

March 24, 2006
COMMENTARY

Democracy Isn't 'Western'

 By **AMARTYA SEN**
 March 24, 2006; Page A10

"The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves, that we are underlings." Culture too, like our stars, is often blamed for our failures. Attempts to build a better world capsize, it is alleged, in the high sea of cultural resistance. The determinism of culture is increasingly used in contemporary global discussions to generate pessimism about the feasibility of a democratic state, or of a flourishing economy, or of a tolerant society, wherever these conditions do not already obtain.


Indeed, cultural stereotyping can have great effectiveness in fixing our way of thinking. When there is an accidental correlation between cultural prejudice and social observation (no matter how casual), a theory is born, and it may refuse to die even after the chance correlation has vanished without trace. For example, labored jokes against the Irish, which have had such currency in England, had the superficial appearance of fitting well with the depressing predicament of the Irish economy when it was doing quite badly. But when the Irish economy started growing astonishingly rapidly, for many years faster than any other European economy, the cultural stereotyping and its allegedly profound economic and social relevance were not junked as sheer rubbish. Theories have lives of their own, quite defiantly of the phenomenal world that can be actually observed.

Many have observed that in the '60s South Korea and Ghana had similar income per head, whereas within 30 years the former grew to be 15 times richer than the latter. This comparative history is immensely important to study and causally analyze, but the temptation to put much of the blame on Ghanaian or African culture (as is done by as astute an observer as Samuel Huntington) calls for some resistance. Mr. Huntington closes his contrast with a spectacular formula: "South Koreans valued thrift, investment, hard work, education, organization and discipline. Ghanaians had different values. In short, cultures count." Ghanaians, and perhaps many other Africans, seem doomed to stagnate, according to this analysis.

In fact, that cultural story is extremely deceptive. There were many important differences, other than any differences in cultural predispositions, between Ghana and Korea in the 1960s. First, the class structures in the two countries were quite different, with a very much bigger -- and proactive -- role of business classes in Korea. Second, the politics were very different, too, with the government in South Korea eager to play a prime-moving role in initiating societal reform and economic development in a way that was not true in Ghana. Third, the close relationship between the Korean economy and Japan, on the one hand, and the U.S., on the other, made a big difference, at least in the early stages of Korean economic expansion.

Fourth -- and perhaps most important -- by the 1960s South Korea had acquired a much higher literacy rate and a much more expanded school system than Ghana had. Korean massive progress in school education had been largely brought about in the post-World War II period, mainly through resolute public policy, and it could not be seen just as a reflection of cultural difference. This is not to suggest that cultural factors are irrelevant to the process of development, but they do not work in isolation from social, political and economic influences. Nor are they immutable.

DOW JONES REPRINTS

 This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers, use the Order Reprints tool at the bottom of any article or visit: www.djreprints.com.

- [See a sample reprint in PDF format.](#)
- [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

The temptation of founding economic pessimism on cultural resistance is matched by the evident enchantment, even more common today, of basing political pessimism, particularly about democracy, on alleged cultural impossibilities. While it is easy enough to understand the widespread -- and increasing -- doubts about armed intervention allegedly aimed at jump-starting democracy in Iraq through largely foreign and military planning, it would be quite a leap from there to become skeptical of the general possibility of the emergence of democracy in any country that is currently nondemocratic. It is worth remembering that democracy has developed well enough in many countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America, and in the case of some, such as South Africa, even foreign assistance to local democratic movements (for example through economic boycott) has positively helped.

When it is asked whether Western countries can "impose" democracy on the non-Western world, even the language reflects a confusion centering on the idea of "imposition," since it implies a proprietary belief that democracy "belongs" to the West, taking it to be a quintessentially "Western" idea which has originated and flourished exclusively in the West. This is a thoroughly misleading way of understanding the history and the contemporary prospects of democracy.

Democracy, to use the old Millian phrase, is "government by discussion," and voting is only one part of a broader picture (an understanding that has, alas, received little recognition in post-intervention Iraq in the attempt to get straight to polling without the development of broad public reasoning and an independent civil society). There can be no doubt at all that the modern concepts of democracy and of public reasoning have been very deeply influenced by European and American analyses and experiences over the last few centuries (including the contributions of such theorists of democracy as Marquis de Condorcet, Jefferson, Madison and Tocqueville). But to extrapolate backward from these comparatively recent experiences to construct a quintessential and long-run dichotomy between the West and non-West would be deeply misleading. There is a long history of public reasoning across the world, and while it has gone through ups and downs everywhere, the sharp priority of liberal tolerance that has emerged in the West over the past three centuries reflects how social evolution can strengthen and consolidate one tendency to the exclusion -- or near exclusion -- of other tendencies.

The belief in the allegedly "Western" nature of democracy is often linked to the early practice of voting and elections in Greece, especially in Athens. Democracy involves more than balloting, but even in the history of voting there would be a classificatory arbitrariness in defining civilizations in largely racial terms. In this way of looking at civilizational categories, no great difficulty is seen in considering the descendants of, say, Goths and Visigoths as proper inheritors of the Greek tradition ("they are all Europeans," we are told). But there is reluctance in taking note of the Greek intellectual links with other civilizations to the east or south of Greece, despite the greater interest that the Greeks themselves showed in talking to Iranians, or Indians, or Egyptians (rather than in chatting up the Ostrogoths).

Since traditions of public reasoning can be found in nearly all countries, modern democracy can build on the dialogic part of the common human inheritance. In his autobiography, Nelson Mandela describes how influenced he was, as a boy, by seeing the democratic nature of the proceedings of the meetings that were held in his home town: "Everyone who wanted to speak did so. It was democracy in its purest form. There may have been a hierarchy of importance among the speakers, but everyone was heard, chief and subject, warrior and medicine man, shopkeeper and farmer, landowner and laborer." Mr. Mandela could combine his modern ideas about democracy with emphasizing the supportive part of the native tradition, in a way that Gandhi had done in India, and that is the way cultures adapt and develop to respond to modernity. Mr. Mandela's quest for democracy and freedom did not emerge from any Western "imposition."

Similarly, the history of Muslims includes a variety of traditions, not all of which are just religious or "Islamic" in any obvious sense. The work of Arab and Iranian mathematicians, from the eighth century onward reflects a largely nonreligious tradition. Depending on politics, which varied between one Muslim ruler and another, there is also quite a history of tolerance and of public discussion, on which the pursuit of a modern democracy can draw. For example, the emperor Saladin, who fought valiantly for Islam in the Crusades in the 12th century,

could offer, without any contradiction, an honored place in his Egyptian royal court to Maimonides, as that distinguished Jewish philosopher fled an intolerant Europe. When, at the turn of the 16th century, the heretic Giordano Bruno was burned at the stake in Campo dei Fiori in Rome, the Great Mughal emperor Akbar (who was born a Muslim and died a Muslim) had just finished, in Agra, his large project of legally codifying minority rights, including religious freedom for all, along with championing regular discussions between followers of Islam, Hinduism, Jainism, Judaism, Zoroastrianism and other beliefs (including atheism).

Cultural dynamics does not have to build something from absolutely nothing, nor need the future be rigidly tied to majoritarian beliefs today or the power of the contemporary orthodoxy. To see Iranian dissidents who want a fully democratic Iran not as Iranian advocates but as "ambassadors of Western values" would be to add insult to injury, aside from neglecting parts of Iranian history (including the practice of democracy in Susa or Shushan in southwest Iran 2,000 years ago). The diversity of the human past and the freedoms of the contemporary world give us much more choice than cultural determinists acknowledge. This is particularly important to emphasize since the illusion of cultural destiny can extract a heavy price in the continued impoverishment of human lives and liberties.

Mr. Sen, the 1998 Nobel laureate in economics, is the author of "Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny," published next week by Norton.

URL for this article:

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB114317114522207183.html>

Copyright 2006 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our [Subscriber Agreement](#) and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit www.djreprints.com.