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Mini Paper #3-Culture over Politics and Economics

Make an argument for culture with primacy over that of political and economic examination in international development. Why should culture be the primary lens by which to examine international development? Support your argument with the literature and with examples.

A persistent question across relevant disciplines in examination of international development is ‘why do some countries develop and others do not’ (Harrison & Huntington, 2001; Minkov, 2012; Moore, 2012)? This is an important question because of the downstream impacts of underdevelopment; more glaringly so in the wake of globalization. For example, mineral wealth in developing Africa may be a more significant export and income opportunity to contribute to the physical and economic wellness of the populations therein but for the limits imposed by underdevelopment such as corruption, conflict, and deep inequality. Or, more specifically, the Asian financial crisis beginning in 1997 had massive global impacts, its causes tracing back to ‘cronyism’ and nepotism that pervaded the Confucianist region and prevented solid political institutions that observed the rule of law and lent to financial mismanagement (Perkins, in Harrison & Huntington, 2001). Having more people living in countries with infrastructure that can contribute to a more peaceful and progressive whole is the current institutional push. Answering the question as to why some develop and others do not has been explored from economic, political and cultural perspectives, the latter of which has been largely ignored in the inquiry, only to shine a bright light on the failures of economic and political theories in providing a comprehensive explanation. Thus, it is appropriate for a paradigmatic shift that supports culture as the primary lens through which international development is examined.

Samuel Huntington puts forth a definitive claim that “it is culture, not politics, that determines the success of a society” (Harrison & Huntington, 2001). Such a bold stance requires that he follow with an explanation of how he defines success or progress as well as how he defines culture. For, is politics not a creation of culture? And, do politics not influence how culture is shaped? To this end, Huntington defines human progress to be characterized by economic and material development, socio-economic equity, and political democracy. Huntington goes on to define culture as “the values, attitudes, beliefs, orientations, and underlying assumptions prevalent among people in a society,” to better understand the aspects of culture that affect societal development, or progress.

The level of political development, or progress towards a stable political order, is contingent upon the relationship between active political participants in societies and the political institutions (Huntington, 2006). Level of institutionalization, or the “process by which organizations and procedures acquire value and stability,” can be measured based on “adaptability, complexity, autonomy, and coherence of organizations and procedures” (ibid). Operationalizing the criteria for these elements can serve as a foundation for comparative political development. For example, in the United States, Congress serves as an institution with low transaction costs such that stable legislation becomes possible (Hall & Taylor, 1996), whereas in Iraq, it has been exceedingly difficult to build stable institutions due to many of the desired elements of institutionalization such as lack of coherence. Huntington’s gap hypothesis proposes that social mobilization resulting from advances such as in education, urbanization and modernization, in turn influence people’s values and expectations while economic development impacts economic output and capabilities. The gap between social expectation and economic reality is what leads to political instability (i.e., lack of development) because politics becomes the mechanism by which the gap

can be closed. If political institutions are not strong enough to accommodate the mobilization being driven by the gap, then the result is political instability.

How society is shaped has everything to do with the culture from which it is born (Huntington, 2006). Culture is an amalgamation of values, norms, institutions and way of thinking that are learned and not innate (Minkov, 2012). Culture is a generational phenomenon that contributes to the shaping of civilizations and certainly adds value to understanding of state relations. An example of a cultural trait is represented by Hofstede et al. (2010) in their representation of collectivism versus individualism. The North American culture is very much an individualistic one where “I” is used in contrast to “we,” where the nuclear family prevails as opposed to the extended family, or where “equal rights” are valued in lieu of significant class structure differences. In contrast, Indian culture is very much collectivist, where the contribution to the good of the whole is valued as is family unity. India, as a rising world power, however, maintains significant contrasts in class such that over 25% of the larger population live on less than \$1.25/day (the international poverty line). While the collectivist culture sounds romantic and socially responsible, it is also a culture that, according to Hofstede et al., is a predictor of large societal differentials. This is at the crux of much debate about which culture is superior or lends to a more desirable nation-state—that which is the right way to think, act, or behave, in order for the larger civilization to cohesively rise to socially, economically, and politically stable existence as a state.

That which eludes political scientists in an attempt to explain and make predictions is very much a function, in part, of cultural differences. Even the fundamental operationalization of terms can become a barrier (Minkov, 2012). Culture can come to be characterized as a distraction or ‘pesky’ nuance that gets in the way of implementing the desired rational approach and muddy the

efficiencies that could be generated by a global application of neo-liberalist framework of new market economies, entrepreneurialism, and capitalism (ibid). However, Abdollahian et al (2012) found in an empirical study of human development theory, that economic, political and cultural change are joint predictors of societal development, thus culture is not to be ignored despite who's agenda or framework is being championed. Culture influences the state and the society and both the state and society influence one another. In analysis of either, each must be considered.

The structure of society is significant in predicting state capabilities (Migdal, 1988). Social patterns that are well-embedded have impeded state growth consistently over time (ibid). Valenzuela and Valenzuela (1978), in a study of Latin America, found that values of Catholicism, Indian populations and aristocratic rural elites have impeded modernization through irrationality that included lack of entrepreneurialism, lack of instrumental behaviors, weak achievement orientation, disdain for pragmatism and poor institutions (i.e., education system that perpetuates poor attitudes toward development). They concluded that authoritarianism, corporatist organizations and disdain for democracy and liberalism are values embedded in Latin America and that any development that has come about in Latin America is largely due to cultural adaptability and outside influences rather than any real measures of change. Such a position highlights the stronghold that society has on state development.

Another such example can be found in Southern Italy. The culture of this part of the world does not foster a society that leans toward a moderate and that finds interest in socioeconomic modernization and civil engagement (Putnam, 1994). It can be argued that Southern Italy's slow progress toward socioeconomic modernization (vis-à-vis Northern Italy) is the leading factor in their poor regional government performance and weakness of institutions. The ramifications of this governance structure are an unengaged society that functions primarily outside of that

organizational structure. Putnam concludes that cultural values have had greater influence than economic development given Italy's evolution over time (Harrison & Huntington, 2001).

Culture is formulated by societies made up of individuals and those individuals have mental constructs of what will ultimately attain them prosperity, progress, and well-being (Fairbanks, in Harrison & Huntington, 2001). Culture, by its definition, is an aggregation of norms (Minkov, 2012). The cohesion of individual belief systems creating a normative belief system that underlies culture is what realizes action such as how to structure political or economic institutions to reinforce those beliefs. Politics do not spontaneously occur—they are a result of conscious human design. Economies and associated policies do not create themselves—they are a result of conscious human design. Culture, however, is organic and often unspoken but transmutes to application and takes tangible form as carried out through societies, through institutions and the politics and economic considerations therein. Why some countries develop and others do not begins with the individual belief system, is reinforced at varying cultural levels (i.e., both internally and externally) and then becomes part of the tangible existence of cultures as part of a global order. Can we tell an impoverished village of people to get out there and get an education and better jobs and save and invest their money? Sure! But, doesn't that question sound absurd without first addressing if they want to or even value the notion, and what the barriers are for why they haven't done so already? Culture is the lens that should have primacy in the understanding of international development, all else will necessarily follow.

References

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