

Vijayendra Rao and Michael Walton, eds.
Culture and Public Action.

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In the first sentences of their preface, Rao and Walton note the incongruity seemingly apparent in World Bank economists editing a collection of works by economists, anthropologists and sociologists exploring the links between culture and development. It seems only appropriate that the reviewer confesses a background in political science, so that all the disciplinary constraints are out in the open from the start.

Putting aside any further allusions to discipline biases, the book itself is remarkably free of the judgments, biases and dismissive attitudes that are still fairly common currency in the critical development literature. Tensions show between the camps represented by the authors, and perhaps the articles directly reflecting that tension are more indicative of the general reality. Nonetheless, the editors and the authors must be commended for seriously attempting to identify and bridge gaps. Mainstream development has been led most publicly, in terms of policy and implementation, by the Bretton Woods institutions. The World Bank and the IMF have been the most obvious corporate funder/practitioner bodies in the field of economic development. That development has often been unsuccessful, has too often caused outright harm, and that globally so many countries have come so little distance for such sacrifices puts the Bank and the Fund, as the policy leaders, firmly at the centre of critiques from every side. One of the main criticisms has been that the programs do not account for the cultural context of implementation.

Culture and Public Action asks the question: does culture matter for development? There is implicit in this question the response that culture does matter to development and that development matters to culture. The contributors engage in an overall attempt to look at the interrelationship in more detail, to explore how, why, when, where and what “matters” about the relationship. Through the book, one gets a degree of exposure to the main positions contending for recognition and the commendably jargon-free editing makes the discussion understandable to a broader public.

The editors admit inspiration from Amartya Sen, one of the first economists to truly reflect on culture over the course of a lifetime’s work. The offerings here by three distinguished economists and anthropologists — Amartya Sen, Mary Douglas and Arjun Appadurai — provide a solid foundation for the overall content of the book. All deal in their own way with the concepts, and more importantly the intersections, of culture and development, positing again that culture is neither homogeneous nor static — an obviously sensible statement. Forewarned here of the dangers of oversimplification and determinism, the reader must still recognize that there are ongoing examples of cultural determinism used and accepted in many places, including the media, and use caution and question those assuming that “the other” cultures are set in stone.

Sen asserts that the question is not whether culture matters, but rather how it matters in development. Sen advances some of his career arguments succinctly in this paper and probably most students of development have been exposed to them. However, especially in light of global events framed in the new “war on terrorism”, many of his observations are more thought-provoking today than they were even as recently as *Development as Freedom* (1999). Also important to his discussion, piquing

interest because it is not an extensive approach, is how and where culture does **not** matter in development.

Douglas begins by wondering if the greatest crime of the 20th century will be the long tolerance of poverty, where "...every thinking person knows that something is very wrong, but no one knows quite what it is or what to do about it" (p. 85). Her replacement of "culture of poverty" with "culture of apathy" is overdue and a direct policy challenge. Douglas' interpretation dovetails Sen and Appadurai; in essence, all of them argue for more discernment and less oversimplification in working within the gap between economics and culture. If culture is malleable and changes over time, failure (and success?) attributed to "traditional culture" is an oversimplification and essentially wrong.

Appadurai also meshes with Douglas and Sen while adding new concepts and ideas to the mix. His key concept revolves around recovering the future, what he terms the "capacity to aspire" of individuals. Using "capacity to aspire", he shows where and how individuals are attempting to recover the future through their own action. Though the blame-the-victim approach associated with the "culture of poverty" has to some extent been discredited, it certainly still exists implicitly and explicitly in mainstream public discourse, and within international development literature and theory. He uses several cases to show that even the poorest have aspirations and vision for their improved future, and that they have the capacity to realize those aspirations.

The remaining chapters provide further discussion of the ways in which culture and economic development interact and some case studies of particular interactions. They offer various interpretations of the relationships between culture and economics. As appropriate for a topic of considerable variation in approach and definition, the content details vary quite dramatically. Several chapters offer historical and comparative policy approaches. They undertake to provide what could be termed additional foundational understanding for the role that culture has played, and the ways in which it has too often been ignored, in the field of economic development. Many chapters provide case study profiles at a macro level. The examination of HIV/AIDS policy by Jenkins gives some regional cultural context and provides some additional perspective on the challenges of implementation within various contexts. There are several more specific case studies; for example, Harragin's analysis of famine relief in the southern Sudan in 1998 provides considerable detail on cultural approaches, kinship patterns, and the interactions between various agencies (which have their own organizational cultures).

There are two issues worth mentioning that seem to be gaps. First, there is the concept of public action itself. The book seems to consider public action as institutional. While culture is discussed for definition, public action is not. There are few examples of what the cover photo implies as public action — individuals attempting to obtain or block development. With the exception of a few case studies and some brief examples scattered through the work, there is little focus on public action as people's action, and this limits consideration of community-based people's action. Secondly, there is sufficient material in the book that additional organization might have been helpful. With sixteen chapters total, the flow of the book, and the various approaches, would have benefited from some basic divisions. There are certainly three foundation chapters, several historical profiles, as well as policy case studies and country case studies.

These considerations aside, this is an excellent and broadly readable introduction to the field and some of its key debates. In interdisciplinary terms it has brought together economics, anthropology

and sociology in a way that explores the common problems without antagonism, and which points to a number of areas for further exploration. This would certainly be a valuable addition to the growing undergraduate field of international development studies though it might be too narrow to serve as a core text. It would also be useful resource for disciplinary approaches that might wish to explore additional material (beyond the disciplines involved).

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