephone are considered necessities - at least for several income classes. Building a base concerns locally defined necessities, or what a person needs to participate and aspire.

What strikes me about Appadurai's description of the poor in Mumbai is that the Alliance or Federation he describes is a loosely-structured community that is defining and slowly building a base for meeting people's needs: housing, sanitation, water, recognition. To be certain, non governmental and governmental support are required in this endeavor, but as Appadurai shows the activities in this base building transcend and sometimes mock the formal and legal limits established by the larger society. For this reason - and here I depart from Appadurai - I should like to have known more about the cultural and contextual background or history of this base building. On what tools do the people draw? For example, Appadurai tells about the series of connections running from women, to work, to savings, to federation. But why has this rhetorical series of links (introduced by A. Jokin) proven persuasive? Why does it engage people? Can we be more specific about the base that is being remade? (Appadurai also shows how the Federation has appropriated state practices such as self-surveys, housing exhibitions and toilet festivals. But in what way does their appropriation build on, reject or transform their prior practices and relations to the state?) People do not build a base from nothing - what are the social and economic tools on which they draw and which they reform? I return again to the question of culture and economy.

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<sup>6</sup> In Guatemala I once saw a small store advertising primary needs, such as salt, beans and rice, and secondary necessities that included cigarettes and soft drinks!

If we label the federation's developing base social, cultural or financial capital, term it a positive externality, or see it as infrastructure, we divide the innovative, non commoditized efforts in order to rephrase them in our language. Always a legacy, the base - which can be seen as underwriting all market trade - is built slowly with a long time vision, as Appadurai describes. This notion of base and base building with its implications for responding to poverty, and enhancing capabilities and welfare, is the addendum and concept that I would bring to Sen's vision, for the base lies exactly at the intersection of culture and economy.