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# Making Progress?

A study of approaches to culture in development

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# Abstract

This thesis merges the two interests of the author in culture and international development by asking the question of how culture, in various definitions, has been approached in the recent discussions on the role of culture in development. A thoroughgoing question is also what role anthropologists play in these debates, whether or not they have an actual influence on matters of “culture” in international development. The thesis makes use of the anthropology of globalization as well as the post-development school in discussing conceptions of culture and the deconstruction of development. The argument is that notions of culture as an obstacle to development persevere, but that there are signs of progress in the making and this is where anthropologists have important contributions to make.

*Keywords:* culture, development, anthropology of globalization, post-development school

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# 1 Introduction, Aim, and Research Question

Culture is back on the map in development debates. Beyond anthropology, questions are being raised and theories laid out about what role “culture” plays in international development and how this should be approached. Some scholars look to cultural values or behavior as likely explanations to why no progress has been made (Harrison 1985/2000, Huntington and Harrison 2000, Landes 2000). Some go so far as promoting a paternalistic changing of cultural traditions and values as part of foreign aid policy (Brooks 2010). This focus on culture and cultural difference as the single or at least most important explanation is by no means limited to the subject of economic development; we see it applied on everything from civil wars to consumer habits, as Breidenbach and Nyíri (2009) have shown in their enlightening work *Seeing Culture Everywhere*.

For anthropology as a discipline, this sparked interest in culture from other social scientists and disciplines (as well as from more mainstream sources) is certainly interesting in itself, but it also brings up questions of how well anthropologists manage to spread their - often intimate and detailed - knowledge of these subjects and influence other disciplines and policy makers. As argued by Radcliffe (2006:24), culture, while always present in development, has been defined and debated over in various ways at various times, but in separate spaces.

The aim of this paper is to explore how “culture” as a concept has been understood and approached in relation to development. This is performed mainly by examining two recent debates on culture in development, but also by looking at some famous models from the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. A study of the approaches to culture in development so far is prompted as older theories on the subject are resurfacing again, as for example the concept of a “culture of poverty” which will be elaborated on later in the paper. Besides inquiring into the definitions and ascribed roles of culture in development, the purpose here is also to explore the role of anthropology in these debates. The argument is that while simplistic notions of culture as a barrier to development persist, there are some signs of progress and anthropologists have an important role in this. The central question that will be dealt with here is as follows:

- How is culture approached in the recent debates on international development and what is the influence of anthropologists in these discussions?

## 1.1 Anthropology and Development – Evil Twins?

Development anthropologist Tim Allen has argued that there is an “entrenched antipathy” between anthropology and “development” as both industry and academic field which has impacted how culture is approached by development analysts and therefore deserves a closer look. Anthropology’s historical emphasis on cultural variety is said to be the main reason for this tension, as development studies has also focused on the “non-Western” world, but overtly declared it as “less developed” or “underdeveloped”. To many anthropologists, Allen writes, “the very term ‘development’ implies a disturbing homogenization of human experience, and also evokes uncomfortable associations with anthropology’s own origins in Victorian theories of social evolution and its links with European colonialism.” (Allen 2000:462)

James Ferguson has stated that anthropology and development is each other’s “evil twin”; arguing that anthropology, while having to accept a degree of intimacy with development, at the same time resents it for destroying all those things that the discipline treasures. (Ferguson 1996:160, quoted in Tim Allen 2000:462) However, when anthropologists have been involved in real-world issues, they would often be accused by outsiders of maintaining the status quo and refuse changes that could improve the lives of the locals (Nolan 2002:248).

The tension between anthropology and development is also reflected within the discipline of anthropology itself, hence the two existing subfields “anthropology of development” and “development anthropology”. The first field primarily deals with development as an object of study, suggesting that anthropology should study development as any other social phenomenon (Olivier de Sardan 2005:25). “Development anthropology”, on the other hand, is frequently also referred to as applied anthropology. Anthropologists in this setting have three primary and interconnected roles: to gather and analyze information, help design plans and policies, and finally implement plans through action (Nolan 2002:72-73).

There are, however, signs that changes in the tensions may be occurring as more anthropologists are entering the scene of development, both as voices in the debates and as employees within the aid business itself. Another factor that is worth considering is the loss of confidence among students of development when it comes to “knowing” and “truth”, following the rise of critical theories on discourse, power and representation (Allen 2000:462) as will be shown in chapter 3.

## 1.2 Delimitations and Explanations

The goal here is not to provide a comprehensive view of how culture has been approached in development since this would far exceed the scope and limits of this thesis. Rather, the focus is on discussing the recent paths in the interdisciplinary scholarly debate and the views on culture as well as the expressed role that culture is said to play in this setting. However, it is important to also consider the historical factor. Therefore, a brief look is provided at some of the "cultural models" of development that surfaced in the early to mid 20th century and which, in some respects, still enjoys some fame and pervasiveness. As previously mentioned, the focus is on the scholarly debate and hence not on definitions of culture representative of development institutions or governments. The relationship between culture and institutions is an interesting subject and closely related to discussions of culture and development, but it is not elaborated on in this thesis.

### 1.2.1 Development

Unless stated otherwise, the use of the term "development" in any configuration (development debates, discussions, etc) in this thesis draws on Crewe and Harrison's (1998:14-15) account which is twofold. Development is on the one hand described as an industry entailing activities by international organizations, lending institutions, NGO's, and bilateral donors which in turn involve both policies and practices. Development is, on the other hand, also an ideal and an objective towards which organizations and other actors claim to aspire. The contents of this ideal varies and is not always specified in detail, but it is nevertheless viewed as essentially good; a quest to make a positive change. The implication of this is that some countries and regions are characterized as more developed than others, and even those who criticize elements of development practice or the entire development industry do not always dispute this notion. Where the actors discussed in this thesis have a different view of development, this will be clarified.

### 1.2.2 Culture

As concepts of "culture" in development take up a significant part of what this thesis mainly engages in, a myriad of definitions and approaches are presented in the following chapters. Therefore, I shall here limit the content to a general overview of the various perspectives. Among the actors in the first debate on culture in development (chapter 4), there is a clear tendency to view culture as a barrier to progress. It is admitted that cultural values do change, but that this

happens very slowly. The definitions of “culture” revolve around the values, behavior, and beliefs of a people, or at times at a national or even continental level. The second debate reviewed in chapter 5 involves a variety of definitions of culture, but greater flexibility is suggested and cultures are not seen as inhabiting “good” or “bad” values. Culture is viewed as part of a bigger image, as in no way separate from other spheres or influences in society. The actors belonging to each path in the debate will be introduced in the method section below.

### 1.3 Method and Disposition

This thesis is based on secondary sources, which include available books and articles, as well as a few posts on anthropology blogs that have been of interest to the subject in this thesis. As mentioned, there are mainly two debates on culture in development that have emerged in recent years (see for example Breidenbach and Nyíri 2009:107), and they are primarily encapsulated in two anthologies, Huntington and Harrison’s *Culture Matters* (2000), and Rao and Walton’s *Culture and Public Action* (2004). I have therefore chosen to focus mainly on the contributions to these two works, so as to make the wide subject of culture in development somewhat more manageable within the scope of this thesis. Through these interdisciplinary debates, I follow the concept of “culture” in various definitions, in the spirit of what Marcus (1995) has referred to as mobile and multi-sited ethnography.

The following section introduces the historical context in terms of exemplifying how culture has been approached in development in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. The models presented are Edward Banfield’s “amoral familism”, the idea of “cattle complex”, a term first coined by Melville Herskovits, and finally Oscar Lewis’s concept of a “culture of poverty”. What is remarkable here is the persistence of some parts of these models in our present time. The third chapter considers the contributions of anthropology of globalization to conceptions of “culture” in a highly interconnected world. It also explores the deconstruction of development as a discourse, which is done mainly by anthropologists Arturo Escobar and James Ferguson, and is influenced by the anthropology of globalization. Chapter 4 takes on the first debate on culture, as well as the critique of anthropologist Shweder to these arguments. Thereafter the second debate is discussed in chapter 5, where it is shown that anthropologists have had far more influence. The section that follows ties the threads together, in discussing the views on culture in development as well as the role of anthropologists in this debate, before the thesis ends with some concluding remarks.

## 2 Early Approaches to Culture in Development

Between the 1950s and the 1960s, culture was a hot topic in development and, hence, is not a new move in discussions on international development. During this time, development studies was dominated by modernization theory which took for granted that as countries would “develop” they would also submit to Western cultural values and traits. The modernization approach also made ample use of a dichotomy between “traditional” versus “modern” societies in which culture, in the sense of a bounded, discrete entity that comprises structures of symbolic systems, social relations and practice, played an important role. (Schech and Haggis 2008:51) This section explores some of the more famed models of culture in development that continues to reemerge, either as mere reference points or as slightly altered theories. Several of the models below represent views of culture (in a variety of definitions as we shall see) as an obstacle to progress and are to a certain extent based on anthropological research. This has to do with the fact that, for a long time, “other” or “non-Western” cultures have been considered to be the fields of the anthropologist alone. (Allen 2000:460) Another point made by Schech and Haggis (2000:xiii) is that development has for a long time been equated with modernization, usually expressed in political and economic terms, while anthropology has been equated with culture. This in turn created a division of labor where development studies focused on modernization, and culture became the preserve of anthropology.

### 2.1 Amoral Familism

“Amoral familism” was a concept used by political scientist Edward Banfield in his work entitled *The Moral Basis in a Backward Society* (1958) which described the attitudes of peasants in the southern parts of Italy. An amoral familist was a person whose behavior was consistent with maximizing the material, short-term advantage of the nuclear family only, and assuming that everybody else was doing the same. The term implies that a person with this behavior lacks morality when it comes to relations outside of the immediate family, but applies moral codes of right and wrong in relation to family members. (Banfield 1958:83)

The extreme poverty and backwardness that Banfield witnessed in the Italian village is explained largely by “the inability of the villagers to act together for their common good or, indeed, for any

end transcending the immediate, material interest of the nuclear family'. (ibid:9-10) This inability is deemed the consequence of an ethos which Banfield has termed amoral familism. It was produced by an absence of the institution of the extended family, a high mortality, and particular land tenure conditions. "Ethos" is used with reference to Sumner's definition as the sum total of characteristic ideas, standards and codes that distinguishes one groups' character from other groups. (ibid:10) Banfield uses ethos interchangeably with culture, to which he ascribes a crucial importance when it comes to creating and maintaining formal organization. While praising the Japanese culture for its ability to maintain this high degree of organization necessary for a modern economy and a democratic political system, Banfield in his 1958 work expressed doubt that there was any other non-Western culture in the world that could achieve this level of organization without radically changing their ethos, or find expression for their latent potentialities. (ibid:8-9) The concept of amoral familism was later applied to an African context by political scientist and Africa expert Göran Hydén, who argued that the peasant mode of production created an "'invisible' economy of affection" that was highly difficult to change unless the economic structures were effectively transformed (Hydén 1983:28 quoted in Allen 2000:455).

## 2.2 Cattle Complex

A student of Franz Boas, the American cultural anthropologist Melville Herskovits was the first to coin the term "cattle complex", which has been understood to imply that certain groups of pastoralists are incapable of responding to new opportunities as they are too obsessed with their livestock. This is sometimes provided as an explanation to why African pastoralists are poor in a material sense and why their soils become eroded. It has even been cited as a reason for lack of economic growth on a regional or national scale. (Allen 2000:454) The concept of cattle complex can also be viewed in an alternative light as something worth preserving since it can symbolize people living in harmony with nature, untouched by capitalism and its corruptive impact (ibid:456). As remarked by anthropologist David Turton, Herskovits used the term cattle complex to refer to a set of cultural traits such as the use of cattle in bride wealth and sacrifice, and never argued that pastoralists were economically irrational. Nevertheless, it has been used among development planners and administrators in a Freudian sense to indicate that pastoralists have a sentimental and obsessive attachment to cattle – an irrational preoccupation from a growth-oriented economic perspective. (Turton 1988:138, quoted in Allen 2000:456)

Allen uses the empirical example of pastoralists in Somalia to illustrate how a simplistic and

misinformed view of culture can lead to greatly misleading analyses. Critical to the often expressed belief among developers that progress for pastoralists mean settling them down and educating them to be farmers, Allen relates this view to a concept of culture as isolated and as basically the same thing as “society”. He argues for the need to analyze the political economy of Somalia if one is ever to gain a comprehensive understanding of Somali “culture” (Allen 2000:460), thereby questioning the notion that economics and “culture” are separate spheres, a view that is shared among other scholars as will be shown mainly in section five.

## 2.3 Culture of Poverty

In 1959, the anthropologist Oscar Lewis published a work entitled *Five Families – Mexican case studies in the culture of poverty*, in which he made the argument that there is in fact a culture of the poor to speak of that has its own modalities and distinctive psychological and social consequences for its members. Lewis also argued that this culture of poverty transcended rural-urban, regional and even national boundaries. This was exemplified by supposed similarities in family and kinship structure, time orientation, spending patterns, value systems, parent-child and husband-wife relations and the sense of community found in Puerto Rico, Mexico City slums and lower-class settlements in London. (Lewis 1959:16) In his introduction, he stated what an odd thing it was that many Americans, thanks to anthropologists, knew more about some distant tribe of New Guinea than about the ways of life of the millions of peasants and urban dwellers in countries like Mexico or India. These were countries that would likely become important players in the international scene in the future; hence anthropologists had a responsibility to study and report on the psychology of the people, their problems and ways of thinking and feeling. (ibid:15)

As summed up by Tim Allen, it was ultimately suggested by Lewis that poverty produced its own way of life and its own traits of order and strategy. This culture of poverty especially developed in conditions of rapid social change and once in existence, it was said to have significant stability over time, passed on from one generation to the next. The idea of a “culture of poverty” was popularized in 1965 by the famous Moynihan Report, written by U.S Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, in which he applied Lewis’ concept to urban African American families in the United States. (Allen 2000:455)

In late 2010, a New York Times article entitled “‘Culture of Poverty’ Makes a Comeback” written by Patricia Cohen sparked a renewed debate on the idea that “the poor” have a particular

“culture”, and how this allegedly influence their behavior. This new debate was mostly carried out on various anthropology blogs online (for example Neuroanthropology, Savage Minds and Culture Matters), while the NYT article referenced the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association where the topic had also been discussed (Cohen 2010).

Much attention was given to the United States and how the concept of a culture of poverty had influenced domestic policy, but some saw the potential influence of the concept on international development as well. Among them was anthropologist Pál Nyíri writing for the blog Culture Matters. While welcoming the interest in cultural contexts, he also warned against the risk of relapsing into cultural determinism, stating that “the quite unabashed and unreflexive belief in “cultures of poverty” *avant la lettre* by Chinese development actors, who are increasingly influential, gives the situation an additional dimension.” He then proceeds to take a clear step away from the anti-developmental notion of “cultural survival” (Nyíri 2010), seemingly to avoid the critique usually paid to anthropologists in this setting, as discussed in section 1.1.

# 3 Cultural Flow and the Politics of Representation

Culture was to a large extent driven off the mainstream development agenda in the 1970s and 1980s, as Marxist-inspired dependency theories battled against neoliberalism. When that debate reached an impasse, however, some scholars started searching for new analytical tools in the new fields of globalization and post-colonial studies, which opened up for more dynamic and broader notions of culture (Schech and Haggis 2008:51). This chapter deals with conceptions of culture in relation to globalization that have emerged from studies in the anthropology of globalization, mainly by cultural anthropologists such as Jonathan Friedman and Arjun Appadurai. The second part of this section explores the deconstruction of the development discourse by radical thinkers of the post-development school, namely Arturo Escobar and James Ferguson. When “development” is understood as a discourse, some have argued that because it is driven by meanings produced in a particular cultural context (Euro-American institutions), it becomes not a natural process to be guided and accelerated so much as an exported cultural artifact (Schech and Haggis 2000:1).

## 3.1 Culture and Globalization

Processes of globalization have certainly influenced at least some scholars in how they view the connection between culture and development. As Schech and Haggis (2008:52) point out, the reconfiguration of social relationships regarding time, space, and even speed, along with the deregulation of financial capital and trade have indeed challenged the old dichotomy of modernity and tradition. These binary models were part of the foundations of both Marxist and modernization theories of development. As argued by Pigg, “development fuses the local and the global” in ways which produces consequences and effects that are deeply cultural (Pigg 1992:492 quoted in Schech and Haggis 2000:75). The globalization of cultures does not produce a singular global culture, but rather leads to new differences in the intersection point of the global and the local (Hylland Eriksen 2000:341).

Arjun Appadurai has argued against the core-periphery model in which the local is being incorporated into the global, and instead uses the term “global cultural flow” to depict a more

complex “globalization” across five different “scapes”: ethnoscaples, technoscaples, mediascaples, finanscaples and ideoscaples. These scapes entail the flow of people, technological innovations, capital, information technology, and finally, ideoscaples which encompasses the spread of ideas such as political ideologies of democracy. These were ideologies that were part of the world view of the Western Enlightenment, but as they are spreading to different parts of the world the ideas will assume different meanings. The use of the suffix –scapes is intended to point to the fluidness and irregularity of the five landscapes that is outlined. (Appadurai 1996:33-36) As far as the concept of culture goes, the fluidities of the global cultural flows described by Appadurai effectively weakens notions of culture as bounded, distinct entities envisioned in national, regional, global or local terms (Schech and Haggis 2000:65).

Appadurai has pointed out yet another aspect in the dichotomy between culture and development which is grounded in conventional definitions and that has been crippling. He writes that, for over a century, “culture has been viewed as a matter of one or other kind of pastness – the keywords here are habit, custom, heritage, tradition. On the other hand, development is always seen in terms of the future: plans, hopes, goals, targets.” (Appadurai 2004:60) This coupling together of culture with the past has fostered the misunderstanding that in order to attain the desirable future, the values responsible for the past and present needs to be manipulated by external forces (Breidenbach and Nyíri 2009).

In criticizing the view that the globalizing forces of the western world will absorb peripheral cultures, Appadurai is pointing to the indigenization in one way or another of the forces coming from various metropolises (Appadurai 1996:32). Jonathan Friedman’s famous study (1990) of *Les Sapeurs* in the People’s Republic of the Congo is sometimes seen as an example of this (see Schech and Haggis 2000:61). However, it is important to note that Friedman disagrees with Appadurai’s understanding of globalization as five different “-scapes”, which he argues is highly reductionistic. Instead, he opts for a more holistic approach claiming that the movement of people, for example, does not mean cultural flow in itself but needs to be understood in the wider social and cultural terms of the process. If the migration of people in itself meant the flow of culture, then culture would be reduced to demography, according to Friedman. (Friedman 2004:81)

## 3.2 Deconstructing Notions of Development

As already noted, the critiques against development mistakes and failures have been numerous, but not many of the critics have simultaneously questioned the overall project of “development” as such (Crewe and Harrison 1998:15). The exception to this is represented here by the so-called post-development school, sometimes also referred to as the deconstructionist school. Influenced by the anthropology of globalization, a number of the leading theorists of the post-development school have also been trained as anthropologists and stress the diversity of human experience. There is also a tendency among these scholars to view development policies as a means for imposing cultural homogeneity. It should be noted that although a number of radical thinkers on development often are grouped together under labels such as the post-development school, they are not without differences. (Allen 2000:462-463)

One of the most renowned deconstructionists and an adherent to the post-development school is Arturo Escobar, who described his work *Encountering Development – The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* as the history of the loss of an illusion, and above all a work about how the “Third World” has been constructed by the discourses and practices of development. (Escobar 1995:4) By using discourse analysis in the style of Foucault, Escobar points to how the development discourse has “created an extremely efficient apparatus for producing knowledge about, and the exercise of power over, the Third World”. (ibid:9)

The three axes that define development, according to Escobar, are its forms of knowledge (through which it is further elaborated into theories, concepts, and objects), the “forms of subjectivity” that the discourse promotes which makes people identify themselves as either developed or underdeveloped, and finally the system of power that controls the practice of development (ibid:10). Around this politics of representation, Escobar argues, the very existence of the Third World has been managed and negotiated, and it continues to be an “essential construct for those in power”. He regrets that not many anthropologists have been present in discussions of development as this regime of representation, for most of them have been either inside as applied anthropologists or outside as supporters of the “authentically indigenous”. Anthropologists therefore overlook how development functions as “an arena of cultural contestation and identity construction. (ibid:15) Ultimately, the road forward is suggested to lie in the rejection of the development paradigm altogether, imagining alternatives to development

rather than development alternatives. The alternative, according to Escobar, lies in the resistance to development interventions put forward by grassroots organizations and social movements. (ibid:214-215)

A less radical post-development theorist that nevertheless also draws on Foucaultian discourse theory is James Ferguson, who deconstructed a World Bank country report on Lesotho. The argument was that the Bank (and other development institutions in general) generates a discourse of their own, which in turn constructs Lesotho (in this case) as a particular object of knowledge and then forms a structure of knowledge around it. This structure of knowledge then makes up the foundation for organizing development interventions. Ferguson points to the need to examine the effects created by this institutionalized production of particular ideas about Lesotho. (Ferguson 1994:xiv-xv) He demonstrates how the World Bank report constitutes Lesotho as a "Less Developed Country", an LDC, practically untouched by modern economic development and hence in great need of the development interventions and technical inputs provided by the Bank (ibid:56-58).

The image produced by the World Bank report is contrasted with academic studies on Lesotho and illustrates a great divide between these discourses, as the academic research doesn't provide the justification for "development" that is needed by the development institution. If an academic analysis doesn't provide the development agency with a place to "plug itself in" or provide some sort of basis for the kind of intervention that is the agency's main task, it is simply of no use. (ibid: 69)

Ferguson and Escobar have both been subjected to critique, and it should be noted that they both treat "discourse" and "policy" as virtually the same (Allen 2000:463). Olivier de Sardan (2005:5) has remarked that the "diabolic image" of the development industry that is painted by Escobar and other deconstructors fail to acknowledge the incoherencies, contradictions and uncertainty that is present within these institutions. The continuous shifts that take place in development strategy and policy are ignored, which leads Olivier de Sardan to the conclusion that Escobar and other's approach is an ideological one, that perceives development as a negative entity and isn't grounded in an unbiased empirical enquiry.

Escobar has also been criticized on the fact that even if we recognize the Western values that

permeate the discourse on development, there will still be poverty and hunger in the world (Allen 2000:463). Crewe and Harrison (1998:18) has noted that there remains difficulty in escaping from dichotomies such as “us” and “them”. Inherent in Escobar’s view of development as a single discourse is also the assumption that developers develop and local people resist. Hence the developers remain at the centre, and the social movements of people that Escobar writes about are responses to the fixed centre, rather than influenced by other circumstances and conditions.

To sum up this section, what is ultimately being highlighted by the post-development theorists above, when not necessarily viewed in their most radical fashion, is the important need to question and discuss the cultures within the development institutions and among the other “developers” in general, and be aware of the norms and values inherent in the discourse(s) of development itself.

## 4 Culture as Barrier or Facilitator

As of late, studying culture and the role it plays in development is no longer conceived of as being the monopoly of anthropologists. Increasingly, culture in a more or less inclusive sense is being studied by scholars from other disciplines. Among the contemporary popular arguments that are making “culture” the principal variable in development are Bernard Lewis, who was the first to use the term “clash of civilizations” in reference to the West and its relationship to Islam (Breidenbach & Nyíri 2009:60), and David Landes with his famous work *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations* (1998). At a World Bank conference in 1999 entitled “Culture Counts”, Landes made reference to “toxic cultures” that according to him impeded development (ibid:99). As noted by anthropologists Crewe and Harrison (1998:15), it is common to account for failure in the development industry by looking at the recipients alone and suggest that they are not behaving as expected, and this is where culture comes in as the key variable.

### 4.1 Culture Matters

Samuel Huntington and Lawrence Harrison are two American political scientists whose work(s) have come to symbolize one of the two current paths in the debate on culture in development. In 2000, they published their influential jointly edited anthology *Culture Matters – How values shape human progress*, which was praised by former World Bank president James Wolfensohn and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the former U.S. Senator and author of the Moynihan Report. The book is dedicated to the memory of Edward Banfield, who is praised by the authors for “illuminating the path for so many of us” (Harrison & Huntington 2000). Harrison argues in the introduction that Banfield’s study illustrated the cultural roots of poverty in southern Italy, a case with universal applications according to Harrison (Harrison 2000:xxi).

*Culture Matters* was a result of a Harvard symposium centered on issues such as the link between values and progress, cultural change, and the universality of values and Western cultural imperialism. The outcome was a heavy six-point agenda outlining a theoretical and applied research program concerning how value and attitude change should be incorporated into development planning, policies, and programming in Third World countries. Among these points is the objective to “identify the values and attitudes that promote progress, including an

assessment of the priority that attaches to each, and those that impede it; [...] to establish which values/attitudes positively and negatively influence evolution of democratic political institutions, economic development, and social justice; and to rank them" (Harrison 2000:xxxii-xxxiii). What is expressed here is a view on culture as entailing the values, attitudes, beliefs, orientations and underlying assumptions established among the people of a society, which either facilitate or obstruct "human progress"; that is to say the movement toward economic development, material well-being, political democracy and social-economic equity. (Huntington 2000:xv) There was a consensus among all the participants that cultural values do change, although this happens very slowly (Harrison 2000:xxx).

In his foreword to *Culture Matters*, Huntington makes a comparison between Ghana and South Korea, two countries who in the early 1960s had "roughly comparable levels of per capita GNP", exporting mainly primary products with a similar division of their economies, along with comparable amounts of received economic aid. Yet, in the 1990s South Korea had become the fourteenth largest economy in the world and an industrial giant, with a per capita income similar to Greece, multinational companies and consumer goods industries, and was about to strengthen democratic institutions. In Ghana, however, there were no such changes and its per capita GNP was only around one-fifteenth that of South Korea. Huntington recognizes this difference in development and explains it with main reference to culture: "South Koreans valued thrift, investment, hard work, education, organization, and discipline", while Ghanaians had other values, hence: "In short, cultures count." (Huntington 2000:xiii) Naturally, there are plenty of others who have a different take on this subject.

Amartya Sen (2004:46) has warned against jumping to cultural conclusions, suggesting that half-truths or even quarter-truths can be more dangerous and misleading than simple falsity which is easier to uncover. As for Huntington's comparison, Sen describes the causal story as "extremely deceptive" and points to an array of differences between Ghana and South Korea in the 1960s, when Huntington deemed the countries to be roughly on an equal footing. Both the class structures and the politics differed between the two countries, with South Korea having large and proactive business classes and a government eager to take the leading role in commencing an economic development centered on business in a manner that did not apply to Ghana. Sen further suggests that the close ties between the Japanese and Korean economies, and the relationship between South Korea and the United States, were of significant importance. Most

important was, however, probably the fact that the literacy rate in South Korea was much higher in the 1960s, along with a considerably more expanded school system, than Ghana had at that time. This is not simply due to Korean traditional culture; the changes in the school system were brought about through public policy and by following the lessons from abroad in the post-World War II period. (ibid:46-47) It might also be added that these differences had their roots in the different policies of former colonial powers in the respective countries. While Japan had invested in industries in Korea and developed a modern school system and administration, the focus of the British in Ghana were on developing infrastructure and the extractive industries. (Breidenbach & Nyíri 2009:104) Sen concludes in his critique of the comparison that the cultural determinism on which Huntington seems to rely, would suggest either a cultural triumphalism of South Korea or a radical pessimism concerning Ghana's future. However, neither can be justified by this under-analyzed comparative case. (Sen 2004:47)

A contributor to *Culture Matters*, former World Bank adviser Daniel Etounga-Manguelle (2000:77) calls for a revolution of minds in his chapter entitled "Does Africa need a cultural adjustment program?". He argues that although there is an undeniable diversity in the form of subcultures, there exists a foundation of shared values, attitudes, and institutions that encompass all the nations of Sub-Sahara and, in many ways, the countries in North Africa as well. Hence it makes sense, in Etounga-Manguelle's view, to speak of an "African culture", even though it is not easy to grasp what that cultural reality is. (ibid:67) Etounga-Manguelle identifies some aspects of this elusive African culture, aspects that he to a large extent considers as barriers to development. Among these, he notes the hierarchical distance that makes subordinates in vertical cultures believe that strength prevails over law and that those in power need to be overthrown instead of power being redistributed. Lack of preparation for the future is another aspect, and the African which is, as Etounga-Manguelle puts it, "anchored in his ancestral culture", can only believe that the past will repeat itself. There's little acceptance for changes in social standing, jealousy dominates all interpersonal relations, there's a propensity to feast rather than to work, and "African thought rejects any view of the individual as an autonomous and responsible being." (ibid:69-71) According to Etounga-Manguelle, Africa needs cultural revolutions in education, social life, economics, and politics. Culture is the mother and institutions the children. Therefore, Africa must modify its culture in order to develop more just and efficient institutions. (ibid:75-77)

Breidenbach and Nyíri (2009:103) criticizes Etounga-Manguelle's arguments by stating that: "A

view that subsumes government policies under culture (rather than inquiring into a relationship between them) loses all claims to causality and is for all practical purposes identical to a view that denies culture any relevance at all." By pointing this out, Breidenbach and Nyíri suggest that culture should be viewed as relational; institutions affect culture and culture affect institutions. To exemplify this, they use a case where policies in Zimbabwe aimed at motivating women's entrepreneurship collided with beliefs that business is an activity of males only and women trying to earn money are comparable to prostitutes. Breidenbach and Nyíri understand culture to encompass the ideas, beliefs, motives, and identities that influence the everyday practices and strategies of people as well as their social relationships. They question how a separation between cultural factors on the one hand and economic and social factors on the other is even possible. Cultural beliefs concerning gender roles, as they exemplified with the Zimbabwean case, can reinforce and legitimize such "structural facts", but may not be the cause of them. (ibid:103)

## 4.2 The Anthropological Critique

The *Culture Matters* anthology also entails three contributions written by anthropologists who were, to say the least, critical of the thinking of the other authors represented in the book. The most radical critic is probably Richard Shweder, who in his chapter takes a stand as a "cultural pluralist" in the sense that he values "universalism without the uniformity". (Shweder 2000:164) As Shweder explains early in his chapter, he was recruited by Lawrence Harrison (one of the editors), and asked to be the designated "skeptic" to most other contributors in the volume. Hence, he refers to himself as a "heretic" at a revival meeting. (ibid:160-161)

Shweder asserts that if he was ever to refer to a "culture of poverty", it would most likely be attributed to ascetic communities in the sense that they have renounced wealth and rejected the possession of worldly goods, which is positively valued as an objective good. In keeping with his own idea of how culture counts, Shweder claims he would perhaps try and find some merit in the ascetic community's conception of what is good. (ibid:161) In opposition to most other contributors to *Culture Matters*, Shweder does hereby inquire into local perceptions of development.

Shweder uses the critical term "cultural developmentalism" to refer to the belief that some cultures are backward while others are advanced, and that there are certain objective values such

as justice, health, and material prosperity that all human beings should want if it weren't for their culture being an obstacle to this. (ibid:160) Shweder himself defines culture as traditions of values, the community-specific ideas regarding what is good, true, efficient, and beautiful (ibid:163-164).

Shweder rejects the notion of a "national culture" as one of the things "culture" is most definitely not about. National character studies, he argues, went out of business for good reasons forty years ago. Instead of thinking about behavior as the personality theorists do, it is far more productive to adopt the view of the rational choice theorists. Whereas personality theorists view "action" as forced, rational choice theorists perceive it as emanating from "agency", which includes "preferences" (goals, values) and "constraints" (material resources, information, skills). (ibid:163) On a final note, Shweder seems to share views with Friedman and Appadurai when it comes to perspectives on culture and globalization, the global and the local. He dares to guess that if reliance on the "thin aspects" of Western society (i.e. Visa cards, information technology, weapons) is enough for economic growth to be realized on a global scale, cultures won't converge even as they prosper economically. If accepting the "thick aspects" of Western society (i.e. egalitarianism, individualism, etc), then cultures will neither develop economically nor converge since the desire for material wealth is superseded by their sense of identity. (ibid:171)

## 5 Understanding Local Cultural Contexts

The second path in the debate on culture in development that has emerged in the last decade is mainly encapsulated by the work *Culture and Public Action* (2004), jointly edited by World Bank researchers Vijayendra Rao and Michael Walton. The book is the outcome of a conference organized by the editors, with the effort to take real-life interactions between local social scenes and development workers into account, along with local views on development. These are issues that have particular importance for the participatory approaches that, since the 1990's, have been "the new development orthodoxy" (Breidenbach & Nyíri 2009:107). While Crewe and Harrison (1998:15) argued that self-criticism within the development industry usually is limited to "an acceptance that insufficient attention has been paid to the recipients of aid", the actors discussed here also attempt to go beyond this by inquiring into the culture of the donors and the unequal relations between "developers" and those "to be developed".

### 5.1 A Cultural Lens

Rao and Walton introduce *Culture and Public Action* by stating the following: "Some may find it incongruous that two economists who work for the World Bank are editing a book about culture. It reflects an increasing recognition of the centrality of cultural process to the reproduction of inequality and human ill-being among development policy makers and economists" (2004:vii). In their introductory essay, they stress the need for development to be an interdisciplinary subject regarding both practice and research. This entails cooperation on equal terms among economists, sociologists, anthropologists, and political scientists. (2004:31) A time has come where, in the world of development policy, culture is to a larger extent being viewed as an everyday, malleable fact of life that is just as important to the development process as economics or politics. Similarly, in the academic world, how cultural and social factors shape human behavior is getting increased attention from economists. This focus on culture, Rao and Walton argue, is necessary to tackle "the difficult questions of *what* is valued in terms of well-being, *who* does the valuing, and *why* economic and social factors interact with culture to unequally allocate access to a good life". (ibid:4) Although their focus is less on criticism and more on presenting a practical and conceptual basis for solving the problems of poverty and inequality, Rao and Walton nevertheless make clear that Huntington and Harrison's "hyper-modernization" perspective is not shared by

the authors. (ibid:31) What is needed in public policy according to the authors is a culturally aware approach in order to bring attention to factors that could be “common sense” to the beneficiaries, but may seem irrational, exotic or irrelevant to the policy maker. Previous ignorance of this has been endemic within the development institutions as well as among policy makers. (ibid:8-9) The “cultural lens” that is advocated by Rao and Walton is presumed to have many implications for policy, where it implies a heightened awareness on inequalities among actors, and that interventions need to take cultural contexts into consideration and promote greater “equality of agency”. The point of departure for the policy maker needs to be the acknowledgment of the unequal social, political, and cultural structures within which action take place. (ibid:360)

As far as the notion of “culture” goes, it is viewed in general by the editors as being about “relationality”; that is, the relationships between ideas and perspectives, among individuals within groups and among groups. Reluctant to favor one definition over others, Rao and Walton also relate culture to such concerns as symbolic exchange, identity, aspiration, coordination and the structures and practices which in turn serve relational purposes like ritual, ethnicity, norms, meanings, heritage and beliefs. Borrowing from Amartya Sen’s framework, culture is also viewed as *part* of the set of capabilities that people have which condition how they make and coordinate decisions. (ibid:3-4)

In his contribution to Rao and Walton’s volume, Amartya Sen poses the question of *how* culture matters, rather than *whether* it matters. The real issues are how the different ways that culture may influence development can be better understood, and what the implications would be for development policy and action. (Sen 2004:38)

Sen makes use of “culture” in a variety of ways, starting with the material “cultural expressions” such as music, arts, and literature, which he argues should be part of the furtherance of well-being that is inherit in his view on development. According to Sen, freedom and opportunity to engage in “cultural activities” are constitutive of development among other basic freedoms. These cultural activities are also connected to development in the sense that many of them are economically remunerative and can foster tourism. That cultural factors influence economic behavior is another one of Sen’s points. Although it is somewhat unclear what he means by “culture” in this sense, he argues that it can make a difference to such aspects of human behavior as work ethics, motivation, entrepreneurial initiatives, and willingness to take risks. In this, he

criticizes other economists for falling too easily for the tempting idea that all human beings behave in pretty much the same way. Political participation is crucial for development according to Sen, and this too is influenced by cultural conditions. He makes reference to a “culture of fear” that can be generated by political suppression, as well as when skepticism turns to apathy and creates a “culture of indifference”. Sen also makes a point to discuss how culture *doesn't* matter, and takes a stand against the pessimistic and oversimplifying notion that culture can effectively seal the fate of a country, something he refers to as “epistemic nonsense” (ibid:38-41). To sum up his conception of culture, he argues that it can't be separated from other social influences and contends that it is interactive and relational, and hence part of a wider picture (ibid:50).

Carol Jenkins, an independent HIV consultant for the World Bank, has written an interesting essay on how culture should be approached in development on the issue of HIV/AIDS. She makes use of the concept of culture in two ways. The first, which she calls the classical definition, refers to culture as the social and cognitive traits, along with artifacts, that are associated with a particular group of humans. The second use puts emphasis on culture as “itself a biological, genetically inherited capacity of the species *Homo sapiens*, evolved through time and presumably still in the process of doing so. [...] Hence, cultures change and the cultural attributes of human groups are always in a process of change, albeit at different paces, in different directions, and often with contradictory components”. (Jenkins 2004:260-261)

In the business of HIV prevention, people are told to respect local culture and that good care or prevention should rely on strategies and messages that are culturally appropriate. At the same time, people are also told of the maladaptive aspect of some parts of culture when it comes to the HIV epidemic, and hence those cultural traits need to be changed. According to Jenkins, there is broad agreement on other development goals such as reducing poverty and improve education and reproductive health for girls, and the impact that this could have on HIV. Whether to uphold cultural codes such as abstinence, laws against prostitution, and anti-homosexual tenets that are perceived as protective, or to promote safe sex education without apprehension for cultural values, is much more contested. Jenkins challenges notions of cultural homogeneity by pointing out that even if people belonging to a certain ethnic group (or otherwise) may behave in similar ways, they can nevertheless have different values and rituals. (ibid:261-263) In the end, Jenkins arrives at a middle-ground; cultural sensitivity produced by intimate knowledge is necessary for effective HIV prevention, but this does not translate to the requirement of a

“slavish adherence to traditional codes”, and change is much more likely to be sustainable if it comes from within (ibid:280).

Appadurai is part of the group of anthropologists and sociologists contributing to *Culture and Public Action*, whose chapter tackles why culture matters for development and poverty reduction. He argues that in the battle against poverty, we need to change the way we view culture so as to create more useful relationships between anthropology and economics, and between development and culture (Appadurai 2004:83-84). Here, one could also argue that the relationship between anthropology and development is in need of some improvement. Appadurai’s use of “we” is likely not just hinted at anthropologists, but economists and other agents of development as well.

According to Appadurai, the future-oriented logic of development could likely find an ally in the cultural capacity that is the capacity to aspire. In Appadurai’s notion of culture then, he focuses on one dimension; its orientation to the future, which he feels has been ignored up until this point. As already noted, culture has frequently been linked to a kind of pastness (tradition, habit, custom), and the future has been largely absent from anthropological models of culture. Keywords such as expectations, wants, needs, and calculations have contributed to economics becoming the science of the future, according to Appadurai, and hence it’s not too surprising that culture is considered as troublesome in nine out of ten treatises on economic development. (Appadurai 2004:59-60) By bringing in “aspiration” as a strong aspect of what he calls cultural capacity, Appadurai strives to give Sen’s expansion on the idea of welfare a sturdy cultural counterpoint. Aspirations about the good life, health and happiness, is present in all societies although not equally distributed in any of them. Part of a system of ideas, aspirations belongs to a larger map of local beliefs and ideas surrounding such grand topics as life and death, peace and warfare. (ibid:63-68) Appadurai contends that “the more privileged in any society simply have used the map of its norms to explore the future more frequently and more realistically”, than what is possible for the poorer members of society because of their lack of opportunities. The main objective is therefore to strengthen the poor’s capacity to aspire by increasing the capacity of “voice”, to inquire, contest, debate, and participate critically. (ibid:69-70)

To sum up, most contributors to this debate share a view of “culture” as related to other spheres in the society, and constantly moving. There is also a clear focus among the authors on local

views on development and the importance of questioning the cultures and preconceived notions of the “developers” and development institutions as well.

In the next chapter there will be a discussion on the differences and potential similarities among the two cultural debates that have now been elaborated on, and whether or not they are part of a new cultural paradigm in development. There will also be a discussion on the role of anthropologists in debates on culture in development.

## 6 A New Paradigm?

The implications of culture for various aspects in the field of development are currently occupying a lot of thought across academic disciplines. Is it possible to speak of a new “cultural paradigm” in development, given the increased interest in culture among various disciplines and policy makers? Breidenbach and Nyíri (2009:118) are pessimistic and argues that even though the “cultural turn” in development has generated increased attention to culture within some departments of the major development institutions and influenced rhetoric and mission statements, changes are largely absent in the field. If culture is simply added on as a kind of legitimization of the current institutional structure and doesn’t confront the basic assumptions in place, then the outlook is dim. Radcliffe (2006:17) asserts that it is too early to speak of a new cultural paradigm around the concepts of development and culture, but nevertheless acknowledges the fact that culture has arrived at the heart of mainstream development debates.

The two debates on culture in development that are outlined above are not without internal differences on the concept of culture, and sometimes they are not necessarily that far apart either. The culture-as-obstacle approach that is apparent in the first debate on culture is in my view very similar to the concept of a culture of poverty laid out by Oscar Lewis in the 60’s. Although neither account goes so far as to say that culture is unchanging, they both suggest that a “disadvantageous” culture is remarkably stable over time. There also appears to be a tendency in the writing of Harrison and Huntington to treat “culture” as if it was the new single key to solving “underdevelopment”; if a country has a culture that impedes development and progress, this culture can be changed and no further obstacles for economic modernization will remain. Crewe and Harrison has critiqued such evolutionist explanations that traditional culture acts as a barrier by stating that: “These constructs do not determine behavior in a direct or lineal way. Rather they are used by individuals within development institutions to plan the future and make sense of the past. They give meaning to representations of reality and lend shape to the way people re-create their past experience of the world.” (Crewe and Harrison 1998:25)

As for the second debate, it does show a greater flexibility in the understandings of culture, with a clearer focus on how these understandings could be translated into practical policy. There is no question among the debaters that culture matters in development, and neither path questions the

further existence of “development interventions”. Breidenbach and Nyíri (2009:105) have argued that Escobar’s intervention in the development debate hasn’t left much of an imprint in the debates considering the fact that if following his viewpoint the logical consequence would be to stop discussing development altogether. I would not argue against the logic, however, if one stops short of following Escobar’s reasoning to its very end, it is possible to see how his ideas has likely been an influence on the second debate. By this I refer to the willingness of the editors to also take into account the unequal power relations that often characterize relations between donors and recipients of aid. In the first path however, it can be noted that the nature and “culture” of development institutions remains largely unquestioned.

As demonstrated in the section on anthropology of globalization, “cultural flow” doesn’t automatically create an increasing cultural homogenization of the world and will not “save” countries from their (as argued by some) current cultural disadvantages.

## 6.1 The Role of Anthropologists – As Contributors or Troublemakers?

The role of the anthropologist in development interventions has been, and continues to be, a subject of controversy and debate. If it isn’t the applicability of the discipline that is contested, then it is the matter of whether “true” anthropologists really should involve themselves in anything else except pondering academic issues for the pure sake of Science. (Brandström 2009:27) As remarked by Malinowski however; “Pure science is that which is capable of application, and as such it is a most practical instrument at the disposal of the practitioner.” (Malinowski 1930:429, quoted in Brandström 2009:28)

The critical and strictly academic and distant study of development interventions by anthropologists is of course also important. But as noted by Brandström, when anthropology stops at criticism or merely observation and reminders, developers and development agencies have a tendency to view anthropologists as mere nuisances, troublemakers instead of contributors. In the two debates on culture outlined above, it is clear that the first one view anthropologists as mere critics and does not seem to acknowledge any potential for a real

contribution from the discipline of anthropology. As Harrison notes in his introduction (2000:xxv), anthropologists are not of much use in this matter because of the cultural relativism treasured within the discipline, which refuses the evaluation of values and practices within other cultures. The approach in the second cultural debate is radically different, in that anthropologists and sociologists make up half of the contributions, and Rao and Walton makes apparent strides in building more bridges between economics and politics on the one hand, and cultural and social dynamics on the other.

Robert Klitgaard poses an interesting question in a 1992 study of the relationship between culture and development: "If culture is important and people have studied culture for a century or more, why don't we have well-developed theories, practical guidelines, close professional links between those who study culture and those who make and manage development policy?" (Klitgaard 1992, quoted in Harrison and Huntington 2000:xvi).

First, it should be noted that efforts have been made in both theory and practice (for example Rao and Walton's (2004) work, and the hiring frenzy of social scientists to various development institutions in the 1990s), to bridge the gap that Klitgaard is referring to above. Secondly, however, it has proved very difficult to develop a theoretical paradigm on the role of culture in development that can help create predictable models. One reason for this is of course the ambiguity of "culture" as a concept which this thesis has shown, and there is always a difficulty in trying to demonstrate causality. As argued by Allen (2000:456-457), even if the issue of whether or not certain behaviors are counter-productive to people's well-being is left aside, it cannot be proved that this behavior stem from a "culture" or way of thinking. Links can be pointed out but causes can't be demonstrated. Thirdly, let's not forget the aforementioned animosity between anthropology as a discipline and development as both industry and ideal, although there have been some changes there as well, at least among some anthropologists.

Daniel Lende who guest blogs at Anthropology and Publicity has made a relevant observation: "I believe anthropologists have the responsibility to offer alternatives and options alongside critique. After a while most people will tune out continued criticism unless there are useful points on how to improve local practices or policy or even just how to understand a problem better", and he continues by acknowledging that: "Given our holistic approach and our ethnographic insight into everyday life, we are well positioned to foster communication between groups and combine

different ideas and perspectives.” (Lende 2010). I believe Lende has a point, particularly in respect to providing knowledge to other actors for bettering the understanding of challenges in the highly complex field of development.

## 7 Concluding Remarks

There will most likely always be popular oversimplifications of the role of culture in various scenarios, not least in the debates on development. These are hard to combat as “culture” is such a complex notion and bound up with other aspects of human life, making it extremely difficult to generalize on what role it plays in or for “human progress”. As this has become the new hot topic in development debates, however, it is likely that more attempts will be made.

The problem with the first path in the debate discussed above - culture as either barrier or facilitator - is that it presumes a one-way street where, if something doesn't turn out the way it was planned, it must be the fault of the people “to be developed”. As far as the approach to culture and its role in development goes, it is an admirable attempt but in the end the framework is too simplistic. The second debate on culture does have a more grounded viewpoint and brings forward the important reality that development interventions is a two-way street where the “culture” of the “developers” also need to be understood.

Whether seen as good or bad, anthropologists should probably get used to the fact that the study of culture no longer belongs to the discipline of anthropology alone, but that the ideas have spread and new theories are being formulated by political scientists and economists alike. It would perhaps be a bit too cynical to claim that anthropologists are currently sitting in the audience whilst somebody else is performing the intricate play of “culture in development” on center stage. However, I argue that there is room for anthropologists to assume a more prominent position in these debates, because the discipline does indeed have a lot to offer, not just on understandings of culture.

### 7.1 Further research

Further research needs to be done in what the connections are between “culture talk” in development, and the practical outcomes of these discussions. How much of what is said in cultural debates on development is actually transformed into practical, real-world efforts. The

next step in the research is then to analyze the effects of these efforts, perhaps through utilizing a careful ethnographic approach. I also believe in a continuous effort to bridge the gap that has arisen within anthropology, between anthropology of development and development anthropology as I fail to see how anyone benefits from this divide.

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