

# CULTURAL FOUNDATIONS FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

by CHARLES ELLIOT \*

The title of this contribution could easily be misinterpreted. It is therefore well to begin by emphasizing certain views to which we are not committed. The first such is that there is a unique constellation of cultural phenomena which are necessary preconditions of economic growth. "Puritan morals", "industry and thrift", "withdrawal of status respect", "need to achieve", "aggressive capitalism" are some examples of cultural variables that have been isolated as engines of growth in some economies. None of them applies universally, unless interpreted so generally as to become operationally insignificant; and indeed few of them apply to more than a small minority of cases of successful development. There is a sound reason for this. Cultural diversity is such that it is exceedingly difficult to find phenomena that can be accurately defined and precisely applied in a variety of cultural environments. Attempts to apply some of the concepts enumerated above on a cross-cultural basis have been either unconvincing or sterile.

## Weaknesses in the assumption of cross-cultural relevance

If there are no unique cultural foundations of economic development, then, are there not at least common attitudes, value sets, cultural structures that reappear in many cases of successful development? This is posed as an empirical question which can presumably be answered by patient research into the cultural milieu of each case. But behind it lurks a more difficult logical question. Supposing it were shown that "withdrawal of status respect" had, in some sense, been a necessary precondition of economic development in  $n\%$  of cases analysed, what could be concluded from that discovery? Certainly not that it is a necessary precondition in any given (future) case of development. Nor would it be legitimate to say that the probability of that particular cultural feature being either necessary or even important in a given future case was made higher by the fact that it had been found to be important in  $n\%$  of past cases. In case this should be thought too negative, we must admit that it may be true that a common cultural variable that can be proved to be positively related to economic development at least defines an area of inquiry for the future. Given that, for example, in Chile, UK, Belgium and Malaya, cultural factor  $X$  has obviously

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been important, it would be sensible to look for that factor when assessing the possibilities of economic growth in Burma or Guatemala.

Third, we would wish to deny that cultural factors are a substitute for economic factors in the process of growth. Much sociological and psychological writing on cultural factors in economic growth have created the impression that the "right" constellation of socio-psychological factors is not only a necessary but also a sufficient condition. This has only to be spelt out to be seen to be false.

Social and cultural factors do not cause economic growth *per se*. They react on economic variables in such a way as to accelerate or inhibit the functioning of the growth process. For instance, the extended family system is an obvious example of a cultural phenomenon that obstructs saving. At its best it is a fine system of social security, ideally adapted to the economic conditions of poor societies. As such, it demands the sharing of any "excess" wealth among the members of the extended family or even of the clan, and therefore renders accumulation of money nearly impossible. If the politico-economic setting of development demands private saving on a substantial scale (e.g. classical capitalism), such saving will not be forthcoming from the areas and groups which maintain the extended family system. By removing the need for the extended family — perhaps by the provision of adequate social security based on cash contributions — one does not thereby produce economic growth as a rabbit out of a hat. One merely removes one obstacle to the accumulation of financial capital — a relatively small step along the path to self-sustaining growth.

Another example would be the value system that regards the number of cattle as a status symbol, and therefore emphasizes quantity rather than quality — a cultural feature which has been widely recognized as one of the major obstacles to agricultural — and therefore economic — development in many poor countries. The removal of this element in the value-set may be a necessary precondition of agricultural revolution: it is certainly not a sufficient condition. It has already been shown that this cultural feature is associated with a surprising ignorance of cattle husbandry. The change in values which, in terms of cattle, substitute quantity for quality, does not therefore immediately lead to substantial improvements in the national herd.

This point ties in with a fourth. Talk of cultural foundations and cultural obstacles has often arisen because, either implicitly or explicitly, one politico-economic system has been posited and cultural phenomena have been judged from that standpoint alone. A simple example is the

role of the individual entrepreneur and the development of an entrepreneurial class. A great deal of work has been done both on the empirical origins of an entrepreneurial class and on cultural prerequisites for the emergence of such a class. Such is the centre of interest of Hagen's work <sup>1</sup> on 'status respect' and of McClelland's <sup>2</sup> researches on "*n*-achievement". But if we assume that the development of an entrepreneurial class is a necessary condition of economic development we are assuming that some sort of capitalism is the only vehicle of such development. Not only do the non-capitalist countries deny this assumption, but even the history of many capitalist countries, not excluding the United States, attests how much has been achieved by State development projects, which have not required entrepreneurial ability in the normal sense.

#### Exploring development "values" in their own cultural milieu

From these four points, then, we conclude that the search for cultural foundations for economic development as such is a wild-goose chase. More profitable is the attempt to analyse constellations of cultural features which are consistent with given types of development effort. Take a classical capitalist economy, then we can specify certain attitudinal values that are helpful or even necessary. This is where the Weber-Tawney debate about thrift, industry and *πλεονεξία* is relevant. It is also where the cultural analysis of entrepreneurship is relevant, since capitalism necessarily implies a capitalist or entrepreneurial class. But if we take a classical communist system — admittedly an imprecise concept but one that is workable in the present context — then an entirely different set of cultural values becomes relevant. These would include an intense attachment to a corporate ideal, making politically possible substantial delays in the improvement of individual welfare, a basically authoritarian political structure — with all that that implies about cultural patterns at levels other than national, and a diminished sense of the value of the individual which has traditionally been alien to countries with a strong Protestant connection.

It is when we move away from the classical models to the twilight band in which most of the *tiers monde* find themselves that it becomes much less easy to specify the cultural features that have in the past or are at present positively associated with successful development. Although it is doing considerable violence to the complexities of the situation, it is roughly true that most developing countries today seek an ideological

<sup>1</sup> HAGEN, EVERETT, *On the Theory of Social Change*, 1962.

<sup>2</sup> McCLELLAND, DAVID, *The Achieving Society*, Princeton: van Nostrand. 1961.

*via media* in which both private capital and State enterprise are involved. Thus savings-oriented cultural features are relevant — e.g. extended family, attitudes to supernormal wealth, to productive investment, to social and occupational mobility, to risk-taking, norms of savings media (e.g. poor cows or bank deposits : gold fillings or Government saving bonds) ; but equally relevant are corporate oriented values of a socialist or, towards one extreme, totalitarian nature — e.g. cultural value of the larger, non-individualistic society, the acceptance of present suffering for a millennial vision of plenty (an interesting contrast to the revolution of expectations), the submission to authoritarian or paternalistic forms of government.

Herein lies one of the great unexplored problems of many developing societies. Simplifying with a boldness born of desperation, “traditional” societies, in Africa at least, were basically authoritarian and many of the values stemming therefrom favour a socialist-totalitarian form of development. The political dynamism of nationalism, rigged out though it has usually been with the trappings of democracy, has normally been an expression of a fundamentally authoritarian society. The espousal of a corporate ideal, the readiness to suffer for the realization of that ideal, the impatience with critics of the regime, the belief in the omniscience of central authority have all, to varying degrees, been present. But superimposed on this and often directly traceable to cultural intrusions, foremost among which has been Christians evangelism, are some cultural norms which have stepped directly out of a neo-classical capitalist background — e.g. strong individualism, *πλεονεξία*, desire to enjoy the fruits of one’s (individual) labours. This cultural muddle — it is too confused to be a cultural fusion — is at once strength and weakness. It is a source of strength precisely because it provides some cultural foundations for *any* type of economic order from totalitarian to untrammelled capitalist. It is a source of weakness because it provides an adequate cultural foundation for no *one* economic order — Thus within a year Africa has seen two major attempts to try to forge a common ideology out of a heterogeneous cultural tradition — namely TANU’s Arusha Declaration and President Kaunda’s statement to UNIP on African Humanism. Both stress their respectable “traditional” African cultural heritage, but both appeal, covertly or overtly, to “Western” values and mores — e.g. saving, industry, individual advancement ; perhaps in a hundred years’ time, historians will be able to decide whether the cultural confusion of many developing countries has been an asset or a liability in the process of economic development.

### **Have the Churches something to contribute ?**

In this confusion, where do the Churches stand ? Hitherto they have found it difficult to divorce their evangelism from the cultural milieu of their countries of origin. This has sometimes led them to strike cultural attitudes which most would now agree were silly, such as the prohibition of African dancing on the ground that it was sensuous and debasing. But equally some of their impact on cultural questions, such as polygamy, seems to stem directly from Biblical teaching and it may well be asking too much of missionaries to try to empty Christianity of all cultural content before beginning to evangelize. On the broader question of economic development, two points emerge. The first is that the Churches must be more sympathetic than they have often been in the past to the poor countries' attempts to grapple with the relationship between culture and ideology. "African Socialism", for instance is a woolly concept, but not one that is in any sense anti-Christian or even anti-God. Yet the Churches in Africa have so far treated it as an engineer treats an unexploded bomb — with a mixture of caution, hatred and fear. The enormous task of creating modern structures to enshrine ancient and yet valid relationships is one into which Christians should enter with joy and enthusiasm. For here is a chance to help the poor countries find, in a future age of relative affluence, expression of a view of man and society that reveals the hollowness and hypocrisy of much of modern Western civilization.

The second point is more concrete. The Churches have traditionally been part of the mechanism of the creation of culture. The Christian κοινωτια the Church schools, industrial and rural mission — all have been tributaries to the cultural stream of society. But, as a bold generalization, these contributions have been largely irrelevant to the problems facing the countries concerned. The Church schools have not been alone in their failure to come to grips with the difficulty of producing a graduate properly equipped for the life he will lead after he leaves school — the Government schools in French colonies were a good deal worse — but they are symbolic of the Churches' aloofness and seeming callousness towards the real and terrible deprivations of huge segments of the population. To the extent to which this can be rectified, the Churches have a huge contribution to make in helping define and fortify the cultural foundations for economic development.

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