

# Of Human Capital

## *National Character and Cultural Assets*

Book Review by Kevin Lamb

Every year Transparency International publishes a list of the most and least corrupt nations worldwide. Since 1995, the Berlin-based organization has ranked nations on a scale of 10 (least corrupt) to 0 (most corrupt) according to *perceptions of the degree of corruption*. This information comes from surveys of business people who are asked to assess the *risk level* of nations in terms of international commerce and business transactions.

Certain patterns emerge in these national comparisons. Denmark is the least corrupt while several other European nations rank among the top ten. Others include New Zealand, Iceland, Canada and Singapore. The United States ties Austria as the 17th least corrupt nation. Cameroon, Paraguay, Honduras, Tanzania and Nigeria round out the survey for their rampant corruption. Two years ago, Nigeria edged out the finalists as the most decadent.

Some observers contend that a legacy of colonial oppression explains these differences in national corruption. Imperialism merely fosters despotism; third world indigence stems from exploitation and enslavement. In other words, pent-up resentment against the tyranny of military conquests generates violent uprisings. Put simply, oppression *causes* poverty and degradation.

While prevalent among intellectual elites, this viewpoint is intensely scrutinized in Thomas Sowell's recent book *Conquests and Cultures*. In the final volume of his trilogy on race and culture, Sowell examines the role of culture and military conquests in establishing national economic and social trends. As a

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**Kevin Lamb** is a library assistant for *Newsweek*. He is a frequent contributor to *The Social Contract*.

result, common assumptions regarding "victimization" are thoroughly discredited. Such as the notion that successful cultures *impose* socio-economic disparities on the indigent. Sowell argues that "human capital," what some refer to as the culmination of national character and cultural traits, remains the primary source of national disparities in economic and political stability. Cultural and ethnic differences explain inequalities of national achievement more aptly than imperialism. As Sowell points out, it is *inequality* rather than *equality* that governs human affairs.

A major lesson that surfaces from Sowell's study is the fallacy of multiculturalism, namely that "diversity" enhances national vitality. Hence, *all* cultures are *equally endowed* with the same combination of *valuable* traits and characteristics. As former Colorado governor Richard Lamm put it recently, "diverse people must unify or they have conflicts. Melting pots that don't melt become pressure

cookers."

Consider Nigeria and Rwanda. Thirty-eight years after achieving independence from Great Britain, Africa's largest country remains in political turmoil and economic ruin. Since 1966, military regimes have ruled Nigeria from one coup after another. The per capita gross domestic product of Nigerians is \$300 while inflation lingers at 100 percent, despite vast reserves of offshore oil deposits. As a *Washington Post* reporter noted in October 1995;

*Perhaps nowhere is Nigeria's plight more evident than in Lagos, the country's largest metropolitan area, with about 7 million people, a rotting infrastructure, nonfunctioning public institutions and suffocating poverty.*

*The city's streets are often impassable because few of its stoplights function, and traffic police are overwhelmed. The usual, brief afternoon*

### Conquests & Cultures: An International History

by Thomas Sowell

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*showers fill up crater-sized potholes in the roads.*

*Children, many younger than 10, roam Lagos's streets late into the night, selling oranges or bread or peanuts. On the sidewalks, candlelight frames the faces of adult peddlers surrounded by their goods as they struggle to eke a profit from a workday that began just past dawn and will end near midnight.<sup>1</sup>*

Ethnic division remains the source of Nigeria's economic and social problems. Nigeria's population is composed of 250 different ethnic groups. This level of

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tribal "diversity," coupled with its level of population density and expansion, hinders the formation of well-established customs and traditions, which also fuel its incivility, placing it firmly among the world's most corrupt nations. The lack of a common heritage united by language, civic manners and social mores — prevalent among more homo-geneous cultures — has stunted the cultivation of skills that are necessary for global economic competition and national productivity. In pragmatic terms, Sowell demonstrates that the incivility of Nigerian culture places it firmly among the world's most corrupt nations.

Likewise, the widespread ethnic violence that consumed the east-central African nation of Rwanda, following the death of President Habyarimana in April 1994, offers yet another example of the destructive consequences when a melting pot becomes a boiling caldron. In a two month span, fighting between Rwanda's two major ethnic groups, the ruling Hutus and Tutsi rebels, led to the massacre of nearly 500,000 Rwandans and displaced nearly 2 million refugees to Zaire and Burundi. A quarter of Rwanda's population either perished in the violence or fled the country as marauding bands of Hutu militias wiped out entire villages.

Colonial rule provided a measure of order and

stability that has eroded under decolonization. Whatever social cohesion had previously existed in Nigeria and Rwanda, ethnic violence has unraveled since achieving their independence. Sowell drives this point home in his trademark iconoclastic way:

*The impact of European conquerors on Africa, for good and evil, was relatively brief as history is measured ) about three generations, as compared to the centuries in which the Romans ruled Britain or Imperial China ruled parts of southeast Asia or the Moors ruled Spain... in many parts of Africa the departure of the European rulers was followed by technological breakdowns, failing economies, and political chaos. One man, one vote ) one time.*

The progressive path of modern civilizations is grounded upon what Sowell refers to as the "human capital" of advanced cultures. This "human capital" consists of a refined set of skills, habits, talents and traits which over generations give some cultures a competitive advantage over others. Sowell establishes this point beyond any reasonable doubt by cultivating solid historical examples that support this central point. It is his explanation of *how* cultures *acquired* these different qualities that puts him on thin ice.

As is the case with some of his prior works, Sowell tends to gloss over the empirical relationship between race, culture and ethnicity. Not that much of what he writes is inaccurate, rather Sowell often takes his reader to the water's edge only to wade through the shallow aspects of highly contentious issues. While Sowell acknowledges the realities of race, culture and ethnicity — often recognizing the validity of each category — his own analysis fails to adequately disentangle these illusive yet distinct concepts. Time and again he manages to capture the essence of the bigger picture without fully examining the ingredients in the developing process.

Cultures simply do not exist in a vacuum. Any comparative analysis of *cultural differences* requires further reduction in dissecting the factors that produce this variation. For instance, how does race or ethnicity *specifically* influence culture or vice versa for that matter? If race or ethnicity is irrelevant for cultural development, *why* is it irrelevant? By probing the murky depths of these concepts a little more, Sowell could

augment his already impressive body of scholarship with a more definitive edge. Instead of a patchwork of comparative historical examples, this analytical puissance would give Sowell's study the penetrative strength of a Spengler, Gibbon or Toynbee.

Some cultures, according to Sowell, have acquired beneficial skills by the luck of their own geographic location. The climate, terrain, borders, coastline, and natural resources of Western Europe are more conducive to commerce and trade, more so than Eastern Europe and even other continents. The natural landscape of Western Europe has contributed to its cultural enrichment. This argument also surfaces in Jared Diamond's Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*.

As an explanation of cultural advancement, Sowell concedes that landscape is one of many factors. Geography merely supplements cultural traits like natural talent and skill level in advanced civilizations. Yet, Sowell leaves his reader with the impression that geography *can* trump these other cultural factors. He suggests that geography may in fact be *the* major difference between the physical and cultural landscapes of Europe and Africa. Implicit in this argument is the notion that given the same set of geographical and environmental conditions that define Western Europe, the cultural landscape of Africa would be vastly different. And perhaps Sowell is right.

However, arguments over the significance of geography in cultural development are not new. Sir Ernest Barker, the eminent Oxford University political scientist, underscored the importance of geography, territory and climate in his classic study *National Character and the Factors in Its Formation*.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, Yale University geographer Ellsworth Huntington wrote at length about the relevance of climate and geography to cultural differences. Both stressed the geographical side of the equation without neglecting one critical factor that Sowell overlooks: the contribution of a gene pool. Consider Huntington's observations on the role of inheritance:

*As the difficulties of the environment become greater, the importance of heredity increases. Another way of putting it is that as people rise in the scale of innate capacity, as well as of cultural advantages, the limits imposed by nature become less strict.*<sup>3</sup>

In *Mainsprings of Civilization*, Huntington notes that the Scandinavian settlers of Iceland, isolated by unfavorable geographical conditions (three-quarters of its surface area is wasteland) and represented in relatively small numbers, were able to establish a thriving culture, one that produced several daily newspapers, magazines and academic journals as well as a Nobel prize recipient. This Icelandic culture thrived despite few schools and the lack of natural resources. Jon Karlsson writes in *The Genetics of Human Mentality* that "Iceland claims to have essentially total literacy, and certainly it is true that everyone learns to read and write except a few severely handicapped persons. More books are reported to be printed in Iceland per capita than in any other country."<sup>4</sup>

The example of Icelandic culture illustrates the refined qualities of "human capital" that, as Sowell points out, are essential for cultivating a permanent civilization. Although Sowell realizes that "geography isn't destiny," he neglects to flush out a few important factors while emphasizing ones that he admits are of limited explanatory value. In a timelessly perceptive slim volume, *National Welfare and National Decay*, William McDougall, the dean of social psychologists, captured the gist of Sowell's work, "the great condition of the decline of any civilization is the inadequacy of the qualities of the people who are the bearers of it."<sup>5</sup>

Despite its shortcomings, Sowell's *Conquests and Cultures* effectively debunks a number of myths regarding the role of imperialism and military conquest in cultural affairs. As an outstanding complement to the rest of his trilogy on race and culture, this final volume reflects the thoughtful deliberations of a landmark study.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Buckley, Stephen, "After 35 Years, Nigeria Still Stumbling on Road to Democracy," *The Washington Post*, October 1, 1995.

<sup>2</sup> Barker, Ernest, *National Character and the Factors In Its Formation*, Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1927, Chapter 3, "The Geographic Factor: Territory and Climate" pp.48-83.

<sup>3</sup> Huntington, Ellsworth, *Mainsprings of Civilization*, John Wiley & Sons, 1947, p.145.

<sup>4</sup> Karlsson, Jon L., *Genetics of Human Mentality*, Praeger, 1991, p.76.

<sup>5</sup> McDougall, William, *National Welfare and National Decay*, Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1921, p.36.