

I. INTRODUCTION

Over the years, academia has witnessed many different intellectual debates on ideologies and political systems such as liberal democracy, communism, socialism, social democracy, totalitarianism, fascism, and others, economic preferences such as capitalist system, *laissez faire*, centralized structure, hybrid systems of government control with a free market -as Turkey claimed to follow starting from the 1980s- and others. Political scientists, sociologists, economists all have been discussing as to which political and economic systems are more efficient and which ones put more emphasis on the wealth, happiness and livelihood of people. Nonetheless, not until recently has the focus of the discussion been such a sophisticated and provocative one: *Culture*. The new fashion intellectual debate capturing the attention of academia and scholars has picked a topic which is virtually impossible to reach a consensus and the question is whether some cultures or some values are better.

The author of this paper describes himself as a “multiculturalist”, and therefore strictly refrains himself from favoring an intercultural hierarchy in defining the roles and characteristics of world cultures. The foundation of such understanding is based on belief that each culture has a unique historical and social accumulation and carries a special value of its kind. The possibility should not be taken for granted that deifying a culture may become identical in blunting others which, in turn, may seriously threaten to abolish the multiculturalist world structure. Last but not least, many cultures of which the origins date back to thousands of years ago have not been solely based on creating economically added value and they certainly do not require a progressive stance in order to keep their existence.

II. THE ARGUMENT AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

We are much accustomed so far to the pride of the thinkers from the developed world in their functioning free market economies, industry, financial and educational institutions, judiciary systems; however, a new claim that has sparked a heated discussion and found supporters calls that some cultures or faiths are superior than others for wealth and economic development. The argument is supported by the claim that certain characteristics are attributable to certain cultures or faith groups, and these so-called characteristics are essential in achieving economical gains and business purposes. Moreover, it is argued that in order to adjust with the changing needs, habits, and necessities of the dominant world economical order, some cultures may need a self-confrontation and a radical change in their understanding of enlightenment and achievement.

Weber, originally a historian who later became one of the most prominent figures in diversified social sciences, describes Protestantism -particularly its Calvinist branches- and Protestan ethic as a significant contributor in business success and capital accumulation. He attributes hard work, honesty, seriousness, perseverance, frugality, and the use of time to the roots of Protestan belief and argues that whereas predestination doctrine in Protestantism would not last so long, a behavioral norm mentioned above is converted into a daily secular code.

Landes (2000) lays out a didactic argument in what he calls culture as the major difference among the nations and goes further to claim that looking at a number of countries, the power of culture is so remarkable that it can help foresee the economic successes of a number of countries, such as Japan, Germany, and South Korea. He

praises Japan as a version of Weber's Protestant ethic, which he qualifies as a tool in realizing the economic miracle. Landes also challenges sociologist Robert Merton, who gives credit to Weberism as providing a direct link between Protestantism and the rise of modern science, in his view of claiming that the the thesis of Weber is over.

Not quite relying on Weberian tradition, Inglehart (2000) presents a moderate way in suggesting that the rise of industrial society forces for coherent cultural changes from traditional value systems. Nonetheless, he describes culture as path dependent and argues that a society's historical faith origins "give rise to cultural zones with highly distinctive value systems that persist" when the effects of economic development is controlled (p.80) Therefore, while the wealth of a society is argued to be linked with its cultural roots, the latter is also affected by the economic development.

Harrison (2000) discusses that the intellectual debate focusing on culture and cultural changes dates back to Banfield, Weber, Tocqueville and Montesquieu, and understanding cultural differences can provide an insight in comprehending why some ethnic/religious groups have done better than others. He finds the discrepancy not only in economic terms but with respect to democratic institutions and justice as well, and shows the practical example of Latin America where, he argues that, a major group of people have been far away from wealth, democracy, and social justice.

III. COUNTER ARGUMENTS

The overstatement qualifying the Protestan characteristic as unique and an "ideal" type for today's modernized economy is a false representation. Beyond the sociological and cultural debate, describing the members of a certain culture -mainly of the western

world- as rational, diligent, clean, orderly, and productive seems to be an implicit form of neo-discrimination. In fact, the cultural debate witnesses a revised form of social engineering formed by a new class of intellectuals. This understanding aims to address mainly cultural differences in describing why some nations have succeeded more than others and what kind of behavioral shifts would be needed to pursue economical advancement.

Probably the most striking counter attack has come from Shweder (2000) who, notwithstanding the most politically correct anthropologists, boldly states that the “white man’s burden, cultural developmentalism is back” and he argues that “the self-congratulatory, up-from-barbarism theme of Western liberalism has once again become fashionable on the anthropological scene” (p. 162). Laying out a co-existence theory, the author points out that pluralism does not reject the ideas of progress and decline. He further challenges what he calls triumphal progressivism, “which tries to pick out some one cultural tradition as superior to all the rest” (p. 165)

Another typical counter argument comes from Confucianism which has deep impacts in many cultures of Far East. Many times Confucianist thought was overlooked by the western progressivists as an impediment in economical development because of its characteristic way of family relationships and the role of females in traditional Chinese society. Whereas Protestan doctrine is highly rationalized in its institutionalized structure and based almost purely on meritocracy, eastern societies embracing Confucianist philosophy put the main emphasis on favoring family members, relatives, and friends even in business settings, which -in a westernized thinking- is a major contributor to create a nepotist structure.

Nonetheless, some social theorists portray the Confucianist philosophy as a strong instrument in building up East Asian modernity. King (1996) makes a cultural interpretation in emphasizing specific cultural factors and reveals that the culturalists “attribute the success of Eastern societies to their common cultural heritage, that is, Confucianism.” The author exemplifies Herman Kahn and others who point out that the people of the region, grown up with Confucian thought, have been provided the mentality and work ethic which assisted them to economic development. The study also lays out that students of today’s Chinese culture disagree with Weber’s views on traditional Chinese culture and challenge his diagnosis of Confucianism which finds the main elements of the doctrine a barrier to the rise of capitalism. Redding (cited in King, 1996) finds a parallelism between Confucian ethics and stability and adaptiveness, and further discusses that traditional Chinese family business provides a societal transformation in overseas Chinese communities. He finally argues that Confucian ethics is helpful in establishing “a moral base for the legitimization of authority at the level of the firm and for the facilitation of reliable transactions”, in “ensuring a state infrastructure that allows stable decentralization”, and in comprising “universal and necessary conditions for sustainable economic growth.”

Edgerton (2000), on the other hand, offers a different approach in what he calls optimally-beneficial decision-making. He suggests that beliefs and practices do not necessarily persist just because they are optimally beneficial, but rather they are workable in the continuation of the group and therefore, “changes in them are not self-evidently needed.” (p. 137) He contends that even if a population manages to adapt to its environment, it is unlikely to keep such adaptation for any length of time. He

acknowledges that while culture may tend to be adaptive, it cannot be perceived as perfect. The author goes on further to argue that any insistent, traditional belief in a surviving society should not be assumed to be adaptive. Ellen (1982, p. 251, cited from Edgerton, 2000) strikingly describes that “cultural adaptations are seldom the best of all possible solutions and never entirely rational.”

Apart from cultural factors, there are a number of other explanatory differences in discerning developmental disparities. One of them is the impact of climate and geography. It cannot be taken for granted that the temperate parts of the world are wealthier than, for instance, the tropical regions. Sachs (2000) suggests that geographically remote societies are less economically developed than the ones who live on coastal plains or navigable rivers. He further discusses that being landlocked, the handicap of rich European countries such as Switzerland, Austria, and Luxembourg is offset by the fact that they have the advantage of being surrounded by rich coastal economies.

Another significant factor, which at the first hand might seem to be very culture-related, is the administrative regime of the country that has radical impacts on national wealth. The foundation and existence of democratic institutions and the order of law has been critically important in shaping the economic destination. Whereas it could be argued that the existence of such western values and institutions is already a sign of cultural transformation, I go on to argue that many non-western traditional cultures, having preserved their cultural roots, still manage to improve thanks to a loyal implementation of democracy and supremacy of law, such as -but not limited to- Japan, South Korea, and India. According to Perkins (2000, p. 243) the current challenge of

Asian values, which served economic development for almost half a century, “is to complete the process of creating a strong modern economy built on a foundation of law.”

Lindsay (2000) brings a different dimension to the debate in drawing attention to mental models. In explaining the wealth differences, rather than a pure culturalist approach, he puts emphasis on mental models which -with the words of Peter Senge- “surface, test and improve our internal pictures of how the world works” (p. 291). Lindsay argues that the main challenge is to break through the mental models which might stand as an impediment against competitive mind-sets. There may or may not be a cultural change and the main task is to create a comparatively advantaged mind-set which can play a major role in wealth creation. Above all, culture cannot be blamed for the absence of competitive mind-sets.

IV. WHERE IS EDUCATION STANDING IN CULTURAL DEBATE?

While discussing the issue whether it is mainly culture in defining the developmental changes in a country, I notice that one big issue is underemphasized and that is the role of education in shaping culture and, if any, maladaptive practices of a society. Whereas I give full credit to the impact of daily norms and values of a social system in guiding the young generations, I also think that these daily norms and values, too, can be influenced or revised thanks to the educational practices in and out of the classroom. Hence, education in the family and in the school deserve as much attention as peculiar distinctiveness of a culture.

The role of education deserves a special attention in development studies. According to Cheng (2000), development studies have a tendency towards a general

framework which could be applied to all countries despite the fact that nations follow different routes in their efforts of development. Hence, he calls attention to comparative studies in education and the multidimensional structure of the issue.

Stevenson and Stigler (1992, cited from Cheng, 1998) define the role of predominant societal educational practices in explaining the differences in learning outcomes. They argue that there is a dichotomy between effort and ability and the marked differences in this context are demonstrated to be arising from parental education. The authors conclude that American parents attribute their children's success and failure to innate ability whereas Japanese and Chinese parents put more emphasis on the effort of children. These research findings are in contrast with the arguments of some social thinkers who favor solely culture in identifying the developmental discrepancies. Their conclusion also contradicts with the argument of Protestant behavior code which praises hard work rather than characteristic abilities. The argument of Stevenson and Stigler is striking in that they characterize Chinese and Japanese societies which "allow no excuses for lack of progress in school; regardless of one's current level of performance, opportunities for advancement are always believed to be available through more effort." (p. 95, cited from Cheng, 1998)

Although the western style cultural philosophy highlights the strength of individual and tries to reach collective wealth through the power, creativity, and hard work of individuals, eastern cultures seem to succeed with an alternative route, collectivist understanding. Cheng (1998) points out that East Asian collectivist cultures view education as a means of socialization rather than the western type of individual development. It is education which teaches children how to adapt themselves to the

larger group and “school education is designed to instill in children the norms and expectations of the society.” (p.15) Looking at the major economical developments in the region, Confucianism-affected East Asian mode of educating the youngsters seem to bear fruit despite the major dissimilarities in cultural terms.

Another illustration of the impact of education on the acquired values is discipline. Weberian school of thought and its supporters make an oversimplification in finding the rigorous structure of work in Protestant ethic. However, non-Protestant eastern educational systems approach the case from a different perspective and the way they make the young individuals gain a rigorous discipline can be seen in educational methods, which also embrace their different cultural contexts. Confucian eastern cultures use discipline as a tool of teaching a positive and valued aspect of socialization whereas in many western systems discipline has a function in realizing orderly learning and it is mainly used to prevent behavioral problems (Cheng, 1998). Hence, a rigorous work ethic has broader implications than a mere cultural identification.

V. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper is not to underestimate the power of culture, nor to deny the role of culture in economic, social, and educational transformations of the nations. Given the sophistication of the issue, it is hard to come to a consensus as to what extent culture can influence the dynamics of a society. However, it is aimed to challenge the dignified approach of qualifying one group of cultural norms as more harmonious with today's economic modernization and moreover, it aims to call the attention to the pitfalls

of such deterministic argument by providing conflicting data from eastern cultures, some of which are presented as new-age economic miracles by eminent scholars.

Economic development is a very dynamic process and not even the most respected academicians have managed to reach a consensus on the optimal prescription of affluency. The economic evolution of mankind does not include sharp cause-and-effect correlations and it still remains a mystery as to what extent the cultural characteristics have been attributable to development. Moreover, the impact of daily behaviors could be self-contradictory in that one peculiar norm may add significant value in monetary terms whereas another of the very same culture may be counterproductive. Hence, it is essential to give more credit to other parameters and considerations. It needs to be remembered that the impact of sophisticated factors such as culture should be dealt with great care as it comes with general approximations, rather than straightforward outcomes of positive sciences.

The role of education practices can considerably contribute as a major part of the debate. It can be proposed that education, in and of itself, is a reflector of culture and its role affirms the impact of cultural orientation. Nonetheless, education systems of many traditional cultures such as East Asians, some of which are claimed to lack the adaptiveness of modernized economy, also provide their individuals many strengths and skills needed through the path of economical achievement and wealth creation such as hard work, dedication, and discipline despite the major dissimilarities in cultural terms. Further comparative studies in education and its multidimensional structure, therefore, is of critical importance and deserves as much attention as the role of culture in identifying the developmental discrepancies.

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