

## **Culture and Sentiment: principles and practice in development**

This paper follows after a more thoroughly abstract theorisation of the relevance of cultural theory to the everyday business of social development. That essay, *Culture and Development* (available from ACOA), set itself four tasks, each vindicated by a theoretical excursus under the name of the relevant theorists.

The opening premise of the parent essay is that for some years now government agencies have been dismayed by the frequency of failure in their plans on behalf of peripheral regions with a long history of economic decline. The short list of guiding principles which follow is intended as no more than suggestive; about something as complicated as social development it is probable that we can never be right; in which case, it is best that from time to time we change our way of being wrong.

Policy failure has been put down to several causes. Economically backward areas teach resentment to those who live there. Local people exculpate themselves from blame for the mess things are in by cursing the obtuse bureaucrats from the metropolis who promise an unattainable future while doing nothing to restore the reassurance of the past. At the same time, the development agents themselves are strongly criticised by academic evaluators not only for the acute limitations of their models of implementation, but also for the suppressed content of the ideological-economic imperatives which drive them. They are accused of confining themselves strictly to the circle of those who think likewise; they know little of the people and the way of life whose public servants they are. Both sides, fairly enough, then reach for the concept of culture to explain what has gone wrong. The cultural assumptions of the élite are held responsible for their not understanding local people; the culture of the locals has prevented their taking the development opportunity, because it has taught only sullenness and mistrust of government.

'Culture' is then used as a catch-all with which to name insuperable difficulty. The following practical principles may help to make the concept useful and usable. To begin with, therefore, let us follow the great anthropologist Clifford Geertz when he defines culture as 'the ensemble of stories we tell ourselves about ourselves'.<sup>1</sup> That is to say, we inhabit the

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<sup>1</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture*, London: Hutchinson, 1975, p448, p452.

narratives of how to live which a given culture not only instructs us in by way of schooling and parenting, but also embodies in the roles it makes available - as father, mother, lover, child; client, authority, supplicant, victim; traditionalist, egalitarian, opportunist, isolate; and so on and on.

Everyone can recognise and respond to a story; the trick is to see how an entire collocation of such texts constitutes a distinctive culture, a whole way of life. Here another aphorism of Geertz's might help. Treating everyday social action as a story brings out its "use of emotion for cognitive ends". The habits of mind of the social sciences which have essentially shaped the forms of welfare and the administration of social development have taught that judgement should be detached from feeling, facts separated from personal values, and objectivity preferred to subjectivity. Perhaps the most important lesson in my present catalogue is that these precepts are impossible to follow.

## II

Our first principle is therefore to jettison the subjectivity-objectivity categories. Assorted philosophers have shown, as one of them, Hilary Putnam puts it,<sup>2</sup> "the entanglement of facts with values". This is clear from an example provided by a second philosopher, John Searle,<sup>3</sup> when he points out that the word 'poisonous' is plainly factual, but also carries with it the value of staying alive by avoiding poison. The objectivist always hopes to find a perfect correspondence between the bare words which describe the world, and the factual reality of the world out there. Putnam and company argue that it can't be done. What *can* be done is to use the inescapably social and interactive nature of human exchange ('intersubjective' in the jargon) in order to find workable agreement ('warranted assertability', also in the jargon).

The objectivist is always looking for "the view from nowhere",<sup>4</sup> a God-like perspective on humankind below. There is no such vantage point. All arguments have to be achieved from *somewhere*. Consequently, the invention of validating criteria of the kind supplied by evaluation procedures only have usefulness when they are situated in an open political argument. The preferable argumentative mode, and moreover the one most people use naturally, is *comparative*. We show each other in narrative form how one set of

<sup>2</sup> Hilary Putnam, *The Many Faces of Realism*, La Salle: Open Court Books, 1987, p129.

<sup>3</sup> John Searle, *Speech-Acts*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, chapter 8.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.

circumstances so conduces to an improvement in the quality of life that everyone agrees on a transition to the new way. No doubt such agreement may take a long time to win. I have in mind the establishment in Britain in 1948 of the National Health Service. It was passionately opposed by self-interest, snobbery and honest traditionalism, but no-one would now prefer a return to the doctor's panel, the pay-as-you-can principle, the old mixture of incoherence, improvisation, selflessness and arbitrary injustice. The new arrangements brought about, as Charles Taylor puts it, "an extension of our practical capabilities [and this] is a reliable criterion of increasing knowledge".<sup>5</sup> Now *that* really is a recognisable performance target.

In such comparative storytelling we grasp the possibility of social development by way of a narrative which frames and *comprehends* it (i.e. so enfolds the moral that we understand it).

### III

We comprehend by way of our sympathetic feeling for the story. It is thus that we "use our emotions for cognitive ends". This is therefore the moment for a short homily on the relevance of our feelings as development agents and theirs as the people being brought the new developments.

It is first important to note that in spite of our inordinate protectiveness towards our personal feelings as above all *ours* and therefore not subject to correction, we may obviously be wrong about what we think we feel and, no less obviously, may change our feelings for the better, having done which we may understand the world better.

Commonplace as all this sounds, it is quite usual for those whose job it is to treat other people as *cases* to forget it. The government agent in economic departments, like colleagues in hospitals, social security offices, clinics, jails, police stations and schools, is liable to treat others not in terms of ordinary human dimensions, but as *policy objects*, to be treated with a special kind of objectivity of attitude which suspends the normal rules of moral encounters.<sup>6</sup> Consistently to treat others with the detachment of social scientific or official objectivity is to

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<sup>5</sup> Charles Taylor, 'History, comparison, truth' in his *Philosophical Argument*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1995.

<sup>6</sup> I take this argument from Peter Strawson, 'Freedom and resentment' in his *Studies in the Philosophy of Thought and Action*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968, pp84ff.

make enemies of those so treated, to remove from them the attribution of moral responsibility, and certain to cause resentment and even hatred in the other person.

If feelings are spontaneous and changeable, how shall we know which bring out the best in both us and them? The answer is that we don't know, but given that our feelings order and make sense of the experiences we are living through, then when doing one's best to explain and implement policy, those feelings will serve that best which approximate to the old nursery ideal of *loving-kindness*. It is a truism to say that we most fully understand human predicaments with as inclusive, patient and intelligent a play of our finest feelings and moral sympathy as possible, isn't it? Very well, let us try it. The interpretation of narratives needs must be ventured upon by our best selves - which is *not* to commend pious self-abnegation, or to pretend that implementing policy can be practised without a due show of exasperated frustration, rage, boredom or any other feeling proper to the situation. In short, the passions are as much part of the momentum of public life as the so-called objectivity, let alone the expediency, which get the money.

It may be a useful illustration of the involuntary necessity to drop the stance of objectivity even in relationships such as those between psychiatrist and patient to recall a dramatic moment from that excellent film *Ordinary People*, made by Robert Redford some years ago. The psychiatrist is treating the sixteen-year-old boy, victim of a psychopathic depression brought on by the drowning of his older brother in a boating accident he himself survived. Pressed hard and painfully by the psychiatrist, the boy (who is very bright) wards off one question impertinently, 'you're the doctor'. His analyst is immediately and rightly angry. "Don't trade one-liners with me!" He has observed the moral rule to treat his patient as morally responsible.

Adopting the objective attitude to another human being, Strawson says, 'is to see him ... as an object of social policy' and yet, he goes on, 'we cannot, as we are, seriously envisage ourselves adopting a thoroughgoing objectivity of attitude to others as a result of theoretical conviction ...'<sup>7</sup> The potential range of all our moral sentiments only comes into play when we are actively engaged in social intercourse. That full range may include what psychobabble requires us to put down in our caseworking as unhelpful, dysfunctional, or judgemental. As Michael Frayn immortalized it,

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<sup>7</sup> Strason (1968) p79, p83.

... the ultimate aim of the caseworker must not be to casework at all, but to get his cases to face up to caseworking themselves. [The] vision [is] of the caseworker as becoming increasingly abstract, first not commenting, then not even uttering sympathetic noises, finally not even listening, merely a benign presence disposing to good.<sup>8</sup>

This is the celestial and highmindedly useless version of the objective attitude. The actual participant, however observant, will and should be as subject as her interlocutors to the passions, even the vehement ones listed in Descartes' great essay:<sup>9</sup> wonder, love, hatred, desire, joy, sadness. The conscientious development bureaucrat, posted to the seafront in Portstewart, to Cape Breton, Karratha, Sichnan province, Mogadishu, is beset by a rage, frustration, boredom, ambition, goodwill, eagerness to be liked; how on earth are these colours of the soul to be put at the service of the commonwealth?

Feelings are inseparable from cognition and action; both impel the necessary human act of interpretation. Every act of interpretation is also an act of judgement. (This is true both ways of course.) Understanding on the part of all actors is impelled and comprehended by a frame of feeling. As the metaphor of 'frame' (or structure) brings out, the constituent feelings enclose the action; give it shape and direction; place it in an intelligible sequence; *plot* it.

Let me conclude this section with a sort of test question taken from a novel about practising development.

The academic adviser to the government, an old socialist, is listening to the entrepreneur avid to do development *his* way and make a lot of money out of the badly needed new town. The academic detests the entrepreneur, who is quietly, legitimately, offering him the easy chance of a beautiful house conversion in countryside he loves and belongs to. The entrepreneur's arguments are to his own advantage, but are good and sound as well. The academic then listens to and watches a surly, mean, radically unlikable but absolutely straight local farmer and councillor. The farmer-councillor may do very well out of the scheme, but he senses it is far bigger, is backed by much bigger money from God knows where, than he knows. It could change his life, all their lives. The academic goes back to London and, at a ministerial

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Frayn, *Sweet Dreams*, London: Collins, 1973, p118.

<sup>9</sup> René Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul* (1649).

seminar, makes a most moving speech about returning practical use of the land to the people it belongs to. The minister's Principal (civil servant) accuses him of "heroic absurdity".<sup>10</sup>

How shall we understand this?

#### IV

The feelings which comprehend a narrative move in rhythm to our expectations of the plot and its characters. So too the feelings which move and change as we practise our development. These latter feelings are functions of our hopes and purposes. We want the story to square with them.

The hopes conventionally attached to development policy are usually matched to measurement of so-called outcomes: employment levels, income increases, performance targets, contribution to GDP. It has been the colossal achievement of Amartya Sen successfully to propose a quite different set of criteria by which to appraise, in the processes of due democratic debate, the success and reasonableness of policy.

Summarising Sen and commending him to our purposes is an awesome business. For thirty years and in a vast range of publications he has set himself, as is now well known worldwide, to humanise the ways in which social development is conceived. I realise that at this point I am probably telling my audience what it knows already. But this synopsis of Sen's main precepts acquires a new context in virtue of our brief theory of (in David Hume's great phrase) "the civil affections".

Sen has proved the most thoroughgoing of the critics of the foundational presuppositions of development theory and practice, whether in the free marketeering form which won such predominance in the ideological guise of Reaganomics, or in the more straightforwardly economicistic assumptions of World Bank and IMF (i.e. investment loans tied to fiscal stipulations). At the same time, he has, at once courteous and punitive, severely damaged those efforts by utilitarian political thinkers, which have saturated our collective consciousness for so long, to calculate social benefits simply as measured aggregates of material welfare. In some of the goofier versions of utilitarianism, the attempt is made, by

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<sup>10</sup> Summarised from Raymond Williams, *The Fight for Manod*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1979.

way of questionnaire and optimism to connect general material welfare to what Martin Hollis so agreeably satirises as "miwigs" or "micro-watts of inner glow".<sup>11</sup>

Sen's radical alternative is to propose a quite different criterion of *wellbeing according to context*.<sup>12</sup> That is to say, he suggests we look for the signs of the good life as lived by the people doing the living, and not as measured by those lending the money. Nor is this to be a matter of spotting the miwigs. Wellbeing for Sen is to be found in the freedom individuals have to exercise their key capabilities.

These will vary somewhat from place to place, which is why we must take account of the differentiations of culture. He takes freedom as the ultimate value giving narrative form and encompassing feeling to each life, and suggests that it does so according to the satisfactions it makes possible as individuals freely exercise their key *capabilities*. If freedom is the shaping and characterising quality in the well-lived life, it is so because the free man or woman in living freely is able to live virtuously, in the sense of possessing the capability to select and pursue those objectives which are both feasible and desirable in a given context.

In the extreme exigencies of a poor African state, such capabilities may include little more than the satisfaction of the simplest economic and medical needs. But Sen is at pains to emphasise that these satisfactions are inseparable from political freedoms. Only with the freedoms brought by education, for example, will people be able to recognise their medical needs. Only with political freedoms will they be able to obtain a political hearing.<sup>13</sup> By the same token, in a wealthy Western democracy, Italy let us say, a good life, combining as it should both doing right and living well, is clearly and only *functioning* when a person has the capabilities to do right (regard the law, exercise rights, fulfil political duties, attend to others' welfare) and live well (choose freely enough, act fulfillingly enough, reflect critically enough).

"Functioning" is Sen's second term of art after capabilities. A capability "refers to the alternative combinations of functionings" that a person may achieve. Functionings "represent

<sup>11</sup> Martin Hollis, *The Cunning of Reason*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

<sup>12</sup> The readiest primer (expounded here) is Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. See also his *On Ethics and Economics*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1987; and *Poverty and Famines*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981. See, most recently, his *Rationality and Freedom*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2002.

<sup>13</sup> *Development in Freedom* (2001), pp146ff.

parts of the state of a person - in particular the various things that he or she manages to do or be in leading a life. The *capability* of a person reflects the alternative combinations of functionings the person can achieve, and from which he or she can choose one collection".<sup>14</sup>

It should be pointed out, in a technical aside, that 'set' here is used in its mathematical sense, and set theory provides Sen with the recombinative energy his analysis needs if he is to avoid the dead numeracy of standard quantitative research. At the same time, his emphasis on 'choosing' as both capability and achievement is distant from the present cant so much promulgated by governments hoping to sell consumer choice for votes. Sen's choosing has decidedly more existential force than either choosing a new gas-guzzling 4x4, or even a surgeon for one's hip operation. The substantive freedom, which is to say the capability, is to choose a life and, in a profound sense, its *style* (*le style, c'est l'homme*) one has reason to value. Such a style of life occupies its own 'evaluative space', and the extent of a person's functionings, numerically assessed, constitutes achievement in a functioning vector,<sup>15</sup> i.e. a quantity having both direction and magnitude.

Sen emphasises that, given the conceptual simplicity of his algebra, the important recognition is of the complexity and ambiguity of human choice; its sometime brevity; its obligingness to hindsight. Earnestly attentive as he always is to the political application of his social mathematics, he emphasises that consensual evaluation 'requires public discussion and a democratic understanding and acceptance'.<sup>16</sup> In other words, these are loaded and practical instruments whose use cannot be dissociated from 'reasoned evaluation' and coming-to-judgements by those whose functionings and freedoms are at stake. As Sen shows us, we ignore at our peril the 'informational bases', thought of by most welfare economists as innocently numerical, which order and sanction our social and political judgements. Different ideological and cultural systems yield different results in the very figures which compel their political conclusions.

His critics have much berated him, even at their most sympathetic,<sup>17</sup> for isolating freedom as the paramount value, and capability clusters (or functionings) as the non-specific zone (or

<sup>14</sup> Quoted from Sen, 'Capability and wellbeing' in *The Quality of Life*, Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen (eds), Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993, p31.

<sup>15</sup> Sen (2001) pp74 ff.

<sup>16</sup> Sen (2001) p79.

<sup>17</sup> E.g. Martha Nussbaum, 'Capabilities as fundamental entitlements: Sen and social justice', *Feminist Economics*, 9, 2-3, 2003, pp33-59.

vector) of freedom in action. I think such criticism misses another of Sen's political targets, which is to take the most presumed-upon and commonly assented-to political value, and argue from his singular interpretation of that value, in order to win co-operation from those other ideological camps who also affirm the central importance of freedom, but from very different intellectual premises. As he says himself:

Not only is this approach able to take direct note of the importance of freedom, it can also pay substantial attention to the underlying motivations that contribute to the relevance of the other approaches. In particular, the freedom-based perspective can take note of, *inter alia*, utilitarianism's interest in human wellbeing, libertarianism's involvement with processes of choice and the freedom to act and Rawlsian theory's focus on individual liberty and on the resources needed for substantive freedoms. In this sense the capability approach has a breadth and sensitivity that give it a very extensive reach, allowing evaluative attention to be paid to a variety of important concerns, some of which are ignored, one way or another, in the alternative approaches. This extensive reach is possible because the freedoms of persons can be judged through explicit reference to outcomes and processes that they have reason to value and seek.<sup>18</sup>

Sen remarks elsewhere that he was always drawn to the paramount commitments of the Old Left to equality and social justice as well as to freedoms truly capable of realisation, rather than those nominal and vacuous freedoms rousingly claimed and then disregarded by the American Constitution. He turned away, as well he might, from the concomitant vengefulness of Left-revolution, and in settling for freedom as his inclusive value keeps the attention of those other formations criticised by him in the book to hand: utilitarians, neo-conservatives and classical liberals. It should be noticed, as a matter of the highest importance, how Sen's reconceptualisation of freedom<sup>19</sup> as a field of capabilities also subsumes the key value of equality. Capabilities are vacuous unless equally shared, and all the historical evidence shows that the poor cherish their rights every bit as much as their subsistence.

All this is typical of his politeness, and his politeness is, as it should be, a key political value. For it leads us directly to the concept and the value of culture itself.

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<sup>18</sup> Sen (2001) p86.

<sup>19</sup> In which he owes much to Quentin Skinner's canonical Isaiah Berlin lecture, 'The third concept of liberty', British Academy, November 2001.

It has been Sen's enormous contribution to the world's various attempts to administer welfare and point social development in the right direction to provide evaluative concepts translatable into very different circumstances. Functionings as they cluster themselves into capability sets mean very different things in Korea as opposed to Ghana, India as opposed to China,<sup>20</sup> less markedly so in, say, Cape Breton as opposed to Northern Ireland. But wherever we seek to observe and fulfil social preferences in terms of people's capability to be free, we will only be able to understand the values and purposes expressing themselves in those preferences by way of the local culture and our own capacity to hear it, breathe it in, think and feel within and without it.

To say so is to pronounce another truism of our day. In ordinary conversation, 'culture' may designate any trifling feature of a social organisation: a university department has a 'culture of mistrust', an international corporation a 'culture of corruption'. Used in this very general way, a concept is in danger of becoming vacuous. It serves to pick out *no* distinctive features of a state of affairs, and in this case becomes synonymous with catchall words like 'atmosphere', 'climate' or 'normal social practice'.

Culture itself, however, in its two hundred and fifty year history, has gathered conflicting but humanly vital and vitalising meanings to itself, and if it is to serve us as an instrument of benign public action - as a striking new collection of policy essays enjoins<sup>21</sup> - then it is worth sorting a little amongst these ambiguities before trying to determine how the concept of culture may be rendered operational.

The structure of the concept<sup>22</sup> is, from its beginning, dual and (in W B Gallie's phrase) 'inherently contested'. That is to say, part of its meaning is at odds with its other part, as is the case for a number of our noblest and most cherished concepts of political values (one thinks immediately of liberty herself, equality also, sovereignty, and so forth). Culture's two predominant meanings are usually thought of as being, first, the realm of our highest aspirations and expressions, Matthew Arnold's 'best that has been known and thought', and,

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<sup>20</sup> Sen's examples in his essay 'How does culture matter?' in *Culture and Public Action*, Vijaendra Rao and Michael Walton (eds), Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2004.

<sup>21</sup> Rao and Walton (2004) as cited.

<sup>22</sup> Much of this section is summarised from my own recent book: Fred Inglis, *Culture*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004.

second, as designating all the customs, practices, beliefs, social structures and systems which together constitute a particular way of life. The first application, starting from the great worthies of the Enlightenment and Romanticism, configures those expressions of local or national life which embody our best thoughts about how our world ought to be, such as will, now or in the lives of our children and their children, bring out what we believe to be the best in us. The second application, usefully looser, found its origins largely in the hands of the first two generations of anthropologists, for whom it marked out those features of generally distant ways of life which characterised its members as so specifically *not like us* (and precious accordingly). The cultures of what were then called primitive peoples by their great chroniclers - Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, Evans-Pritchard, Margaret Mead - composed of their customs, kinships, beliefs, mythology, were enclosed, complete, changeless, and immune. It is this usage which lends itself to today's easy-going parlance, where a culture may gather to itself almost any aspect of the way of life to hand, from its smallest gestures to its largest spectacles.

For my purposes I shall retain both its idealising charge and its daily ordinariness. I shall say that culture is the ground upon which a society draws the figures of its politics, and as such is best caught in the definition already quoted from Clifford Geertz, "the ensemble of stories we tell ourselves about ourselves". So inclusive a formula omits, of course, the sometimes bloodstained conflicts which have ensured the survival of some stories and the disappearance of others. R G Collingwood has given one inspiring lead to students of culture when he writes:

The children of each generation are taught to want what they are taught they must not have ... [But] where you find new ways of thinking and acting never displayed with more than a low degree of success you may take it as certain that the discarded ways are remembered with regret, and that the tradition of their glories is being tenaciously kept alive.<sup>23</sup>

Armed with this insight, generally applicable to colonised or otherwise dominated peripheries (Collingwood is writing about Roman Britain), we may return to Geertz's "ensemble of stories"<sup>24</sup> and his more strenuous definition elsewhere of cultural and political spectacles and

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<sup>23</sup> R G Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1938, p143.

<sup>24</sup> Clifford Geertz, *Negara: the theatre-state in 19th century Bali*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980, p121ff.

customs as a "constellation of enshrined ideas", and see these as fuller, more contradictorily charged with life and meaning than before.

Everyday actions express and embody beliefs and ideas about the way of the world. Understanding other people's lives is a matter of, as they say, participant-observation; it is also and very urgently a matter of self-awareness and self-criticism. Either way, culture is best grasped *not* definitionally, but ostensively; it is there to be seen and heard. But as the idea of culture as narrative adverts us, we are handling the stuff of passion wherever we move in culture. Terms such as 'structure' and 'system' mislead us; what we are engaging with is a poetics not a mechanics. A social order, insofar as it commands authority and obedience, draws its mighty force from its imaginative energies, dramatised in its public narratives and its semiotic representations (for us, on TV).

The lesson of these grand phrases for the mild-mannered government agent is partly to be found in our detour around the moral sentiments. Insofar as the culture of a department of state is quite other than the culture of a fishing village whose fish have vanished (and no-one can doubt that there *is* difference), either side will need to come to the parlay with some understanding of both narratives, and of the frames of feeling which shape their plot and characterise their villains.

What will be at stake here is a good deal more corrugated and rebarbative than well-meaning injunctions about seeing the other person's point of view or sympathising with their predicament. Understanding another culture, including a different section of one's own, cannot be, as we have seen, a case for a therapeutic coaxing of subordinate neighbours to do what their superiors want without quite noticing their own complicity (the purpose of all managerialist practice). Nor can it be a one-way business of the sort conducted by the first anthropologists, interpreting strangeness to the folks at home, although seeing ourselves as strangers see us is a necessary part of the self-education of a development agency.

For one thing, globalisation (or, as I'd rather say, turbo-capitalism<sup>25</sup>) has rolled in like a mighty wave, bringing with it vast energies and submarine destructiveness, sweeping new life forward, sucking old life out. Culture, in this turbulence, becomes both a redoubt for the

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<sup>25</sup> Borrowing from Edward Luttwak, *Turbo-Capitalism: winners and losers in the global economy*, London: Orion Books, 1999.

protection of old life and a turbine house for the harnessing of the flood on behalf of local production. In either version, rearguard action or vanguard advance, nothing is left enclosed, completed, static (it wasn't, we may be sure, for Malinowski's Trobriand Islanders or Evans-Pritchard's Azande either). Cultural collision is forced upon everybody, and I have more than sufficient faith in human resourcefulness to be sure that cross-cultural understanding is not just remotely possible but, even in the teeth of fundamentalism, contemporaneously enlarging.

It is all very well, however, to gesture thus at the scale of global movements, but doing so neglects the small steps of that domestic world where all but the power élite live. Indeed, as the strictures of Joseph Stiglitz remind us,<sup>26</sup> the culture of that élite, when it is writing the cheques for the IMF, is so entirely closed and self-referential that its well-dressed officers prefer the fiscal contract to the social one, and by the time the bread riots break out (as they did in his test case of Indonesia when the IMF stipulated that food subsidies be cancelled), have long since left by business class in the 747.

The domestic world of social development should be a more benignant, more studiedly reciprocal, altogether less self-satisfied locale than lunch with the IMF. In its tolerant space, a space as tolerant of inevitable frustration and necessary anger as welcoming to absurd over-optimism and natural timidity, we might contrive a framework for connecting culture to public action.

Plainly, any such framework must have, to put the matter technically, *generative* rather than *allocative* powers. Its function, in other words, is not to *classify* data and the objects of observation; it is to explain the dynamics of thoughts and feelings, and thereby to stimulate action by way of explanation. If, for example, one grasps how the people before you classify their capabilities and then frame them in purposive narrative, one is in a position to suggest what might usefully be done next. The classification of feasible choices, in other words, orders the actions the person may choose to perform; the narrative frame gives her an intelligible plot - direction, motive, consequence.

First therefore, our development agency should fashion a working definition of the predominant cultural assumptions of those living in the development area, in terms of the

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<sup>26</sup> Joseph Stiglitz, *Globalisation and its Discontents*, London: Allan Lane, 2002.

structure of those feelings (resentment, eagerness, welcome, dislike, timidity, shame) its members bring to the expectation of government action. Second, assemble a parallel account, demanding a high degree of self-awareness and outsider observation, of the cultural, technical and cognitive assumptions brought to bear upon the situation by the government itself and its agencies. Third, theorise the ways in which the two frames of cultural reference (which is to say, structures of feeling) may be made to overlap.

Such a venture would entail, perhaps, deployment of some such theory of pedagogic instruction as that of Jerome Bruner,<sup>27</sup> taking note of his insistence that understanding any cognitive or, indeed, moral problem, demands the acquisition of conceptual 'spirals' capable of interpreting new experience. One such 'spiral' is our theory of the civil affections. We coax forward those feelings which, as we say, 'accommodate' the other person, and comprehend their story. The development officer meets, say, a group of out-of-work fishermen hoping to start a winter adventure trekking station. On the spiral of the sentiments, the officer begins with non-committal sympathy and interestedness, and moves maybe towards eager enthusiasm or a gently sceptical discouragement. Or perhaps the spiral curves through more cognitive forms, as Bruner suggests; the officer is able to break away from the strictly economic criteria of per capita income and unemployment returns, and judge the result of development as the enhancement of multiple functionings (job satisfaction, geographic mobility, business optimism, a quickening of citizenship). What it all takes is worlds away from the dire susurrations of psychobabble. The mutual interrogation of such cultural frameworks will require, no doubt, equality of respect just as it will steeliness and resolution. But as Charles Taylor (that great Canadian) has already put it for us: "Because of these links between understanding and practical ability we cannot deny whatever increases our capacities its title as a gain in knowledge."<sup>28</sup> The key resources for both human and government development agency are dependable knowledge, and the capability to act on it.

Finally, our action-generative model of practice, taking advantage of Sen and his company of friends,<sup>29</sup> requires an account of how to connect the gifts of development with the promise of happiness - or, to put it less dewily, how to identify some of the promising possibilities immanent in the local world as it actually is, and to connect these with a future version of their *feasible* betterment. Written into this present formulation of how to do this, is the

<sup>27</sup> Jerome Bruner, *Towards a Theory of Instruction*, Harvard: Belknap Press, 1962.

<sup>28</sup> Charles Taylor (1995) p48.

<sup>29</sup> Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen, *The Quality of Life*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.

assumption that any such connection must be democratically made. Nor is this a mere piety. There is, for instance, no unbroken line in the making of a collective decision which will travel from the aggregation of preferences to the protection of individual rights. High principle and high feelings, low motives and low cunning, are all part of politics and intrinsic to the good society.

## VI

In a final postscript it may be worth alluding to the efforts of another anthropologist to codify and improve the strains of democratic collaboration. Mary Douglas<sup>30</sup> pictures effective political groupings as configured by 'grid' and 'group', where 'grid' marks the boundaries and rituals signifying difference between us and others, and 'group' specifies the rules and rituals which incorporate and embody membership.

These are found in the details of culture: ways of thought and of speech, of custom and ceremony, of dress and diet, of time and chance. All social organisms which attempt political organisation, Douglas boldly claims,<sup>31</sup> fall into one of four cultural memberships; none is democratically adequate by itself, the difficulty and delight is to keep all in play.

The first group is hierarchical and bureaucratic, both necessary attributes for mere efficiency and coherence, but by themselves autocratic and repressive. The second is locally minded and egalitarian, both essential to oppose indifferent centralism and vulgar authoritarianism, but structurally liable to formlessness and quarrelsome irresolution. The third cultural group is opportunist and entrepreneurial, precious quantities for capitalism but of course fatally uncooperative and piratical towards social bounds and duties. The last grouping is often without mutual recognition at all; it is the host of the isolates, solitaries and fatalists, often situated a long way from the centres of power, lapsed into what Douglas calls "the culture of apathy", mistrustful and passive. Hard to get the fatalists to do anything, hard for us all at the wrong times not to feel the same.

These are the four faces not only of those to whom, as W H Auden might have said, development is done, but also of those who do the development themselves. These are also

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<sup>30</sup> Mary Douglas, 'Grid and group' in *Natural Symbols*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973, pp77-92.

<sup>31</sup> She summarises her theory in Rao and Walton (2004), 'Traditional culture', pp85-109.

the Fabianising stops and starts of utopian planning. The virtuous planners seek out those best values of the present, visible in ordinary beliefs and actions, and envisage their extension in an imaginable and practicable future, never very far away, always liable to disappointment. The values in question are, let us say, Sen's capabilities and my high hopes: freedom, adequate fulfilment, a glimmer of self-awareness, recognition of membership one of another, passable self-reliance.

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