

CULTURAL OBSTACLES TO PROGRESS IN THE THIRD WORLD — AND AT HOME

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The principal obstacles to human progress in the Third World are, I believe, in the minds of the people who live in the Third World. Other factors are relevant: resource endowment, climate, government policies, even the roulette wheel vagaries of history. But the principal explanation of the disappointing performance of most underdeveloped countries in the past few decades is a set of values and attitudes that resist political, economic, and social progress.

I also believe that values and attitudes are at the root of poverty problems in the United States and that an erosion of national values and attitudes has a lot to do with the disturbing economic performance and social malaise of the United States in the past quarter-century.

By the standards of Western Europe, North America, Japan, and Australia, Latin America looks more like the nineteenth century than the twentieth. In *Underdevelopment is a State of Mind: The Latin American Case*, I tried to demonstrate that this anomaly is principally the consequence of the powerful momentum of traditional Ibero-Catholic culture. That culture is essentially anti-democratic, anti-social, anti-entrepreneurial, and anti-work. It has operated with similarly stultifying consequences in Spain and Portugal until the last twenty years.

For the past quarter-century, the conventional wisdom explanation of Latin America's condition in the academic communities of North America, Europe, and Latin America has been dependency theory — Latin America's authoritarianism, poor economic performance, and extreme social inequality are principally the consequence of a world economic system that places the developed countries, and above all the United States, at "the center" and Latin America (and other Third World countries) at the exploited "periphery." Dependency theory is rooted in a Marxist-Léninist interpretation of the success of the democratic capitalist countries.

Dependency theory has great emotional appeal, particularly in an era in which relativism is the dominant theme in intellectual communities around the world. Dependency theory depicts Latin America as the victim of a greedy,

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irresponsible United States. It makes Latin American intellectuals feel good about themselves and convinces them that José Enrique Rodó, the Uruguayan who wrote the best-selling *Ariel* in 1900, was right when he argued that Latin America was spiritually superior to a materialistic United States. Dependency theory explains why that spiritual superiority has failed to express itself in democratic institutions, economic dynamism, and social equality: the Yankees and their domestic agents, the oligarchies, have conspired against progress.

But there is comparable emotional appeal for intellectuals in Europe and the United States. In *Without Marx or Jesus*, Jean-François Revel observed that "Anti-Americanism is one of the great psychological phenomena of our time."¹ Much of the anti-Americanism flows from that dark corner of the human

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psyche in which the less successful harbor envy and resentment of the more successful, the same dark corner that nurtures dependency theory in Latin America *and* in Europe, and, in its most hideous expression, nurtured the Hitlerian view of the Jews.

The emotional appeal of dependency theory for American intellectuals has much to do with the anti-Americanism that has been so palpable in the US academic community since Vietnam and Watergate. That anti-Americanism, the reverse of European intellectuals' envy and resentment, is rooted in feelings of guilt, reinforced by the stark contrast between our well-being and Latin America's poverty, authoritarianism, and inequality.

Dependency theory is largely mythical, and its influence is waning in the absence of data to support it. Nearly 70 percent of all US trade is with, and 70 percent of US investment is in, the developed countries. US trade with and investment in Canada exceed that of all comparable US activity in Latin America.

Trends in our terms of trade have been about the same as Latin America's. (The United States is, after all, the world's largest exporter of primary products.) US multinational corporation profits are not significantly greater in Latin America than in other parts of the world.² And even if they were, some evidence suggests that more "dependent" countries grow faster, more equitably, and more democratically than less "dependent" countries.³ Die-hard

1. (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 124.

2. See Joseph Ramos, "Reflections on Gustavo Gutierrez's Theory of Liberation" in Michael Novak, ed., *Liberation North-Liberation South* (Washington D.C.: The American Enterprise Institute, 1981), 55.

3. See R.R. Kaufman, Daniel S. Giller, and Harry I. Chernotsky, "Preliminary Test of the Theory of Dependency," *Comparative Politics* 7 (April 1975): 304.

dependencistas should ponder the cases of Korea and Taiwan, not to mention the experiences of Canada, Australia, and the United States in the nineteenth century.

Dependency theory erodes Americans' belief in themselves and in their society. But it has more pernicious consequences for Latin America, where self-criticism is a rare commodity and where most intellectuals and politicians are comfortable blaming the Yankee devil for Latin America's problems. In contrast, self-criticism is *overdeveloped* in the United States. The two opposite

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tendencies reinforce one another, erode the quality of scholarship both in the United States and in Latin America, and lead Latin Americans who seek change down a dead-end street where they are likely to find the new authoritarianism and economic stagnation of Cuba, Nicaragua, and liberation theology.

What are the real problems that explain why this area, with European antecedents a century older than those of Canada and the United States and with comparable natural resource endowment, is today as much as a century behind Canada and the United States? Those problems flow from a world view in which:

- Identification and trust rarely extend beyond the family, with consequent high levels of political, economic, and social fragmentation and polarization; with nepotism, corruption, tax evasion, and other anti-social behavior; and with a lack of concern on the part of the affluent and powerful for the well-being of their less-fortunate compatriots, evidenced by limited political participation, illiteracy, high morbidity and mortality levels, and few acts of philanthropy.
- The ethical code, strongly influenced by Ibero-Catholic tradition and in some cases (e.g. Brazil, Haiti, Cuba) by African religions that often have no ethical content, does not demand, to quote Max Weber, "a life of good works combined into a unified system"

but is based on “the very human Catholic cycle of sin, repentance, atonement, release, followed by renewed sin.”⁴

- Authoritarianism and rigid hierarchy are taken for granted.
- Wealth is seen as finite — what one member of the community acquires is presumed to be at the expense of others — and innovation as a threat.
- Work is viewed as a necessary evil.

These are the fundamental characteristics of Latin American culture. Of course, they are not peculiar to Latin America: Edward Banfield describes a very similar set of values and attitudes for southern Italy in *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society*,⁵ David Korten does the same for Ethiopia in *Planned Change in a Traditional Society*,⁶ and there are striking parallels between Latin American culture and the universal peasant culture described by George Foster in *Peasant Society: A Reader*.⁷

Let me restate my admittedly sweeping conclusion for the majority of poor countries, in Latin America and elsewhere, that are not moving purposefully toward more open, dynamic, and equitable societies: the principal problem is to find ways of transforming traditional development-resistant values and attitudes into the modern values and attitudes that facilitate and provide incentives for development. That does not mean policies and programs are unimportant. Indeed, policies and programs which emphasize the market and encourage economic pluralism, which promote education and educational reform, and which strengthen the bonds of cooperation in economic and social enterprise, may be important tools in achieving progressive cultural change. But the articulation and execution of such policies may depend on new ways of seeing the world where the inspiration must come from political, intellectual, and religious leaders.

Poverty in the United States is found principally among blacks and Hispanics in the inner city. The condition of these people is suggested by the following statistics:⁸

- Forty-four percent of black teens and 56 percent of Hispanic teens are illiterate.
- The illegitimacy rate among blacks is more than 50 percent.
- Blacks account for 12 percent of the US population but 46 percent of arrests for violent crimes.
- Hispanics account for 6 percent of the population but 12 percent of all arrests for violent crime.

4. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950), 117.

5. (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1958).

6. (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1972).

7. Jack M. Potter, May N. Diaz, and George M. Foster, eds., (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1967).

8. The data are drawn from an article by former Colorado Governor Richard D. Lamm that appeared in the *Dartmouth Alumni Magazine*, May 1987.

I believe cultural problems are at the root of these statistics and are comparable to the "development" problems of Third World countries. My earlier comments about Latin America's condition apply generally to the Hispanic population of the United States. Two special considerations, however, apply to Latin Americans who have migrated to the United States: (1) John Kenneth Galbraith argues in *The Nature of Mass Poverty*⁹ that people who uproot themselves to migrate to a distant country with a strange language and customs are by definition upwardly mobile risk-takers, a point strengthened by the fact that the Hispanic "immigrant" group which takes the fewest risks — the Puerto Ricans — shows less upward mobility than any other immigrant group; and (2) we need to know more about the extent and rate of acculturation of Hispanic immigrants to the American value system, particularly in light of the above statistics and the continuing flood of illegal immigrants from Latin America.

Likewise, culture accounts principally for the problem of the black ghetto. Today's ghetto dweller is the current generation of an ethnic group that has been isolated from the mainstream of American culture for centuries, first by slavery, then by Jim Crow, and now by the *de facto* segregation of the inner city. The values and attitudes of the black ghetto dweller are a mix of traditional African culture, which is not progress-prone, as the current condition of sub-Saharan Africa suggests; slavery, which, as a number of observers¹⁰ have pointed out, is among the systems most destructive of progressive values and attitudes that humankind has devised; southern share-cropping, perhaps the closest that the United States has come to universal peasant culture; and the television / cheap thrill / conspicuous consumption ethos that currently infects not only the ghetto but US society as a whole.

The problems of the American ghetto are strikingly similar to the problems of Haiti, and for good reason. The roots of the Haitian people are in West Africa, as is the case for the large majority of American blacks; the ancestors of the Haitian people lived for generations as slaves. The vast majority of Haitians since independence in 1804 have subsisted as peasant farmers. They have been substantially isolated from more progressive cultures in part because of Haiti's early fears of the return of the French, and in part because of early fears of other nations practicing slavery, foremost among them the United States (until the Civil War), that the example of Haiti's successful uprising would spread. Haitians speak *creole*, the language of the slavery experience. If you think that the slavery experience has been erased from the psyches of American ghetto blacks, listen to the echoes of slavery in their language.

Those inclined to leap to racial explanations for the parallels between the American ghetto and Haiti should ponder the case of Barbados. The roots of its people are also in West Africa; most Barbadian blacks were enslaved by the British until 1834; and today, Barbados is a prosperous democracy, similar

9. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), chapter 8.

10. E.g., Sir Arthur Lewis in *The Theory of Economic Growth*, David McClelland in *The Achieving Society*, and Carlos Rangel in *The Latin Americans*.

to Britain in values, attitudes, and institutions. Indeed, it is not far off the mark to think of Barbadians as black Englishmen.

White racism had a lot to do with the condition of American blacks until the last few decades. Notwithstanding the protests of some black leaders to the contrary, there has been a dramatic liberalization of white attitudes about race since the 1950s.¹¹ Millions of blacks have found their way into the American cultural mainstream. Affirmative action psychology has taken root in business, government, the professions, and the universities, a phenomenon that a prominent Brazilian black recently pointed to as a model for Brazil to follow.¹² The Mexican writer Octavio Paz, who has never been reluctant to criticize the United States, wrote in 1986, "It is not beyond the bounds of possibility that by the end of this century the United States will have become the first multiracial democracy in history."¹³

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In these circumstances, those black leaders who point to racism as the principal cause of the problems of the black poor perform a major disservice. First, they alienate many non-racist whites. Even more importantly, they send a message to the ghettos that the people there have no control over their own destinies. The pernicious consequences for self-help are comparable to the consequences of dependency theory for the Latin American psyche.

America's cultural problem does not, however, stop at the ghetto. Since World War II, there has been an erosion in the values that have brought the United States so far: work as a central core of human life, austerity, excellence, fair play, trust,¹⁴ and community. The erosion is principally attributable to US success and affluence, coinciding with the advent of television, which has made its own contribution to the erosion. The process accelerated with the Vietnam War and Watergate.

Today, some of the symbols of that erosion are the budget deficit, the trade deficit, the drug epidemic, the fact that Japanese cars are of generally higher

11. See, for example, D. Garth Taylor, Paul B. Sheatsley, and Andrew M. Greeley, "Attitudes Toward Racial Integration," in *Scientific American*, 1978, 42-49.

12. Col. Jorge da Silva in an interview in *Jornal do Brasil*, 20 November 1988.

13. "Notes on the United States," *The Wilson Quarterly* (Spring 1986): 89.

14. For evidence of the erosion of trust in the United States, see Ronald Inglehart, "The Renaissance of Political Culture," *American Political Science Review*, (December 1988).

quality than American cars,¹⁵ the recent sleaze on Wall Street and in Washington, and the general incivility of dialogue among the branches of government, in the press, and in academe. Culture changes, to be sure, but not always in a positive direction. There is a lot of historical evidence — including that cited by Paul Kennedy in *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* — that affluence and power breed cultural decline.

The great irony of our recent presidential election is that Michael Dukakis, the embodiment of traditional American values, failed to communicate his concern about, and his commitment to, those values in his campaign. Had he done so, I believe he would be in the White House today.

15. *Consumer Reports* in 1988 rated most Japanese cars above average in reliability, most American cars below average.

