

On the return of the 'civilizing project'

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Abstract (Document Summary)

Shweder comments on the return of the "civilizing project." "Civilizing project" was used to justify European interventions in foreign lands in the last heyday of Western initiated globalization and Empire Building (roughly 1870-1914).

The ranking of cultures, civilizations, and religions from better to worse may have gone out of fashion among academic anthropologists long ago, but such thinking is back, with a vengeance, and in some pretty fancy places. An "evolutionary" or "developmental" view of culture, reminiscent of the idea of the "11 civilizing project" that was used to justify European interventions in foreign lands in the last heyday of Western initiated globalization and Empire Building (roughly 1870 - 1914), has returned to the intellectual scene. And it is being used, once again, to classify as "backward," "unenlightened," or "insufferable" the beliefs and practices of other groups, nations, and even whole civilizations.

Consider, for example, events at two recent World Bank meetings, the first called "Culture Counts" and the second called "Gender and Justice in Africa."

"Culture Counts" was a large international gathering held at the end of the last millennium in Florence, Italy. Although there were speeches by First Lady Hillary Clinton and the President of the World Bank, the intellectual highlight was the plenary academic session, which featured a keynote address by a prominent American economic historian. He reported on the last thousand years of what he presumed to be the universal race among nations to get rich and explained why cultural inheritance makes all the difference for whether a country is rich or poor.

China was probably leading the race one thousand years ago, he supposed, but they inherited too many xenophobic beliefs from their ancestors and didn't want to trade with outsiders. So the Chinese fell behind and didn't get a ship to the Atlantic Ocean until well into the nineteenth century. The keynote speaker then took the audience on an economic and cultural tour of the rest of the world. Culture counts everywhere, he said. In Latin America they have this attitude called "machismo"; so Latin men think they are little princes and don't want to work. In Africa, okay yes the physical environment is not very good, but they fight all the time and they beat their wives. And then there is Southern Europe, where there is pious devotion to Catholicism. The Catholic Church turned against Galileo and science. So Southern Europeans fell into ignorance and superstition. But now we have reached the year 2000. Look around! North Americans and Northern Europeans have won the race, and for good cultural reasons, the American exclaimed. Even before he could fully deliver his take-home message ("Get with the progressive program: Westernize your culture, model yourself after us, or remain poor!") the Chinese delegate to the meeting had walked out of the room.

The second meeting, on "Gender and Justice in Africa," was held at World Bank central in Washington, D.C., with satellite links to audiences in several African countries. A prominent Western liberal feminist, who apparently believes that progressive social change requires that the sisters of the world unite in opposition to a loathsome and oppressive universal patriarchy, delivered the following message to a predominately African female audience. Stop complaining about colonialism, she said. African traditions and customs were bad for women long before colonialism came along. She then referred to a sensational literary account of wife beating. As it turned out, the "sisters" in the audience were mainly united in opposition to what they perceived as the speaker's neo-colonial attitudes, and all-too-familiar and highminded first world missionary zeal. They certainly had some complaints about their men. But they still viewed them as members of the family and generally felt at home with them in their traditions. And they actually thought African females were pretty powerful, in their own way.

It is not surprising that for an American anthropologist of my generation the meetings I just described evoked a sense of *deja vu*. Most American anthropologists who came of age in the postcolonial period learned about cultural development and the idea that "the West is best" in their history of anthropology books, typically in a chapter about regrettable European theories of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Those theories were premised on the idea that all cultures or societies could be ranked or placed in stages, from low to high, from savage to civilized, from primitive to modern, from backward to advanced, culminating in the way of life of the English, the French, or the Germans. Associated with late-nineteenth-century cultural evolutionary theories was the civilizing project, known as the "White Man's Burden" (although, then as now, it was understood to be a white woman's burden too). It was assumed that the citizens of Europe had a moral obligation to enlighten, develop, and transform those who lived in backward, primitive, or "dark age" societies.

In those days the imperial liberal aim was to promote universal progress, which was associated with Northern European sensibilities and English (or French, or German) conceptions of an orderly society. In our own day, the gold standard for defining progress is often, if only implicitly, the United States - our wealth and free enterprise, our democratic form of government, our dedication to work, and our ideas about gender, sexuality, marriage, and the family. Otherwise, not much has changed: today, as in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, prominent Western scholars trumpet the superiority of our way of life; and today, as then, Western newspapers print sensationalized stories about barbaric practices in foreign lands.

"Afghan women face the world!" ran one recent headline. The implication was that our own local cultural standards for "normal" modes of communication, social affiliation, and face-to-face contact provide the essential yardstick for measuring human progress and defining what all men and women must "naturally" want to do. The implication was that veiling in the Islamic world is a backward practice, that it is widely experienced as oppressive. That implication will certainly come as a surprise to many Islamic women, for whom the head scarf or the veil conveys a sense of dignified modesty, control, self-respect, civility, and a local socially endorsed conception of proper sex identity, gender relationships, and expressive signaling. That may be one reason that the burkha preceded the Taliban and is probably going to long survive the fall of Kandahar.

For much of the twentieth century, an introductory course in cultural anthropology, or at least its Platonic ideal, was meant to be an antidote to precisely that type of ethnocentric "up-from-barbarism," "we're developed/you're not" thinking. The aim of such a course, which might be called "Anthropology 101," was to enlarge the scope of our understanding of, appreciation of, and toleration for cultural differences. Its main message was this. Many things we take for granted as natural or divinely given or logically necessary or practically indispensable for life in an orderly, safe, and morally decent society are neither natural, nor divinely given, nor logically necessary, nor practically indispensable for life in an orderly, safe, and morally decent society. They are products of a local history. They are ways of seeing and being in the world which lend meaning and value to our own form of life. But they are not the only ways to construct a rational, worthy, and practically efficient way of life. They are matters of opinion, not absolute truth. They are discretionary forms, not mandatory ones. Nature and reason leave plenty of room for cultural variety, and we should too.

Of course, any intellectual approach that seriously challenges ethnocentrism is liable sometimes to produce highly controversial results. There would be little courage in the conviction that there is more than one way to construct a rational and morally decent way of life if such an attitude amounted to no more than a toleration or taste for each other's foods and festivities. As a thought experiment, consider a potentially uncomfortable example: the practice of polygamy.

In light of the renewal of cultural developmental thinking, "polygamy" is once again receiving attention as a putative barbaric practice, the kind of thing done by savages and those with a "traditional" (read "underdeveloped" or "not yet sufficiently modern") culture. I say "once again" because one is reminded of the great nineteenth-century polygamy debate in the USA. Despite the fact that there is a good deal of precedent for polygamy in the Bible, Mormons in the territory of Utah came under the gaze of that era's civilizing project and were forced out of their religiously based marriage customs through legal sanctions.

In 1878 (*Reynolds v. United States*, 98 U.S. 145) the United States Supreme Court was asked to decide whether a law prohibiting polygamy was constitutionally permissible, since it might appear to place a burden on the "free exercise of religion" by Mormons. The Court, in its wisdom, set out to define the limits on the coercive powers of the State, stating that "Congress was deprived of all legislative power over mere opinion, but was left free to reach actions which were in violation of social duties or subversive of good order." That statement, of course, raises more questions than it answers. Is a cultural preference for monogamy over polygamy, even when expressed in conduct, more than a matter of opinion? Is polygamy really subversive of social order? Are there in fact transcendental values or natural social duties that demand that kinship and family life must be organized solely around heterosexual monogamous family units?

Although no hard evidence was presented, the Court answered those questions in cultural developmental terms. They assumed that polygamy must be vicious and harmful to women and children and alien to the way of life of a civilized nation. They wrote, "Polygamy has always been odious among the northern and western nations of Europe, and, until the establishment of the Mormon Church, was almost exclusively a feature of the life of Asiatic and of African people." Whether they were right or wrong about the actual distribution of permissible polygamy among the cultures of the world, it seems apparent that the judges were implying more than just "that's the way we [the descendants of Northern and Western Europeans] do it here, so you must too." They were aware that on a world scale there is little agreement among the many cultures of the world about the single best way to organize kinship, marriage, and family life. Yet the existence of cultural diversity did not lead them to view their own preference for monogamous marriages as a matter of opinion or local cultural taste. Why? In part because they ranked the "Northern and Western nations of Europe" high in the evolutionary hierarchy of cultures and presupposed the superiority of European cultures at discovering moral truth.

What would Anthropology have to say about the issue? How would it complicate our evaluation of the case? In fact, as anthropologists who study kinship have long known, polygamy per se is not subversive of social order. Typically in "polygamous societies" the vast majority of marriages are monogamous, and the two forms of marriage have peacefully coexisted in almost every society where

polygamy has been socially acceptable. Very many cultures of the world have found polygamy socially acceptable. In all such cultures there are healthy, happy, and socially dutiful people who have grown up or lived in polygamous households, including Mormon children prior to 1878. Indeed, it is rather doubtful that the likelihood of being healthy, happy, and socially dutiful in life actually turns on a family life issue of this type.

Polygamy may seem an exotic topic, but it is not just of historical or academic interest. In contemporary India, ever since the time of independence from British rule, civil order has in fact been enhanced (rather than disrupted) by allowing the large Muslim minority population the right to their own marriage laws permissive of polygamous marriages. Yet there is vocal opposition to this accommodation by liberal feminists and anti-Muslim Hindu fundamentalists (strange bedfellows indeed). In South Africa, where local ethnic group customs permissive of polygamy survived through the repressive years of the Apartheid regime, there are ongoing imperial liberal attempts to "progressively" reform society by mandating monogamy, although there is resistance as well, in the name of the "right to culture." It remains to be seen whether the contemporary leaders of Asia and Africa will now embrace the cultural preferences of "the Northern and Western nations of Europe" and react to the practices of their own ancestors as "odious." It would be ironic indeed if the "white man's burden" to eradicate polygamy from the world not only returned but was embraced by the cosmopolitan African elite.

Undoubtedly it was naive of American anthropologists to imagine that the civilizing project was an obsolete ideology associated only with the imperial liberalism of the late nineteenth century. The intellectual roots of the idea of progressive universal development run deep, and may even gain some force from the popular "Enlightenment" tale about the emergence of modern secular society in the West. The "Enlightenment" is a powerful myth about origins, much like the stories in the Bible and other sacred texts.

As the conventional story goes, once upon a time the West slumbered in intellectual darkness. Then about three hundred years ago, starting in countries like England and France, a great awakening occurred, as inquiring European minds became ever more rational, ever more able to know the truth about nature and human beings. As a result, "religion" (superstition, fantasy, ignorance, subjectivity) gave way to "science" (fact, education, objectivity, reason). Parochial group allegiances gave way to humanism, cosmopolitanism, and individualism. Hierarchical structures and topdown command systems gave way to autonomous structures. Church was separated from state, politics from science, power from truth.

For those who are secular missionaries, the "Enlightenment" story thus provides a charter for how to remake society and better the world in the image of the West. For those who are more theologically inclined, the idea that God blesses cultures in the sign of their prosperity now serves to justify the same mission. Either way, with the end of the Cold War, the temptation in the "West" to engage in "Enlightened" interventions into other peoples' ways of life has become irresistible, once again. Indeed, the "West" and its prophets of progressive universal development are in a better position to have their way than any time since just before the outbreak of World War I.

Only time will tell whether intellectual history is repeating itself. One now looks to the heirs of twentieth-century cultural anthropology to join in a debate about the idea of progress and its implications for cultural diversity. One looks for rigorous and informed critiques of current developmental stories linking culture and economy, which tell a different or more complex tale about why some nations are rich and others poor.

Above all, one looks to pluralists of all kinds to teach us how to admire (and feel at home in) our own way of life without implying that it is the only kind that is worth living.

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