

Cultures Matter: A Review Article of Books by Harrison and Huntington, Segesváry, and Breckenridge, Pollock, Bhabha, and Chakrabarty

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William H. Thornton

Cultures Matter: A Review Article of Books by Harrison and Huntington, Segesváry, and Breckenridge, Pollock, Bhabha, and Chakrabarty

This book review article is about new work published by Lawrence E. Harrison and Samuel P. Huntington, eds., *Culture Matters: How Values Shape Human Progress* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), Victor Segesváry, *Dialogue of Civilizations: An Introduction to Civilizational Analysis* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2000), and Carol A. Breckenridge, Sheldon Pollock, Homi Bhabha, and Dipesh Chakrabarty, eds., *Cosmopolitanism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

In many respects *Culture Matters* was dated on the day it went to press. Its unifying concern -- the salient role of culture in economic development and underdevelopment -- heavily favors one cultural model while treating all others as developmental impediments. To say that "culture matters," therefore, is not to say that "cultures matter." For roughly a decade, from the mid 1980s to the mid 1990s, that singular usage held sway in world affairs, drawing support from the ongoing "Asian miracle," post-Cold War globalism, the American New Economy, and the Right turn of Latin America. Unfortunately for *Culture Matters*, history did not end on that triumphal note. After the Asian Crash, the collapse of the U.S. market, the Enron debacle, and the rebound of Left populism in Latin America, *Culture Matters* finds itself marching on an empty parade ground. It entirely misses, moreover, the most pressing question of them all: the cultural provenance of jihadist terrorism. It turns out that *Culture Matters'* principal editor, Lawrence Harrison, is something of a one-trick pony, not to mention a one-culture culturalist. Since 1985 he has been mired in a rearguard defense of his neomodernist classic, *Underdevelopment is a State of Mind: The Latin American Case*. All of *Culture Matters'* contributors, even those few who are out of step in Harrison's parade, are forced to march to its music. From this perspective East Asia's economic success and Latin America's failure are twin lessons in a cultural morality tale whereby the capitalist West is set up as the obligatory model for global emulation. Harrison et al. bear glad tidings for underdeveloped countries: salvation is close at hand. All it requires is the total forfeiture of your cultural identity and every trace of resistance, especially dependency theory.

Strangely, for a book published in 2000, this developmental "state of mind" takes little account of the Asian Crash of 1997-98. Although three articles are nominally assigned to the subject, only Lucian Pye is bold enough to say the emperor never had any clothes: the "Asian miracle" is and always has been a tendentious myth. Stranger still, the famous cultural admonition of *Culture Matters'* other editor, Samuel Huntington, is kept on the bench throughout the game. This is most unfortunate, for Huntington's concept of "civilizational clash" has been at the cutting edge of debate after 9/11. Regrettably *Culture Matters* suits him up for promotional purposes only (see Huntington's confession to this effect xv). Henderson's oppositional selections are equally duplicitous. Although his main target is the Left, none of *Culture Matters'* dissenting voices are actually on the Left. One suspects that Richard Schweder's fleeting complaint about Harrison's developmentalism got in by accident. True to his anthropological calling, Schweder was primarily interested in defending cultural difference against the ravages of Harrison's cultural unilateralism. This was no doubt expected, but in the heat of argument Schweder struck at least a glancing blow for the Left.

Several contributors with Third World backgrounds took umbrage at Schweder's charge that they had been used to stack the deck with pseudo-insiders. But the patent fact is they were put there to confirm Henderson's thesis on "native grounds." A more forthright title for this book, therefore, would have been *Western Capitalist Culture Matters*. Not surprisingly the contrary voices in *Culture Matters* make for the best reading. In addition to Schweder and the inimitable Pye, a different slant on cultural matters is provided by Jeffrey Sachs, Jared Diamond, and Nathan Glazer. While these antithetic or at least qualifying chapters are a welcome diversion, *Culture Matters* keeps its thematic house in order.

It fails, however, in its larger purpose of proving the undiminished relevance of Henderson's Reagan era thesis for the twenty-first century. That is because Culture Matters lacks any compelling sense of how much things have changed since 1985. There is no serious attention, for example, to the cultural maelstrom unleashed by the end of the Cold War. Instead we get a full blast of New Economy hubris. Nonetheless Culture Matters should be required reading in any cultural studies program -- not for the light it sheds on global development, but as an icon of Roaring 1990s economism and Washington consensus globalism.

A balanced if somewhat ethereal corrective is available in Victor Segesvary's "civilizational pluralism." Here Harrison's Culture Matters gives way, in effect, to Cultures Matter. For Sevesvary cultures are rooted in existence and thus are incommensurable. But far from seeing cultures as monadic, he considers intercultural dialogue all the more imperative in the face of globalization. The worst case scenario from this pluralist vantage is the kind of monocultural imperialism that Harrison advances in the name of development. In Dialogue of Cultures, Segesvary addresses the core problem that Henderson manages to evade: the cultural homogenization that globalism enforces. This civilizational onslaught has thrown non-capitalist cultures into a struggle (the proper Koranic meaning of contemporary jihad) for their very survival. The Moslem world is especially prone to this crisis because religion is such an integral part of daily life under Islam. Secularization, even on the most benign terms, becomes threatenful to this ethos; and today's globalization is anything but benign. The problem is compounded by the fact that Western secularism is itself a sacralized ideology. Resting as it does on purely material modes of social interaction, globalization cannot answer questions of ultimate concern. Religious fundamentalism, Islamic and otherwise, responds to this threat by retreating even farther into a lair of security and certainty. This is its answer to globalization's myth of the market and the prima facie value (as opposed to virtue) of consumerist culture. The irony is that fundamentalism, in rejecting the cultural revolution that globalization requires, foments a reactionary cultural revolution that is anti-modern but hardly traditional. Segesvary does not, however, see Islam as inherently reactionary. He includes in his appendix the 1999 "Tehran Declaration on Dialogue Among Civilizations," which calls for human diversity, tolerance, and mutual respect among cultures. Such civil (as opposed to secularist) Islam is only "anti-Western" insofar as it rejects all cultural domination, whether from Washington or Al Qaeda. It was in this spirit that Iran's president Khatami, at the Eighth Islamic Summit, endorsed the plan for a UN Year of Dialogue Among Civilizations. Paradoxically, that year was to be 2001. History, one could say, is what happens while we make other plans.

By granting that their topic is not "a known entity existing in the world," but "something awaiting realization" (1), the editors of Cosmopolitanism inadvertently cast their culture model as one more utopian plan awaiting history's axe. Still, this is a big improvement over past cosmopolitanisms, which as Ackbar Abbas notes were merely extensions of First World culture (210). That is to say they marched in the same modernist parade that Harrison would have us revive. By contrast, postmodern cosmopolitanism, as advanced by Ulf Hannerz, undertakes to engage the cultural "other" rather than expunge it. In the spirit of other compradorist projects -- the "Third Way," "glocalization," "hybridization," etc. -- today's cosmopolitans seek a place for the "other" within rather than against globalization. This retreat from direct resistance does not, in Sheldon Pollock's view, involve simple "mongrelization" or *mélange*. Rather it counters cultural domination by way of strategic appropriation (47). That is enough, in Dipesh Chakrabarty's opinion, to get us past the morass of totalistic universalism versus absolute relativism (82), which would be no small accomplishment.

In a richly nuanced exposition of Bombay's cultural resilience, Arjun Appaduri illustrates how the local can make its mark in a globalized world. Mamadou Diouf further explores this question in the context of his study of a Senegalese religious group, the Murid Brotherhood. He concludes that such remodeled traditions hold their own against the homogenizing forces of modernization and now globalization (114). So too, in another Sengalese study, Tiki Biaya concludes that traditional African

values are alive and well in local Islamic culture (154). In one way or another, all the chapters in *Cosmopolitanism* support the proposition that distinct cultures -- locally rooted but not static or territorially bounded -- still thrive in our globalized world. That is good news for the future of cultural anthropology, and cultural studies generally, but it sheds little light on the cultural enmity that erupted in the 1990s and culminated in 9/11. For all their profound differences, the three cultural models under examination in this review share one dubious feature: a happy ending. They all tell us, in effect, that the cultural inroads of globalization are manageable. Since cultural imperialism is no real threat, radical action is not required, and indeed would be counterproductive.

Such complacency is the cultural complement of economic TINAism -- the view that "there is no alternative" to current globalization. We are given to believe that while "culture matters," cultural imperialism does not; for the impositions of the global can easily be foiled by the local. This good news not only enjoins us to forget Seattle, but to rule out cultural aggression as a motive for global terrorism. Thanks in part to this blackout, the tragic dialectic that Benjamin Barber adumbrated in *Jihad vs. McWorld* (1995) was left to fester unattended for another six years. Suffice it to say that the cultural studies establishment was caught entirely off guard on 9/11. Along with the general public, but with far less excuse, these advocates of shore-to-shore cultural confluence found themselves asking, "Why?" They had long neglected to ask if the so-called underdeveloped world, and the Muslim world in particular, wanted any part of their vaunted cultural hybridity. Like the editors of *Culture Matters* and *Cosmopolitanism*, they brought in a host of putative "insiders" -- well educated, well traveled, well funded, yet "Third World" -- to assure themselves that residents of the periphery were relishing the cultural choices that globalization affords. It may well be that cultural appropriation is the closest thing to real resistance that most on the global periphery can muster. But that is nothing to celebrate. No one thought to ask these "peripherals" if they might prefer a less placid form of resistance -- perhaps something more like 9/11. That oversight has consequences not only for foreign affairs but for the question of how "cultures matter." Segesvary's recourse to "civilizational pluralism" has a nice ring, but it ultimately amounts to star gazing on the deck of the Titanic. It never gets around to advising the captain to reduce his speed through the ice fields. If 9/11 does not get that point across, nothing will.

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