

# POLITICAL CULTURE AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

HOWARD J. WIARDA

Since the Enlightenment, what we now call the social sciences have come to eschew “culturalist explanations” of political, social, and economic behavior. Over the past two centuries, and particularly since Marx and Durkheim, we have tended to think that scientific and technical advances, economic inter-relationships, and institutional arrangements determine the way people think and behave, and not culture. It is interesting and significant that both Marxian analysis and recent non-Marxian developmental analysis (as found in the writings of S.M. Lipset or W.W. Rostow,<sup>1</sup> for example) tend to downgrade or even manifestly reject the cultural variables that help shape development, in favor of “grand theory” in which presumably universal sociological and economic factors play the major role.

No one would deny, of course, that the great motor forces of scientific and technological advance, economic development, and institutional change are among the critical factors in stimulating modernization processes. At the same time, explanations from the point of view of political culture, in amateurish hands, run the risk of dangerous simplification, national stereotyping (“Englishmen do this,” “Spaniards do that”), and the employment of unacceptable racial and ethnic biases.

## THE POLITICAL-CULTURAL IMPERATIVE

Nevertheless, the importance of cultural variables cannot be ignored. Some scholars, among them Daniel Bell and Clifford Geertz, suggest that cultural factors are as important in shaping national development as the others previously listed, even arguing that it is often culture that conditions the form, pace, and style of economic development instead of the other way around.<sup>2</sup> In their view, what Marx called the “superstructure” (culture, ideas, belief systems, traditional ways of doing things) influences the substructure (economic and class relations) as much or more than the latter shapes the former — or at least interacts with it in far more complex ways than the apostles of grand, often unidimensional, systems theory have been willing to admit. At

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1. Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1960); W. W. Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1960).  
2. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973); Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1976).

the same time, in the hands of sophisticated analysts such as Lucian Pye, Gabriel Almond, Samuel Huntington, and Sidney Verba, the comparative study of political culture has moved far beyond the old, unacceptable "national character" studies to become far more precise, empirical, and rigorous, and to provide a major tool for understanding the political differences between regions and countries.<sup>3</sup>

In both Marxian and non-Marxian development theory, traditional political culture was presumed to give way under the onslaught of modernization, either through revolution or by more gradual processes. But while research project after research project over the past three decades focused on the developing nations, traditional political culture and institutions have proved to be remarkably long-lived and persistent. Rather than being swept aside by the tides of history, or consigned to history's ash cans, these institutions — whether in Asia, the Middle East, Africa, or Latin America — have repeatedly shown themselves to be flexible and accommodative, most often bending to

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change rather than being overwhelmed by it. Many of these traditional institutions, such as India's caste associations or Latin America's extended patronage networks, rather than having been discarded as modernization proceeds, have themselves modernized. In the process, they have converted themselves into interest associations, and thus, have bridged the gap between traditional and modern. These institutions have provided for political-cultural continuity as well as change.

Religion was one of those "traditional" cultural forces that was supposed to disappear as modernization went forward. But who studying the Middle East, in the face of the revival of Islamic fundamentalism, can say with certainty that religion is a thing of the past? Nor can Latin America's historic Catholicism be simply waved aside as an artifact of the past; rather, the political struggle there involves different factions *within* the Catholic Church (and, increasingly, between the Church and the rising evangelical sects), not between religion and the supposedly inevitable forces of secularism. As Daniel Bell has remarked, "From Voltaire to Marx every Enlightenment thinker thought that

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3. Lucian Pye, *The Mandarin and the Cadre: China's Political Cultures* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 1988); Samuel P. Huntington, *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981); and Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, eds., *The Civic Culture* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1963).

religion would disappear in the twentieth century because religion was fetishism, animistic superstition. Well it's not true," Bell continued, "because religion is a response, and sometimes a very coherent response, to the existential predicaments faced by all men in all times. Empires have crumbled, political systems have crumbled, economic systems have crumbled. The great historical religions have survived."<sup>4</sup> The modernization-begets-secularization thesis has just not stood up.

Religion is, however, but one of the features of political culture on which our comparative studies of development ought to concentrate. Others include legal systems, traditional social organizations (such as the family or clan), patronage mechanisms, ideologies and belief systems, and historic forms of social and political institutions. All of these are part of a broad "political culture." Yet none of them can be accounted for entirely on the basis of scientific or technological change, or economic or class structure. In fact, much of what we find in the political culture persists independently of these other forces, often defying the best-laid schemes of the grand systems builders.

#### CULTURE, CORPORATION, AND LATIN AMERICAN DEVELOPMENT

In my own earlier research on Latin America, I tended to emphasize those political-cultural features inherited from the feudal-medieval (and thus pre-Enlightenment) mother countries; Spain and Portugal.<sup>5</sup> These features included powerful strains of authoritarianism, elitism, hierarchy, patrimonialism, and corporatism. I saw corporatism, then as now, as the product of two main influences.

The first was Latin America's historical and cultural tradition, strongly influenced by Catholic precepts and the peculiarly Iberian history of the Reconquest, the achievement of national consolidation according to the Hapsburgian model (top-down, absolutist, and distinct from the Lockean liberalism model). This tradition was also affected by the particular (and continuing) organic relations to the state of such corporate agencies as the military orders, the Church, the town, and the universities. The political arena largely focused on the state's efforts to expand and consolidate its power over these groups, and on the corporate entities that make up society to maintain their autonomy from the state. In this sense, corporatism is a product of a particular world view derived from an Aristotelian-Thomist synthesis; it is a general pattern of political cognition comparable to liberalism or Marxism.<sup>6</sup>

The second influence leading to the persistence and even expansion of corporatism, a factor later emphasized by Philippe Schmitter and others, and

4. See the interview with Bell in *The New York Times*, 7 February 1989, C13.

5. Howard J. Wiarda, "Toward a Theory of Development in the Iberic-Latin Tradition: The Corporative Model," *World Politics* 25 (January 1973): 206-35; *Politics and Social Change in Latin America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1982); *Corporatism and Development: The Portuguese Experience* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1977); and *Corporatism and National Development in Latin America* (Boulder, Co.: Westview Press, 1981).

6. See the comments of Charles W. Anderson in *American Political Science Review* (December 1978): 1478.

elevated into a veritable cottage industry of new writings,<sup>7</sup> was not historical but contemporary: the modern state's need to control and harness the Latin American development process through the creation of state-sponsored and directed trade unions, peasant associations, and other corporate bodies. This second form of corporatism was, of course, not unique to Iberia or Latin America but existed in a variety of forms in different areas.

Several influences were at work in shaping the concept of political culture I used with regard to Latin America, and particularly the emphasis on corporatism as one essential ingredient in it. The first was dissatisfaction with the other paradigms then available — developmentalism and Marxism — neither of which, after a point, seemed to fit Latin America very well. Second,

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related, was the effort to develop a paradigm that *did* build upon Latin America's own history and dynamics, including its powerful, persistent traditions of organic-statism and corporatism. Third was research experience in Brazil, Mexico, Central America, the Dominican Republic, Venezuela, Argentina, Spain, and Portugal. All, in regimes of the Left and of the Right, in military contexts as well as democratic ones, seemed to have one or another form of persistent corporatist institutions.

The fourth influence was my earlier training as an historian, under Irving Leonard, Donald Worcester, Lyle McAlister, and Alva Curtis Wilgus. One cannot have studied Roman law, the writings of Thomas Aquinas, the *Siete Partidas*, the "organic laws" governing state-church or state-town relations, the "*fuero militar*," or Spanish colonial administration without coming away with a profound appreciation of the immense, and continuing, impact of these institutions and ideas on Latin American life. Indeed, I would argue, contrary to those social scientists who believe that Latin American "history" began only with the Cuban revolution, that one cannot understand Latin America at all

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7. Schmitter and G. Lehmbruch, eds., *Patterns of Corporatist Policy-making* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1982); but see also Antony Black, *Guilds and Civil Society in European Political Thought from the Twelfth Century to the Present* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984).

unless one first comes to grips with the heavy hand of the hemisphere's history, which includes powerful political-cultural influences.

Political-cultural approaches have not always been appreciated by some Latin American intellectuals or by some North American scholars. For what such explanations do is to place responsibility for Latin America's continuing underdevelopment directly on Latin America itself rather than allowing it to be ascribed (far preferable, from the Latin American viewpoint) to US machinations, as in dependency theory. Latin Americans also resent the paternalism involved, the notion that the United States must be the model for them to follow, and that they themselves have nothing to contribute. Ironically, when a theory did come along, such as corporatism, that *was* derived from Latin America's own history and traditions, the region decided it did not like that theory and rejected it.<sup>8</sup>

Some US scholars also had problems with the corporatism idea. The Marxist Left, of course, had to reject it because the theory clashed with their faith that it was class structure that determined political culture and never the other way around. Now, however, some enlightened Marxists have rediscov-

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ered the independence of culture as a political variable. The noted "*dependencia*" writer Enzo Faletto has just published an article on political culture and democratization in which he concludes that "structural conditions are insufficient for democracy to arise and take effect."<sup>9</sup>

Non-Marxist scholars also had very mixed feelings. Although not rigid economic determinists, they nonetheless often tend to believe that socioeconomic forces are the chief explanatory factor in development and that culture is important only because it seems to "get in the way." As liberals, they cannot abide the determinist elements present in some political culture writ-

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8. For an attempt at an explanation of why corporatism evoked such strong feelings, see Mitchell A. Seligson, "Political Culture and Democratization in Latin America," in James Malloy and Eduardo Gamarra, eds., *Latin American and Caribbean Contemporary Record*, 7 (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1989). My own attempt to wrestle with corporatism's receptivity as a theory is in "Interpreting Iberian-Latin American Relations: Paradigm Consensus and Conflict," in Wiarda, ed., *The Iberian-Latin American Connection* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1986).

9. Enzo Faletto, "Cultura política y conciencia democrática," *Revista de la CEPAL* 35 (August 1988): 77-82.

ings which seem to suggest that, despite their diligent reform efforts, Latin America seems *always* fated to be authoritarian, elitist, and organic-corporatist. If that is so, then how can political-culturalists explain Latin America's inspiring, recent transition to democracy?

At this point, several of the more fevered criticisms of political culture research need to be addressed. Political culture is certainly not a "racist" explanation as some of the old national character studies might have been. Rather, it looks systematically and empirically, with the appropriate qualifications, at *patterns* of political beliefs and orientations; it tries to understand other societies on their own terms. If such examinations of cultural factors are "racist," then the entire field of cultural anthropology might as well pack up its tents.

Nor does emphasis on political culture imply a deterministic "culturalist" explanation. Rather, it simply says that political culture is one important variable among several (class, economic factors, political institutions) that shape political outcomes and, therefore, is deserving of serious attention. Just because a scholar *chooses* to write about political culture because that person finds it interesting does not mean he or she thinks other factors are unimportant. So far as I know, not a single serious scholar who writes about political culture has claimed that this factor is important to the exclusion of all others; nor has there been on the part of scholars of political culture an attempt to elevate political culture into a single-causal explanation.

Rather, political culture is generally viewed as an important factor which, under the impact of both Marxist and non-Marxist political economy or systems theory, has not received the attention it deserves. As a matter of fact, most serious scholars in this field see political culture, economic and class determinants, and political-institutional factors as interrelated in all kinds of complex and changing ways. They would prefer to remain open-minded concerning the question of whether it is the economy that determines the culture, for example, or the culture that helps shape the kind of economy and developmental patterns that emerge. It seems to most of us that these questions need to be kept open for discussion, investigation, and empirical testing, and should not become simply a matter of assertions that border on religious faith.

Nor are political-cultural explanations ruled out by the recent transitions to democracy in Latin America. First, the more careful analysts of political culture have always recognized that, at least since the nineteenth century, two traditions — an authoritarian-corporatist one and a liberal-democratic one — have uneasily coexisted in Latin America, often alternating in power. At present, the liberal-democratic one is (temporarily?) ascendant. Second, while at the formal-institutional level (and in some cases more deeply than that) democracy in contemporary Latin America has triumphed, below the surface many institutions — the Church, the Army, labor relations, lord-peasant relations, the state structure — often remained dominated by authoritarian-corporatist-patrimonialist features. Third, change has occurred, including in Latin America's political culture. The area is now more urban, affluent, literate, developed, and modern than it was thirty years ago, when the last

great, but soon aborted, movement toward democratization began. Opinion surveys in country after country show that democracy has a firmer foundation now than it had during the heyday of the Alliance for Progress in the early 1960s. As socioeconomic development and modernization have gone forward, the political culture has also been transformed, albeit shakily in some countries, toward support of democracy. Again, the more sophisticated analysts of political culture have consistently recognized that political culture is not static and unchanging but always shows both continuous and changing features.

#### A RENAISSANCE OF POLITICAL CULTURE

Political culture is presently enjoying a renaissance. Samuel Huntington, Aaron Wildavsky, Harry Eckstein, and Lucian Pye — all among the leading figures in the profession — have recently published major books and articles using the political culture approach.<sup>10</sup> Westview Press, perhaps the leading publisher of Latin American and developing-areas books in the country, has

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recently begun a new political-culture series; Harvard University's Center for International Affairs also has initiated a faculty seminar on political culture. Three major articles dealing with political culture have been published in the *American Political Science Review* in the past two years; in the most recent of these, Professor Ronald Inglehart of the University of Michigan argues that "it is time to redress the balance in social analysis" — toward greater attention to political-culture variables. His empirically-based research indicates that political culture is a crucial link between economic development and democracy, that political culture is an important independent variable, and that

10. Samuel P. Huntington, "Will More Countries Become Democratic?" *Political Science Quarterly* 99 (1984): 193-218; Wildavsky, "Choosing Preferences by Constructing Institutions: A Cultural Theory of Preference Formation," *American Political Science Review* 81 (March 1987); Harry Eckstein, "A Culturalist Theory of Political Change," *American Political Science Review* 82 (September 1988): 789-804; and Pye, *The Mandarin and the Cadre*.

the peoples of different countries and areas have reasonably durable cultural attributes that often have major economic and political consequences.<sup>11</sup>

In anthropology, Clifford Geertz's emphasis on "thick description" — essentially political culture — has been widely lauded.<sup>12</sup> In economics and sociology, Tony Barnett's recent book on development stresses that the development process cannot be understood in terms of technological advances alone but that economic, political, *and* cultural factors must also be taken into account.<sup>13</sup>

Even psychoanalysis, which has always assumed that its categories were universal, has now moved toward greater cultural relativism. "The prevailing psychological maps we assume in the West to be universal simply do not apply to people in much of the world," states New York psychoanalyst Alan Roland. "You just can't do psychotherapy with a person from Vietnam or El Salvador as you would with a Boston housewife," says Harvard Medical School psychiatrist Arthur Kleinman; "the ethnocentric arrogance of Western psychotherapy is being challenged head on by the growing recognition of the problems of treating non-Western immigrants." Kleinman concluded, "There are some psychiatric disorders, like depression and schizophrenia, that are universal; but even among them the power of culture to radically shape symptoms is profound."<sup>14</sup>

Meanwhile, even in Latin America where dependency theory ("blame it all on the United States; never look inward — at least not publicly!") holds sway, some grudging recognition of the political-cultural variable is beginning to surface. Chilean scholar Norbert Lechner has just published an influential book on political culture and democratization<sup>15</sup>; already noted is the fact that one of the leading advocates of the primary importance of economic factors in determining political outcomes, Enzo Faletto, is now arguing that the "structural factors" stressed by dependency theory are inadequate to explain democracy's rise and consolidation in the area. More traditional Latin American thinkers — Zea, Paz, Faoro — have long wrestled seriously and honestly with the weight of their own countries' political culture.

Even more important have been the effects of the recent East Asian economic miracles on Latin America. Latin America cannot and does not wish to emulate East Asia sociologically, but it does recognize it is losing out economically to the various Asian "tigers" and suffering by comparison with them. East Asia had all the features that Latin American dependency theory complains about — US multinationals, dependency on US markets, etc. — and yet Asia turned these features to developmental advantage while Latin America still insists on blaming them for its underdevelopment. But if East Asia and Latin America

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11. Inghelhart, "The Renaissance of Political Culture," *American Political Science Review* 82 (December 1988): 1203-30.

12. Clifford Geertz, *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth Century Bali* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980).

13. Barnett, *Social and Economic Development* (New York: Guilford Publications, 1989).

14. See the story in *The New York Times*, 7 March 1989, Cliff.

15. Norbert Lechner, *Cultura política y democratización* (Santiago, Chile: CLACSO/FLACSO/ICI, 1987).



had these "structural features" in common, and one turned them to advantage while the other remained mired in underdevelopment, then it must be factors other than the structural ones that explain their differences. Among scholars as well as many Latin Americans, even though the latter cannot always bring themselves to say so publicly, the sense is growing that the missing explanatory variable may well be culture.

#### CONCLUSIONS

It seems obvious to me that political culture remains an important variable in explaining development, or the lack thereof. If the red herrings and straw men ("racism," "culturalism") can be stripped away, political culture in well-trained hands (devoid of national stereotyping or determinism) can be a powerful source of explanation and interpretation. Anyone who would study Latin America, for example, without paying serious attention to key political-cultural variables simply does not understand the area. Such variables must include religion and the Catholic Church, the code law legal system, the values and preferences that Latin Americans hold, the critical role of "*fueros*" and the corporate organization of society, and the role of history and tradition.

At the same time, political culture should not be thought of as *the* only

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explanatory variable, to the exclusion of class structure, political institutions, economic development, and doubtless other factors as well. A partial but still incomplete explanation derived from political culture should not be elevated into the status of a single or all-encompassing one. This is, it seems to me, where the interpretation offered in Lawrence E. Harrison's book, influential in some quarters, goes astray.<sup>16</sup> First, although Harrison says in his preface that he recognizes other forces besides culture are important in explaining Latin American underdevelopment, those factors never figure subsequently into his analysis; it is plain from his analysis that he believes culture is *the* most important factor. Second, Harrison pictures Latin American culture as static and unchanging when, in fact — as in the recent transitions to democracy — that culture is undergoing profound transformation.

16. Lawrence E. Harrison, *Underdevelopment Is a State of Mind: The Latin American Case* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1985).

Third, it is clear that Harrison is immensely hostile to Latin American culture, wants to abolish it entirely as if Latin America were some *tabula rasa* whose cultural slate could be wiped clean, and argues essentially that Latin America cannot develop until it takes on US-like virtues. Clearly, this will not do: Latin America cannot simply start anew as if there were no history, sociology, or culture there that is important or worth preserving. The issue is not whether to abolish Latin American culture and start anew (impossible, of course) but to adjust to and work within Latin America's existing institutions and culture, while trying to nudge the region toward greater efficiency. Surely, this is a more interesting and complex view of political culture than

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the rigid and unidimensional picture presented in the Harrison book, and represents a more realistic approach to Latin American development. It may surprise some analysts to read this author's criticism of a culturalist explanation, especially given the fact that he and I are sometimes lumped together in the same footnotes. In fact, Harrison's book goes so far beyond my own sense of the usefulness of political culture as *part* of a broader, more complex, and multifaceted explanation that I wish here to disassociate myself from his position.<sup>17</sup>

On the Latin American side, there are also problems. Not only are "dependency" (dependency, of course, exists in Latin America; *dependency* does not) and structuralist interpretations still prevalent, but Latin America has yet to come to grips with its own political culture. Corporatism was one of the characteristics of historic Latin American political culture, but in the Latin American mind corporatism has been associated with authoritarianism and militarism. So as Latin America has repudiated its authoritarian regimes in the past decade, it has also felt obliged to repudiate corporatism.

In their rush to embrace the new "transitions to democracy" literature, however, Latin American scholars and public officials have not faced squarely the fact that they have essentially moved from an older authoritarian (or state)

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17. A similar critique of the Harrison book to the one offered here is Daniel H. Levine, "If Only They Could Be More Like Us!" *Caribbean Review* 25 (Spring 1987): 19ff.

form of corporatism to a newer form (neo-corporatism) that is more societal and pluralist in character. But it is still *corporatist*, in the realms of labor relations, interest group relations, state-society relations, and many areas of public policy, which means there are still cultural and institutional continuities as well as changes in the recent processes of openings to democracy. Unless and until Latin America recognizes this reality of cultural continuity, not only will Latin Americans continue to misinterpret their own societies and politics, but, in failing adequately and realistically to acknowledge the continuing critical role of such important *corporate* institutions as the armed forces, countries such as Argentina also run the risk of seeing the very transitions to democracy that have been so heartening in this past decade destroyed in the process.<sup>18</sup>

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18. For amplification, see Howard J. Wiarda, "The Military and Democracy," *Harvard International Review* 8 (May/June 1986): 4-9.

