

# Culture Studies 101

Book Review by Kevin Lamb

A renewed interest in culture among social scientists at the end of the 20th Century points to an interesting paradox in the evolution of cultural theories. During the mid-1900s, the views of 'social anthropologists' like Franz Boas, Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, and Ashley Montagu — progressives who considered human nature to be infinitely elastic — challenged hereditarian theories about human behavior. The notion that culture rather than genes cause human *behavioral* differences created a paradigmatic shift among social scientists; ethnic and racial dissimilarities were viewed as cultural artifacts. The logical extension of this rationale found 'society' culpable for persistent economic and social disparities between human populations.

During the late 1960s, iconoclastic scholars like the late Edward Banfield challenged the underlying assumptions of this 'progressive' theory. By scrutinizing *comparative* cultural factors, Banfield recognized the importance of individual and group traits. Accordingly, differences in human attributes, rather than 'racism' or 'oppression,' accounted for the tapestry of urban social conditions — from affluent neighborhoods to indigent ghettos. This spurred Banfield's skepticism as to the effectiveness of government efforts to eliminate adverse social conditions.

An eclectic mix of contemporary scholars have revived much of Banfield's ideas about culture in a thoughtful collection of essays edited by Lawrence Harrison and Samuel P. Huntington, two well-respected Harvard academicians. The contributors reflect upon a variety of comparative factors indicative of cultural variation, which determine economic prosperity as well as social and political stability within advanced nations.

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Most seem to conclude that the difference between economically prosperous nations and backward third world countries is directly attributed to *selected cultural traits*. As Francis Fukuyama points out, shared norms and altruistic values in the Weberian tradition — persistence, thrift, honesty and reciprocity — create a *bond of trust between inhabitants* within productive societies. The element of trust fails to take root in severely corrupt nations like Nigeria, primarily because of the lack of human qualities essential for 'social capital' and the endurance of civil society.

Levels of trust seem to solidify in market-based societies that, according to Seymour Martin Lipset and Gabriel Salman Lenz, maintain solid democratic traditions. Dictatorial regimes foster corruption, social turmoil and political upheaval. Lipset and Lenz attribute the "emergence of developed economies" to an emphasis on "rationality, small family size, achievement, social mobility, and universalism." Both credit sociologist Robert K. Merton for deriving a coherent social theory from cultural factors. The reason why Western

societies are not as *rampantly* corrupt as third world societies is because of the Western allegiance to constitutional principles and democratic traditions that respect individual rights and value personal responsibility.

In one of the more revealing essays, Harvard Sociologist Nathan Glazer considers the "shifting status" of culture "as an explanation over the last century." Glazer argues that culture, as an explanation for group differences in economic, social, and political outcomes, remains second only to race as "one of the less-favored explanatory categories in current thinking." As Glazer puts it,

*We prefer not to refer to or make use of it today, yet there does seem to be a link between race and culture, perhaps only accidental. The great races on the whole are marked by different cultures, and this connection between culture and race is one reason for our*

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*discomfort with cultural explanations.*

More often than not *traits* of culture, like race or ethnicity, prevail against change (fads and fashions) given the stubborn nature of *group* traits. Consider assimilation patterns within culturally diverse nations. Contemporary 'multiculturalism' considers the clustering of inassimilable nationalities or ethnic populations as a national asset; a diverse plurality of peoples *without a common homogeneous culture* is considered a national strength rather than weakness. For the majority, native-born population, cultural change within a community is identified with the inassimilable traits of migrant populations' — values and group norms that differ from a community's host population. The issue when a community evolves demographically is the extent to which a new set of cultural traditions *displaces* rather than *assimilates* with the host culture.

Glazer accepts the influential reality of culture, but argues that education can triumph across cultural lines. Primitive cultures can prosper economically *if* education becomes a hallmark value; differences among cultures are little more than superficial qualities once any given culture values the importance of universal education. Glazer's argument glosses over the fact that genetically conditioned behavioral traits, differences in IQ, personality and temperament, may act as a surrogate factor. Economic success is considered commensurate with higher levels of educational attainment, but what about higher *average* IQ levels? How would Glazer explain the track record of Asian and Jewish sub-cultures? By considering the value placed on education and *merely* disregarding comparative averages in ability levels?

Consider the example of Vietnamese refugees. The waves of Vietnamese refugees displaced to the West after the fall of Saigon dispersed thousands of Vietnamese children (many uprooted from their natural parents) across North America and Europe. The drive and personal determination to acquire not only a college education, but also advanced graduate and medical degrees *in foreign lands absent their native language*, reflect the assiduous nature of their own cultural values toward educational achievement *in addition to* selected

individual traits of natural ability and perseverance. As the prominent anthropologist Clark Wissler once noted, most cultures share a common primitive experience with fire and the bow, but what distinguishes one culture from another is the extent to which such primitive tools were eventually utilized. Innovation, as many of the contributors note, is a factor common among vibrant cultures.

In one of the book's more peculiar essays, Harvard Sociologist Orlando Patterson attempts to clarify the "Afro-American experience" in terms of culture. More specifically, Patterson seeks to justify a cultural explanation for "Afro-American problems," which he contends has been disputed or improperly ignored. He scores on two points: Patterson legitimately argues that economic models fail to explain the persistent social and behavioral chaos that defines inner-urban life; culture explains a great deal of this existence. Where Patterson's argument becomes tenuous at best is his explanation of *how* these adverse conditions entered into African-American culture: the advent of slavery. He also takes issue with the findings of Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray's much publicized 1994 tome *The Bell Curve*. Patterson makes the unsubstantiated claim that Herrnstein and Murray were on the "losing" side of the "so-called Bell Curve Wars." This may reflect the public's skewed perception given the volume of popular criticism that the book's findings generated; it certainly fails to encompass the relevant perspective of scholars within the scope of IQ research. In essence, Patterson seems adrift with a carefully finessed theory that lacks credibility.

Some of the contributors seem ambivalent about exploring the relationship between cultural variation and differences in population traits for the obvious reason: such topics are better left unexamined in the 'PC' climate of contemporary scholarship. The book's direction also lacks the analytical synthesis of a sociobiologist with stature, like the distinguished Harvard scholar Edward O. Wilson, who could enlighten with a probe of the epigenetic foundations of culture. Still, on balance Harrison and Huntington have broken much needed ground on a significant yet neglected topic. •