

The Social Dimensions of Culture

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Contents

Culture has four social dimensions, which can lead to development

Culture first of all provides self-esteem

Culture is a selective mechanism for all kinds of external influences

Culture inspires strategies for resistance by creating a counterweight

Development must have a direction

Culture is, after all, the vitality, which provides *sense*

The subject/object culture

Further Information

Culture has four social dimensions, which can lead to development

Culture is a living thing, consisting of elements inherited from the past, outside influences, which have been embraced and new elements invented locally. Culture has an important role to play in society.

Culture first of all provides self-esteem

Self-esteem, whether it be personal or collective, is an essential precondition if culture is to flourish. Without a minimum consciousness of his or her values or abilities, without a quiet confidence in his or her own resources and means, the individual remains static and muted, both metaphorical, and occasionally in the literal sense. Paulo Freire has analysed this *culture of silence*, which is a characteristic of societies, which have grown dependent and inarticulate. This silence, this apathy, is a specific result of the loss of a sense of society's self-esteem. If it is told incessantly that it is backward, ignorant, incapable, uncompetitive, lazy, marginal, underdeveloped and outdated, the population finally internalises this message and behaves in conformity with this negative image. Affirming its value and potential opens a society to creativity and action.

Culture is a selective mechanism for all kinds of external influences

The ability to select outside influences, to make a choice, is extremely important. Every community must be able to make a free choice between what it considers to be useful and beneficial and what it considers to be superfluous and harmful. This is equally true of the cultural elements inherited from the past. The past heritage is ambiguous; it may be harmful. It is for this reason that the inhabitants of isolated villages often have only one concern – to jettison a culture, which they associate with a past filled with isolation, discomfort, deprivation and humiliation. They aspire to greater material welfare. Who can blame them for this?

The ability to stand up to cultural imperialism or the harmful elements of the past, the ability to select, is determined by culture. It is culture, which contains these values and determines the priorities; it is also culture, which directs the choices in accordance with these priorities.

Culture inspires strategies for resistance by creating a counterweight

Resistance to everything, which is imposed from outside and which is considered to be damaging and unacceptable, is an essential element for harmonious development of every community. After selecting everything, which can be usefully adopted and earmarking the harmful elements for rejection, a strategy of resistance has to be organised. If this is not done, power politics mean that a society will rapidly be overrun by unwanted elements, and finally will passively or unconsciously accept them.

So resistance is to be advised. It should not condemn a region to remaining a fruitlessly isolated community or an outdated backwater – a dream for the city-dweller, but unacceptable to the rural population. Once more, only a strong, confident culture can assess the advantages and the disadvantages, can weigh up the benefits of an immediate financial profit against long-term consistency and a lifestyle open to the outside world. This is a difficult choice; in the final analysis, no magic formula or expert opinion can act as substitute for the judgement of those involved; but if they want to be capable of judging and acting according to this value judgement, they must have a living cultural identity. Culture is primarily a force, which provides direction.

Development must have a direction

Making sense of what one does is of primary importance. Development must have a direction. In every process of social change, economic shift and general development, we must be able to keep to the same course if we do not want to be swept away by different events and pressures. In several European languages, the word *sense* means both *deep significance and direction*.

Culture is, after all, the vitality, which provides *sense*

This is exactly what this means; on the one hand attaching appropriate importance to the values which make us do what is *sensible* – that is, full of good sense, and on the other hand, orientation towards the future, progress in a given direction. The faculty of providing direction for what one undertakes is unique to man. This faculty presupposes some kind of self-esteem and the capacity for selection and resistance as mentioned above, but it is far more than this. It is closely allied to life and the joy of living. Culture is, after all, the vitality, which provides *sense*. In this regard its symbolic dimension (values, spirituality, etc) plays a crucial role. This search for sense is not only an individual activity. It is also collective and encroaches on the political: co-existing, social relationships, which in this time of fragmentation and change are often of a new kind, or need to be re-established.

The subject/object culture

When Ricardo Petrella, a senior European Commission civil servant stressed in the October 1993 edition of the magazine *Economie et Humanisme* the necessity of providing direction for our societies, he wrote that it fundamentally concerns cultural development.

*“ To a certain extent it means passing from an **object culture** (building more houses, infrastructure, roads, machinery, ferrying and transporting more passengers, goods, capital, etc), which has been given priority over the last 30 to 40 years to a **subject culture** (developing links for co-existing, the search for quality of life) ”*

This subject/object culture distinction has to be looked at individually for each intervention. This is why the methodology behind the intervention is at least as important as the intervention itself; it is this on which the real *cultural* nature of the intervention depends:

*the capacity to make it catch fire under the ashes of passiveness and resignation, **the glowing embers.***

Further Information

This article was largely inspired from a presentation made by the author at the European LEADER seminar on *Cultures and Development*, held in Molinos, Aragon, Spain in June 1994.

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