

## **CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT INFORMATION AND KNOWLEDGE**

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**Keywords:** Culture, deculturation, ethnic identity, indigenous peoples, informal economy, local knowledge, multi-cultural societies, north-south, progress, self-determination, tradition.

### **Contents**

1. Introduction: Culture and Development
2. Land, Labour Power and Economic Progress in the “West”
3. Doubts about “Development” as the Universal Destiny of Humanity
4. Culture and the “Informal”
5. Outlook: Hopes for Humanity

Glossary

Bibliography

Biographical Sketches

### **Summary**

For some analysts, “local cultures” have been seen as an obstacle to or a brake on development. Others want to see cultural identity and solidarity as a social capital, and as such, a resource for development, above all for locally based development. Others again, less blasé about prospects of reconciling such radically divergent modes of being and doing, go as far as to denounce prevailing development discourses, including “sustainable development,” as being “anti-culture” or, at least, an (inadvertent?) aggression of the West against other cultures. This article discusses these three contrasting positions on the place of “culture” in the modern development process. Each of these points of view has their specific justifications. However, the different justifications, each operating at its distinct level of diagnosis, are all highly value-loaded. This is brought out through a brief reflection on the conceptions of nature and economy that underlie the prevailing concepts of “development” rooted in the West (Section 2 and Section 3), some of the weak points or contradictions manifest in this Western forward march which have provoked debate about “alternatives to development” (Section 4), and finally, a discussion of the phenomenon of “the informal” as a possible expression of permanent cultural diversity. It is concluded (Section 5) that despite the powerful homogenizing force of “globalization,” cultural and social diversity seems unlikely to disappear. The divergences of perspective over the status of culture in relation to development information will also remain visible and controversial for as long as “development” keeps its place under the sun.

## 1. Introduction: Culture and Development

Western society, with its project of limitless technological prowess, has embarked all peoples on a scary adventure, a perpetual confrontation with the unknown—a duel that is always potentially to the death, with dangers both hidden in nature and engendered by human imagination. As New Zealand poet Ruth Dallas evokes, in *Beating the Drum*:

....  
We have left the tree and waterhole  
For a wilderness of stars.  
Round the sun and round and round.

....  
The rose is shaken in the wind  
Round the sun  
The petals fall  
And round the sun and round.

Karl Marx once said, famously, that “intellectual production changes its character in proportion as material production is changed.” One of his meanings was that the accepted ideas of any period and place, tended to be singularly those that serve ruling elites and dominant economic interests. A second and deeper meaning is also important. This is the coevolution of the material conditions of a society with a society’s self-conception—that is, its belief and value systems, its guiding metaphysics, its conceptions of nature and human nature, and so on.

Culture is a word with many different usages. It can mean leisure and recreational activities, such as going to the cinema. It can mean the rules guiding the behavior and outlook of workers in a factory or a public institution, as in “corporate culture.” More deeply, culture is the whole body of conventions, symbolic expressions, religious and political institutional, metaphysical and cosmological frameworks by which a social group defines itself and the meaning of human life in the world.

The term “development” has been in widespread currency, in its current socioeconomic context, for less than a century. At the end of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, it became common to refer to the challenge of opening up “undeveloped” regions of the world, meaning colonization and the exploitation of land or other resources that were as yet untapped. It was not until after the Second World War that the term “development” came widely to be used for whole societies, and in particular for newly existent nations. As the post-World War II process of decolonization by European imperial powers progressed, it was remarkable to observe how societies that had known hundreds (and sometimes thousands) of years of high civilization, suddenly found themselves in a state of economic “underdevelopment.” They were “lagging behind,” they had to “catch up.”

A rich culture, apparently, does not stop a people from being “backward” in economic terms. But this raises an important question, who decides the terms on which forward or backward, advanced or primitive states, are judged? What are the specific “cultural” premises or value judgments, underlying the dominant practices and conceptions of economic development?

All societies act to transform their world. Technology and know-how can broadly be spoken of as the range of a society's capacities for acting in the material world and for members of the society to interact with each other. But how societies conceptualize technology, what meanings and purposes they attribute to the transformation of nature, varies with a people's culture. What a society takes to be its "economic problem," and the terms in which it will be addressed, is defined in and through culture.

Following the argument of French philosopher Castoriadis (*L'Institution Imaginaire de la Société* 1975), each society constructs or creates its distinctive meaning-filled universe; this is "*The Imaginary Institution of Society*." Society functions through the institution of a world of significations. This is true of fundamental features of human life, such as the meanings attached to birth and death (concepts of the soul, of the afterlife, or reincarnation, and so on), and the way that a person finds their place within a collectivity.

Social life in a great many societies is structured (as can still often be observed) by notions of extended reciprocity, linking individuals and tribes, the human and the natural world, the past and the present, living and the dead (and so on). Take the Nemadi, a nomadic tribe of the SubSahara who hunted antelope, using knives and dogs. The antelope herds are by now decimated, due to the inroads of tourist sport and hunting for commercial gain with Land Rovers and long-range rifles. Hunting is now outlawed, and the outlawing includes to the remaining Nemadi as well. In the old way, dogs would be used to seize the prey, and then a single knife thrust accompanied by a prayer making atonement to the antelope for the killing. Since the soul of the dead beast was supposed to reside in its bones, these were buried with care, to avoid the dogs defiling them.

Hunting, for the Nemadi, is a social relationship. It depended on proper protocols and maintaining a proper relationship, as with friends. Take another example, the New Zealand Maori, a Polynesian people, for whom reciprocity is encapsulated in *mana*, *hau* and *utu*. Gift-exchange between individuals and tribal groups applied also to relationships between human society and the nonhuman world of plant and animal life, the land and sea. Gifts are given to visitors; and to the hosts of a visit; these are examples of the *koha*, the reciprocal gift, still widely practiced, for example at a *tangi* (funeral rite and mourning), or made to those hosting a *hui* (meeting of any sort). They were made in return for specialist services; and to workers who helped on projects such as a meeting-house or war canoe. This research of a sustained and sustaining reciprocity may be understood as any and all of:

- (i) a matter of pride or pleasure;
- (ii) in ethical terms, a matter of maintaining proper relations with other social groups and with the nonhuman world through responding to an obligation of an active and incessant reciprocity;
- (iii) in magical terms, an attempted seduction or propitiation of an other party in a problematical reciprocal exchange;
- (iv) in a social control sense, via the supernatural, it may be retribution, for example by the gods through *tapu* or by *makutu*, for a theft, stupidity, injury, insult, or overture spurned; and

- (v) in all respects, a process of challenge and counter-challenge or duel (sometimes amorous, good-natured, sometimes fearful and mortal).

A magical interaction binds and trammels the parties together, in a web of hopes, fears, obligations, and also of magical affinities (often backed up by threats of *makutu* (sorcery). If a coexistence is to be maintained, the receiver must become in turn the donor, passing the gift on, so that the cycles are always continued and renewed. There is a famous description by a Maori elder (Tamati Ranapiri) of the *hau ngaherehere* (the *hau* of the forest). Maori custom dictated that, in a hunting expedition, the successful hunter should throw away the first bird as an offering to the *mauri* (life-force) of the forest; and then also, when they returned from the expedition, some portion of the catch would be sacrificed (cooked ritually and returned) back to the forest. These returns are the *hau ngaherehere*; the ceremony of sacrifice is the *whaangai hau*. The symbolic returns, counter-gifts, are said to ensure the continuing fecundity of the forest, and hence future success.

How, in modern development, can these notions of friendship in the natural world, of magical efficacy, and these practices and precepts of reciprocity be integrated? What is the place in the modern world for these dimensions of symbolic and social relations? In the not so distant past, so-called animalistic superstitions and pagan practices were seen as irrational, needing to be repressed if not exorcised, so as to permit civilization to take its rightful place. Yet it is still widespread to make appeal to customary practices of so-called nonindustrial peoples, in order to give guidance and hope for a respectful, precautionary and sustainable stewardship of the planet's common resources. What should be made of this? As argued by Latouche (1993) in *La Planète des Naufragés*:

One can of course proclaim that from now on, development means the opposite of what it used to. For example, if one proclaims that "good development is primarily putting value on what one's forebears did and being rooted in a culture," it amounts to defining a word by its opposite. Development has been and still is primarily an uprooting. One might, similarly, decree that the bloodiest dictatorship be called a democracy, even a popular democracy. This wouldn't prevent the people from clamouring for the reality of a democracy. By the same token, enunciating "good development" will unfortunately not prevent the techno-economic dynamism relayed by the national authorities and by most NGOs, from uprooting people and plunging them into the dereliction of shantytowns.

The opening up of "undeveloped" regions to world markets, the introduction of new techniques and commodities, has often resulted in a dramatic loss of access of an individual or people to their preexisting symbolic and social resources permitting knowledge of and affirmation of a culturally defined identity. The development process has been experienced by many peoples as much more a force of deculturation than a creative one.

Does this mean that "development" should, therefore, be resisted, in the name of some sort of cultural integrity? Does it mean, on the contrary, that loss of cultural heritage should be accepted as an inevitable price of progress? In the 1950s, respectable development theorists such as Lewis established models that portrayed the progressive

induction of rural “traditional” populations into the workforces of the expanding “modern” sectors of manufacture and services (Lewis 1954). Rostow, in 1960, writing as an advisor to the Kennedy Presidency at the time of heightened Cold War tensions, gave a grandiose rendering of the five *Stages of Economic Growth*, an unabashed “non-communist manifesto,” that portrayed backwards peoples moving from the Stone Age, to first perspectives on capital accumulation, through to the earthly paradise of mass consumption.

Some analysts during this period went as far as diagnosing the “backwards mentalities” of the peoples of nonindustrial societies as being one of the single great obstructions to development. What was needed, perhaps sadly but inevitably, was to wipe the cultural slate clean and instill “progressive” mentalities.

Notwithstanding, there are many currently who want to see cultural identity and solidarity as a “social capital,” and as such, a resource for development—above all for locally-based development. But, is it not more convincing, if cultural integrity and diversity of peoples is to be affirmed, to denounce the prevailing development discourses as being, themselves, an expression of a specific cultural tradition—Western culture—rooted in a particular history and with a particular coevolution of mentalities, technologies, political institutions, and environmental and economic circumstances? Then at least the question of coexistence, of authentic cultural diversity can be properly posed.

There is an irresolvable tension between the affirmation of universal values (such as respect for an innocent life, or outlawing of torture) and the admission that if one is to speak of respect for diversity of culture, the sole pertinent manner for judging the qualities of a culture is to evaluate its capacity to surmount the crises as they are defined from within.

Although there may be strong convictions about universal values such as “human rights,” it remains nonetheless that most collective survival and well-being problems are culturally constructed. Castoriadis (1975) affirms: “What, for a particular society, constitutes a general problematic at some level of concreteness, is inseparable from the society’s general manner of being, from the sense that the world has been invested with, and the place the problematic holds in this world...”

It is certain that it is not possible to escape from these basic contradictions. This is why a brief reflection is included here on some specificities of Western culture as it underpins the dominant conceptions of development—notably the conceptions of nature, progress and wealth. From this backdrop, it is then possible to set into contrast the very great heterogeneity of individual and collective practices that are visible, notably, in the realms of what is currently called “informal” economic activity.

As to the place of “culture” in the modern development process, from the wide divergences that are thus brought into focus, what can be concluded? Probably that all these points of view have their specific justifications (and blind spots), and that any can be chosen—but not innocently, because the different justifications, each operating with its distinctive mode of diagnosis, are all value-loaded.

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### Biographical Sketches

**Prof. Martin Paul O'Connor** is from Christchurch, New Zealand, and studied physics and humanities in his native country and in Paris. After completing his Ph.D. in economics (*Time and Environment*) at the University of Auckland in New Zealand, he was for several years a Lecturer in Economics at the University of Auckland before taking up a professorial position at the University of Versailles St-Quentin-en-Yvelines (UVSQ) in Paris, in 1995. He has research degrees in physics, sociology and economics, and specializes in interdisciplinary work in ecological economics theory, development theory, environmental policy and social sciences epistemology. In New Zealand during the 1980s he was active in a range of critical and consulting studies including public policy, environmental and social impact assessments, energy and banking sector studies, in parallel to academic teaching and writing. Since 1995, as Project Manager at the C3ED (Centre d'Economie et d'Ethique pour l'Environnement et le Développement) research institute, he has participated in numerous French and European studies in the environmental valuation, green accounting, scenario studies, integrated assessment, risk and water governance fields. He is a member of the editorial advisory boards for the journals *Capitalism Nature Socialism (CNS)* and *Environmental Values*, and currently edits the interdisciplinary *International Journal of Water (IJW)*, published by Inderscience. With colleagues he is active in the development of international teaching networks, notably through the 3<sup>E</sup>-SDP (European Ecological Economics and Sustainable Development Policy) program including North-South cooperation.

**Serge Latouche** is from Paris, France and began his university career teaching economics, first in Zaire and subsequently in Laos during the 1960s. Subsequently he joined the faculty of the University of Science and Technology at Lille in northern France, where he continued to work on the critique of economic development theory and practice. Since 1991 he has been Professor of Economics at the Université de Paris-Sud. He lives in Paris and travels widely in Africa and Europe, where he has contributed significantly to international networks of critical reflection about the ideological underpinnings and ethnocentrism of “development” as a Western cultural program. Recent works including *L'Occidentalisation du Monde* (1989, English translation as *The Westernisation of the World*, also translated in several other languages), *La Planète des Naufragés* (1991, English translation as *In the Wake of the Grand Society*) and *L'Autre Afrique* (1998) focus particularly on the phenomenon of the “informal economy” in African societies and the lessons that might be drawn for hopes of humane societies outside of or “after” Western modernity.