

## REFERENCE

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**Culture and Public Action**, edited by Vijayendra Rao and Michael Walton. 2004. Stanford, California: Stanford Social Sciences, an imprint of Stanford University Press, for the World Bank. 442 + xv. ISBN 0-8047-4786-5, cloth, \$60; ISBN 0-8047-4787-3, paper, \$22.95.

Rao and Walton's collection has contributions from prominent economists, anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, and development practitioners and is a timely and welcome addition to the literature on development studies. It provides academics, students, and development policymakers alike with some much-needed answers and clarifications about how culture and public participation relate to development.

The collection is built around an unlikely alliance of economists (some of whom, including the editors, work for the World Bank) and scholars from other disciplines who are often keen on criticizing economists' general lack of concern and understanding with the ways cultural processes influence economic development. On the matter of the relation between culture and development, Rao and Walton set out to find a middle ground between two extreme positions. Above all, they disagree with what they term the "hypermodernist perspective" that suggests that certain kinds of culture in certain places (e.g., "traditional" cultures in countries in sub-Saharan Africa) are not suited to "development" and thus must be modified in order for growth to take place. At the same time, they believe that the powerful cultural critique of development discourse and institutions (informed by poststructuralism and irritating to many an economist) does not leave much room for designing effective development initiatives and constructive policy. They recognize and acknowledge these tensions explicitly, and they seek to build on such disagreements proactively as a way to move development studies and policy forward. The result is a collection of essays that, even though at times it seems uneven in its treatment of certain topics (the editors acknowledge it does not give sufficient attention to globalization and the relation between culture and economic growth), in the end provides the reader with some novel development policy solutions and a few important lessons about the value of cross-disciplinary and theoretical synthesis.

The book includes 16 essays on diverse topics ranging from the economic value of cultural goods (Arjo Klamer, Chapter 7) to the role of culture in participatory development (Sabina Alkire, Chapter 9) to the policy implications of analyzing the HIV/AIDS pandemic through a cultural perspective (Carol Jenkins, Chapter 12). Such diverse topics are united by the overall goal of the collection, which is to explain how public participation can be harnessed effectively to alleviate poverty and inequality around the world. While notions of "bottom-up" and grassroots development that actively involve people are certainly not new to development studies, the significant difference in this collection is the authors' claim that *effective* public action in the development process depends on proactively harnessing cultural dynamics.

Key to the collection is a well-developed conceptual elaboration of the connections between culture and public action, which appears in the opening chapter and is then revisited and re-elaborated to different extents by the authors throughout the book.

The book embraces a *relational* definition of culture, and Rao and Walton firmly argue against seeing culture as a fixed “thing” or a “variable” that determines behaviors and, hence, development outcomes. Rather, they conceptualize culture as a dynamic process and a relational achievement among individuals and groups and between ideas and perspectives. Because the authors define culture as being concerned with identities and practices, they believe that it can be harnessed for positive social and economic transformation through the building of collective aspirations. Throughout the collection, there are different reports of organized collective action as examples of the harnessing of culture to influence public participation and hence development.

The editors’ relational definition of culture and the cultural approach to development is informed by Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital and by Amartya Sen’s capabilities framework. Sen himself elaborates eloquently on the issue of culture and development in Chapter 2. There, he answers two questions: How does culture matter to development? and, equally importantly, How doesn’t it matter? As an answer to the first question, Sen details the many different dimensions of culture that are relevant to development, from cultures of behavior and economically remunerative cultural activities and objects to cultural and political participation and solidarity and association. In answering the second question, he comes out firmly against cultural determinism, cultural prejudice, and the hypermodernist perspective that Rao and Walton also condemn in the opening chapter. At the same time, Sen addresses the issue of cultural globalization and cautions against uncritically defending retreats to “the local” and those arguments that suggest that people should “stick to their own culture” as a way to challenge globalization. He labels those positions fundamentalist and antidemocratic. As he explains, following this logic means not only rejecting McDonald’s but also the plays of Shakespeare—even if people want to enjoy them. In the end, he argues that culture “is more than mere geography” (p. 55) and that culture should be defined by people using and enjoying what they choose to use and enjoy. The challenge for development, then, is to give people access to elementary capabilities such as reading and writing, being well informed, and having real chances of participating actively in society.

Rao and Walton agree with Sen’s capabilities approach, but they also acknowledge that there is nothing necessarily positive about the capabilities that people have—because those capabilities can be used to reproduce inequalities and further discrimination. However, they remain highly optimistic about the possibility of harnessing cultural processes to improve development effectiveness. In order for that to happen, they argue that what is needed is to achieve “equality of agency”: beyond providing access to human and physical capital, people should have equal access to cultural and social capital. As culture is understood in relational ways, from a normative development perspective, equality of agency means “. . . moving from a focus on individuals to a recognition that . . . group based phenomena shape and influence individual aspirations, [and] capabilities” (Rao and Walton, p. 30).

In Chapter 3, Arjun Appadurai adds more weight to this argument by suggesting that a normative focus of development practice should be to help people understand and agree with each other, to exercise their voice, and to “debate, contest and oppose vital directives for collective social life as they wish” (p. 66). Appadurai defines this process as the “capacity to aspire” (p. 64) and sees it as one of the most important dimensions of the relation between culture and public participation. According to him, it is only by encouraging people’s capacity to aspire and the ability to achieve cultural consensus that the poor will be able to advance their own collective interests.

The book contains several examples of effective development interventions that were informed by such a relational approach, relied on more group-based actions, and depended on a deep understanding of local cultural processes. For example, Rao and Walton offer the mobilization of sex workers for HIV/AIDS intervention in India as a successful example of how a cultural lens improved development effectiveness. Appadurai's colorful account of how a pro-poor activist movement in Mumbai has worked to improve living conditions for thousands of people, by focusing on the construction of public toilets and forcing World Bank and U.N. officials to recognize the merits of some of their activities, also does an excellent job of illustrating and deepening the gist of this collection's main argument. To add more empirical support to Rao and Walton's ideas, a case study by Simon Harragin (Chapter 14) demonstrates how the failure by relief organizations to understand local social structures in Sudan diminished the effectiveness of aid in the context of a famine. Another study of the emergence of the Mayan indigenous movement in Guatemala (Shelton Davis, Chapter 15) demonstrates that the increased visibility of the movement and its recognition in civil society were dependent not only on the mobilization of local cultural identities but also on the movement's dynamic relations with the state and other groups in civil society. Together, Harragin's and Davis's chapters further support the editors' call for the need to pay serious attention to local cultural practices in the development process. Simultaneously, they reinforce Rao and Walton's emphasis on the relational dimensions of culture and agency.

*Culture and Public Action* will satisfy readers at many different levels. For once, it is encouraging to see that a cross-disciplinary and open dialogue that seriously considers the cultural critique of development is occurring within the World Bank. At the same time, a great strength of the book is its normative tone, offering some conceptual advice that could have important policy implications. This is particularly important given that the poststructural critique of development discourse popular through the 1990s was unable to provide much in terms of practical policy implications. Finally, the editors should be commended for creating a well-balanced collection and for providing opening and concluding chapters that are not simply an introduction and summary but rather solid theoretical contributions that provide the reader with clear ideas about the different ways in which culture and public action are intimately related to the outcomes of development interventions.

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**Housing in the Twenty-First Century: Achieving Common Ground**, by Kent W. Colton. 2003. Wertheim Publications in Industrial Relations. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Wertheim Publications Committee of Harvard University, distributed by Harvard University Press. 506 + xx. ISBN 0-674-01093-0, \$39.50.

Over the last half century, America has achieved remarkable progress in housing conditions. There have been sharp declines in the proportion of dilapidated units, the proportion of units lacking basic plumbing and kitchen facilities, and in the incidence of overcrowding. Furthermore, the homeownership rate rose gradually during the 20th century, and as of 2001, more than two-thirds owned their own homes. Rises in homeownership have resulted from the introduction of Federal Housing Administration