

The *Human Development Report* and Cultural Liberty: Tough Liberalism

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In view of the political spillover of ethnic and religious movements — as in former Yugoslavia, Iraq, Afghanistan and several Muslim countries — the policy relevance of the cultural dimensions of development is increasingly prominent. So it is no wonder that this should play a large part in a Human Development Report devoted to culture; in fact, this Report addresses this theme head on. As its title indicates, this Report deals not merely with cultural diversity but with *cultural liberty* which, it argues, is its novel contribution to the debate. Liberty or freedom is the Report's leitmotiv: 'If what is ultimately important is cultural liberty, then the valuing of cultural diversity must take a contingent and conditional form. Much will depend on how that diversity is brought about and sustained' (p. 16). In often paraphrased wording it adopts 'a freedom-based defence of cultural diversity' (p. 23). From this premise follows a critique of cultural conservatism:

Being born in a particular cultural milieu is not an exercise of freedom — quite the contrary. It becomes aligned to cultural liberty only if the person chooses to continue to live within the terms of that culture, and does so having had the opportunity of considering other alternatives. The central issue in cultural liberty is the capability of people to live as they would choose, with adequate opportunity to consider other options. (pp. 16–17)

The Report reiterates that 'tradition should not be confused with freedom of choice' and sternly cautions that 'defending tradition can hold back human development' (p. 88).

On the same premise, the Report criticizes identity politics and quotes Anthony Appiah on the 'imperialism of identity': 'it is crucial always to remember that we are not simply black or white or yellow or brown, gay or straight or bisexual . . . but we are also brothers and sisters; parents and children . . . let us not let our racial identities subject us to new tyrannies' (p. 18). The Report, rightly in my view, draws attention instead to multiple identities, but it carries this too far:

People must be free to choose how to define themselves and must be afforded the same rights and opportunities that their neighbours enjoy. This Report asserts that a main hope for harmony lies in promoting our multiple identities. . . . the recognition of multiple and complementary identities — with individuals identifying themselves as citizens of a state as well as members of ethnic, religious and other cultural groups — is the cornerstone of cultural liberty. (pp. 42, 73)

The point where this Report becomes unreal is when it argues that identity is a matter of individual choice and that it is up to individuals to decide which of their multiple identities matter most, which may be theoretically true but ignores that most people live their lives as part of communities. Besides, dominant discourses and structures of power, also beyond particular communities, often reinforce and perpetuate particular identities.

The first chapter sets forth the precepts of cultural liberty and is followed by a chapter that seeks to implement this in a policy of ‘Building Multicultural Democracies’. This plea for a multicultural conception of democracy is a sturdy discussion of multicultural policies and forms of power sharing, from federalism to consociational arrangements such as proportional electoral representation, with insightful treatments and examples from across the world. This is the most pertinent chapter of the Report and a useful point of reference at a time when most discussions of multiculturalism still focus on the Western world.

The next chapter, ‘Confronting Movements for Cultural Domination’, discusses coercive movements that oppose cultural liberty in the name of cultural superiority on ethnic or religious basis. It discusses restrictive measures against them (such as institutional barriers against coercive political parties, legislation and judicial intervention) but rightly argues that the most effective way to marginalize extremism is to strengthen democratic processes; this includes concerns such as paying attention to school curricula. The closing chapter on ‘Globalization and Cultural Choice’ focuses on three policy challenges: indigenous peoples and extractive industries; trade in cultural goods; and migration. Its contributions are generally what one would expect in a brief twenty page treatment and further reiterate the cultural liberty approach: ‘globalization can expand cultural freedoms only if all people develop multiple and complementary identities as citizens of the world as well as citizens of a state and members of a cultural group’ (p. 89). A further 150 pages on Human Development Indicators follow the text chapters.

Culture and Development

The Report follows on the World Commission on Culture and Development Report, *Our Creative Diversity* (1996) that came out as the culmination of the UNESCO Decade of Culture and Development.¹ But

1. Two of its contributors, Lourdes Arizpe and Sakiko Fukuda-Parr, also contribute to the UNDP report and Sakiko Fukuda-Parr, Director of the Human Development Report Office at UNDP in New York, is its main author.

this Report bears little relation to the literature on culture and development. Earlier work on culture and development examined the cultural assumptions of development thinking and co-operation, from Eurocentrism to racial bias. This literature is reflexive and self-critical and its major concern is to make development efforts more effective and participatory by taking into account social diversity and local culture (for example, Schech and Haggis, 2000). In this Report there is no trace of these concerns. Gone is any reflexive or self-critical character, gone is the critique of Orientalism; instead criticism is squarely aimed at cultural conservatism and extremism — the opponents of cultural liberty.

About development the Report is remarkably brief. It states that ‘there is no clear relationship between culture and development’ (p. 38): ‘Some analysis has found . . . that work ethic, thrift, honesty and openness to strangers can play a role in economic growth . . . But there is no grand cultural theory of development here’ and this is underlined by econometric evidence (p. 39). The Report rightly rejects cultural determinism to explain economic development — from Max Weber’s Protestant ethic (at times Catholic countries were growing faster than Protestant countries) to claims made in Harrison and Huntington’s work *Culture Matters* (2000). It also rightly rejects the cliché of Western liberty and Oriental despotism: ‘The history of the world does not suggest anything like a division between a long-run history of Western toleration and that of non-Western despotism: the very idea of democracy, in the form of participatory public reasoning, has appeared in different civilizations at different periods in world history’ (p. 21).

The Report notes the difficulties of measuring cultural liberty and developing a cultural liberty index because of limited data and conceptual and methodological problems. It attempts to operationalize cultural liberty by measuring its opposites in two forms of exclusion: living mode exclusion (‘when the state or social custom denigrates or suppresses a group’s culture, including its language, religion or traditional customs or lifestyles’) and participation exclusion (‘social, economic and political exclusion along ethnic, linguistic or religious lines’).

The Report rejects as myths the ideas that cultural diversity inevitably leads to clashes over values and that cultural diversity is an obstacle to development.² Fair enough; but these are open doors and weak claims. Would it not be appropriate in a Human Development Report on cultural diversity to take a further step and argue, or at least explore, that cultural diversity may be *conducive* to development? Yet this liberal policy brief

2. This is a common negative finding, though it runs against some conventional wisdom. Thus, an earlier study found that ‘Ethnic, linguistic and religious differences are not significantly related to the growth rate in GDP per capita. States with minorities seeking greater autonomy need not press the minorities to conform to the cultural norms of the majority community to enhance economic performance’ (Lian and Oneal, 1997: 61).

barely discusses the *economics* of cultural diversity. The strongest claim is: 'As this Report argues from beginning to end, attempts to suppress and assimilate diverse cultural groups are not only morally wrong — they are often ineffective, heightening tensions' (p. 44). So the two main pillars of this approach are moral considerations and preventing or managing conflict. Precisely where one would have expected a reflection on correlations between multiculturalism and development it is entirely absent, bar a passing mention of the economic benefits of migration.

There would be several routes toward a political economy of multiculturalism and development. Keith Griffin, a member of the World Commission on Culture and Development, makes a strong case that cultural diversity, past and present, is conducive to development, particularly with a view to the innovative contributions of migrants (Griffin, 2000). Another line of reasoning would be to link up with the learning approach in development economics, which concerns 'learning what one is good at producing' as well as 'learning to learn' (Rodrik and Hausman, 2003). Addressing the question under which conditions combining diverse cultural databases and institutional practices enhances investment decisions and economic performance would involve engaging questions of intercultural social capital (Nederveen Pieterse, 2003). In a wider context, the cultural economy approach, Amin and Thrift (2004) argue that economics generally is not merely a social and a political but a cultural phenomenon; this too may yield novel leads towards a political economy of multiculturalism. But this Human Development Report has none of this; it is long on norms, long on policy and short on economics.

According to the Report, 'Human development aims at expanding an individual's choices' (p. 93). This is odd because one would have thought that development is above all a social, not an individual project; yet it is consistent with the conceptual and analytical roots of the human development approach in liberalism (Nederveen Pieterse, 2001). If the liberalism of human development was background in other reports it is squarely upfront in this one.

The Report is robustly policy-oriented and avowedly normative. Like most development studies it is short on history and on theory. It makes selective references to the massive literature on ethnicity, ethnic conflict, religion and multiculturalism. Among thinkers about multiculturalism the Report most often cites the Canadian author Will Kymlicka whose work is close to liberalism. Compared to this literature the Report offers a global scope: many studies of ethnicity or religion focus only on specific regions and most studies of multiculturalism focus on the Western world. In the tradition of the Human Development Reports, this one adopts a global geography with copious examples across North and South. Because the UNDP acts as a gatekeeper of development resources it can sanction some policies and weave them into international development policies. Which other study features boxed statements by Nelson Mandela on multi-racial democracy in South Africa, by Hamid Karzai on multilingualism in

Afghanistan, John Hume from Northern Ireland, Shirin Ebadi from Iran and other luminaries?

The argument for cultural liberty is a very odd duck in the massive literature on religion, ethnicity and ethnic conflict and indeed novel in this debate. But it does fit the general human development approach and in particular Amartya Sen's argument of *Development as Freedom* (1999) and its functionalist application of a rights-based liberalism. To this report Sen contributed a background paper on Cultural Freedom and Human Development.

As a broadsheet against exclusion the Report does not discuss the exclusions of liberalism itself. These have been well-recorded, for instance in the history of colonialism (Mehta, 1997; Metcalf, 1998). The shortcomings of liberalism in relation to multiculturalism have been examined in a thoughtful study by Bhikhu Parekh (2000).

The core problem of liberal multiculturalism is that it provides a solution for which there is no problem and a remedy for which there is no ailment: a world of optional and multiple identities in which individuals can choose their identity is a world that doesn't need multicultural policies (Nederveen Pieterse, 2004). The central paradox of this Report is that it wants all-round cultural inclusion — but not cultural conservatism; it wants multicultural democracy — but not cultural conservatism. But who can define and declare what is conservative and what is not? In effect this takes the politics out of culture and identity. Campaigns against extremism usually target the extremism of 'others' and are oblivious to one's own extremism.

The Report reads like a compendium of liberal multiculturalism policies — straightforward, plain speaking, but mostly obvious and very difficult to implement. The Report acknowledges the problems that arise from integrating multicultural policies into human development strategies and from its liberal policy recommendations. Thus, while education in one's mother tongue is no doubt a value, it notes that there are practical and economic impediments to implementing this. Yet these reservations do not feed back to the recommendations themselves: 'In the big picture the arguments for these policies are clear. But for policy-makers the contradictions, trade-offs and clashes with other aspects of human development can monopolize their attention' (p. 45). These fundamental problems are often discussed in throw-away lines on 'a history of power relations' that leave matters open and to which there is no follow up. In this way, for all its plain speaking clarity, this is actually a confused and confusing document. At times its pronouncements seem to address a parallel universe: 'The central issue in cultural liberty is the capability of people to live as they would choose, with adequate opportunity to consider other options. The normative weight of freedom can hardly be invoked when no choice — real or potential — is actually considered' (p. 17).

In sum, this Human Development Report presents us with several problems. First, when it claims that 'defending tradition can hold back human

development', in effect it is restating the old-fashioned modernization vs. tradition approach. Second, when it poses cultural liberty as the framework for culture and development, it views developing countries and their cultures through the lens of Western values and perspectives. Third, by offering freedom as the answer to every problem, it places the cart before the horse. Policies informed by norms rather than by the difficult trade-offs of actual development policy belong to the world of ideology.

The Report leads us into an arena of freedom and its opponents. In approach and language it reads like an American take on culture and development and it is not farfetched to note that it matches an American policy agenda. If one would want to align development co-operation with, say, the war on terrorism, this would probably be the way to go. One would first declare the aim of development to be freedom, or expanding individuals' choices. Second, one would aim to defend and spread a 'culture of freedom' and oppose any form of cultural conservatism. To demonstrate even-handedness one would also roundly criticize extremism in the West such as extreme right-wing parties and Christian fundamentalism. Third, one would weave this into development co-operation and conditionality. Thus, the promotion of cultural liberty and the struggle against extremism could become a strand of good governance.

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