

Cultural Determinism

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Introduction

The end of the Cold War and the collapse of communism were two major developments that contributed to causing the world to enter a new transitional period, leading to a new civilization. They created a fluid, largely unstable state of political, social, economic, security and cultural affairs, causing the old balance of power to end. Chester A. Crocker wrote in 1992 that the “historic changes since 1989 have profoundly destabilized the previously existing [world] order without replacing it with any recognizable or legitimate system. New vacuums are setting off new conflicts. The result of this is a global law-and-order deficit that is straining the capacity of existing and emerging security institutions.”¹

Since “old habits die hard and the habits of power die hardest of all,”² thinkers of the waning era have failed to recognize the invalidation of the ideas they helped develop in the past, or reformulate such ideas to suit the new reality and trends of global change. They could only claim victory for free markets and democracy, unaware that both systems have already entered a new era that threatens their relevance and legitimacy. The United States, wrote Chester A. Crocker further, “wants to preach to the rest of the world the post-cold war litany of U.S. goals and hopes: democracy and human rights, free markets and peaceful settlement of disputes. This sermon is fine as far as it goes, but it is a hopelessly inadequate answer to our era of change.”³

Yet, many American thinkers have continued to repeat the same sermon, hindering the development of new ideas to deal with the emerging situation. And in order to explain the failure of most nations to adopt western ideals and ideas of democracy, human rights and free markets, some thinkers moved to develop a new model based on culture, claiming that culture is responsible for progress as well as backwardness, success as well as failure, peace as well as violence. And since cultures, as they claim, do not change meaningfully; many developing nations are destined to languish in a state of perpetual backwardness. Consequently, a new philosophical view emerged that considers culture the decisive factor determining the fate of nations, giving credence to what might be called “*cultural determinism*.”

When several Asian nations entered a period of rapid and sustained economic growth in the 1980s, questions were raised regarding the secret of the Asian economic success story. The answer, several American political philosophers and economists were quick to claim, was the Asian culture and its Confucian ethics. Francis Fukuyama said, "The important variable [in the Asian economic experience] is not industrial policy per se but culture."⁴ As for the role of Confucian ethics, Fukuyama wrote, "Confucianism has defined the character of social relations within the Chinese society over the last two and a half millennia. It consists of a series of ethical principles that are said to undergird a properly functioning society."⁵ Alan Greenspan, the former chairman of the U.S. Federal Reserve, said in a congressional testimony in 1997, "Much of what we took for granted in our free market system to be human nature was not nature at all, but culture."⁶

But if culture is the determining factor behind the economic success of China and the other industrializing Asian nations, then why did those nations had to wait until the second half of the twentieth century to industrialize? And if Confucian ethics have been embedded in the social fabric of Asian society for 2,500 years, as Fukuyama claims, then why did such ethics fail to cause the industrialization of China centuries or even decades earlier? Why did it take the Asian nations more than 200 years after the Industrial Revolution had transformed the economic and sociocultural landscape of Europe to enter the industrial age? And why did North Korea, which shares with its southern neighbor the same culture and supposedly the same Confucian ethics, has failed to replicate the experiment of the south and industrialize? Although culture is an important factor influencing the fate of nations and the course of their economic and social development, it is not the only factor.

China, in fact, was the most advanced nation in the world during the European Middle Ages. The art of printing, for example, was discovered and used in China at least a century before Europe developed it. China also had the best and most complete records regarding its past, and it is said that its bureaucratic system had been the most sophisticated of any state in older times. "Consider China at the outset of the fifteenth century. Its curiosity, its instinct for exploration, and its drive to build and create all the technologies necessary to launch the

industrial revolution – something that would not actually occur for another 400 years, wrote Lester Thurow.”⁷ What happened to China had also happened to other great nations of the past, particularly the Arab and Indian nations.

Although some 250 years have passed since the Industrial Revolution occurred, historians are yet to reach a consensus regarding the social forces that instigated the revolution and the role each force had played in making it happen. In contrast, the promoters of Asia, and particularly the believers in cultural determinism, were quick to declare that Confucian culture is the force behind Asia’s economic success. But as tribute was being paid to Asian cultures and Confucian ethics, values and relationships built around them were rapidly crumbling and replaced by the ethics of the free market and consumerism. Nevertheless, western political strategists who believe in cultural determinism have continued to ignore these facts and blame the cultures of non-western nations for their failure to industrialize and liberalize.

This paper intends to examine the role of culture in society and world politics, analyze the concept of cultural determinism, and review the arguments made by its advocates, with emphasis on the ideas and claims of Francis Fukuyama and Samuel Huntington. The paper will also try to identify the mistaken claims made the promoters of cultural determinism, provide an explanation of why such mistakes were made in the first place, and how to correct them. In the process, new ideas will be presented and new concepts will be coined.

Culture and Politics

After winning World War II, western nations decided to forge a strategic relationship with each other to foster cooperation, rebuild shattered economies, enhance military power, and contain the Soviet military threat and its communist ideology. While security considerations were the major force behind the alliance, western culture and its Christian ethics were given credit for sustaining the alliance and making cooperation possible. Democracy and human rights were also found to be traits of western culture and its Judo-Christian ethos. In contrast, most other cultures whose core is neither Jewish nor Christian were degraded and often called “barbaric,”

their peoples “uncivilized.” And when ethnic conflict spread in non-western states in the 1990s, culture was identified as the villain causing trouble and committing atrocities.

Samuel Huntington wrote, “Cultural identity is the central factor shaping a country’s associations and antagonisms.”⁸ While culture plays a major role in shaping every group’s identity, it does not necessarily shape state identity, because less than ten percent of all states in the world have homogeneous populations identifying with one race and one culture only. In fact, the identity of every national group is influenced by history, geography culture, ideology, education, interests, as well as the outside world. An individual in society is usually a member of several groups that have different and sometimes contradictory goals. Every citizen is a member of a family tied to it by blood, a member of a residential community tied to it by shared concerns, often a member of a professional organization tied to it by shared goals, a member of an economic entity tied to it by interests, and a member of a nation tied to it by history, culture and symbols. All of these associations seek different goals and thus affect the attitudes of individuals and groups in more contradictory than complementary ways.

Huntington also says that “global politics is being reconfigured along cultural lines. Peoples and countries with similar cultures are coming together. Peoples and countries with different cultures are coming apart.”⁹ He asserts that cultures or as he says, civilizations, are destined to clash, and that their inevitable clash will determine the nature and intensity of conflict in the world. Huntington, it ought to be noted, employs the concepts of “culture,” “civilization,” and “religion” alternately to mean the same thing, while their meanings and roles in society are different. Francis Fukuyama, in contrast, does not see cultural competition as a major source of conflict. “On the contrary,” he writes, “the rivalry arising from the interaction of different cultures can frequently lead to creative change, and there are numerous cases of such cultural cross-stimulation.”¹⁰ Thomas Sowell echoes the same thing, he says, “Cross-cultural experiences have been associated with cultural achievements.”¹¹

If the claims of Huntington were to be correct, and that “peoples and countries with similar cultures are coming together and peoples and countries with different cultures are coming apart,” then the European nations should have never fought each other; they should have

always worked together because they have had similar cultures since the times of the Roman Empire; and have had democratic systems for almost two centuries. Yet, most European states fought each other and committed atrocities against one another and against their citizens who were members of racial and religious minorities. They also allied themselves with non-Europeans having different cultures, particularly the Japanese, the Turks, and the Arabs against other Europeans having similar cultures. But if the correct assumption is that Europeans have different cultures and, because of that, they fought each other, then how could they unite after World War II and cooperate to achieve shared goals and even form a European Union?

In contrast to the Europeans, Arabs claim to have and do largely have the same culture, not just similar cultures, the same history, the same language, and the majority of them have the same religion. Yet Arabs have failed to unite and ally themselves against non-Arabs; all attempts to unite Arabs have failed. Most Latin Americans also share similar cultures and the same religion and language, but are unable to unite. Moreover, the central Asian countries, which were freed from the yoke of communism, were quick to rediscover their Turkish cultural roots and Islamic heritage, yet they are unable to unite. Even African tribes having similar cultures, languages, and religions and very little to fight over seem to have found fighting and killing each other easier than uniting with one another. The examples of Somalia, Rwanda, and Liberia are cases that prove beyond doubt that culture is incapable by itself of uniting peoples separated by ethnicity and living in pre-industrial times.

“People separated by ideology but united by culture come together, as the two Germanys did and as the two Koreas and the several Chinas are beginning to,”¹² wrote Huntington. This claim is very far from the truth. The two Germanys did not come together and could not have come together while separated by ideology; they came together in 1989 after the collapse of the Marxist ideology and the failure of East Germany’s economy. The people of East Germany moved en masse towards the west, destroying the Berlin Wall and forcing open all borders. Race, history, and need were the real forces that incited the East Germans to move west and encouraged the West Germans to embrace their blood brothers and save them from economic catastrophe. As for the Koreas, the only thing uniting them today is not culture but mutual

antagonism and enmity nurtured by ideology and fostered by a cynical American policy. The return of Hong Kong to China in 1997 was not the result of choice; it occurred because Hong Kong was an occupied territory whose return to China was agreed upon between the occupied and the British occupier a long time ago.

The United States' relationships with other countries also make the point that culture is not the major force shaping inter-state relationships. The United States, despite sharing a similar culture with western European nations, cooperates more with Mexico that has a different culture than with France. It also allies itself with nations such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, Pakistan and Turkey, with which it shares neither culture, or language, or religion, nor borders. In 1991, shared security concerns, not culture or religion, compelled a few Arab states to join the United States to fight Iraqi Arabs with whom they shared not only culture, but religion and family and tribal ties as well.

Unity of peoples and countries in the past was accomplished by force, not by choice. Unity of peoples and countries in the age of globalization that is dominated by interests and security considerations is accomplished by choice, not by force. Mutual economic interests and shared security concerns are strong justifications for unity among different states with different cultures; cultural similarities are helpful but not sufficient to provide by themselves a rationale for political unity or even security coordination.

Culture and Conflict

When a few groups of Muslim radicals began to engage in terrorism, Islam and its values were blamed for the terrible acts. Many voices were raised in the West, particularly in the United States, condemning Islam, its followers and legacy, warning against the impending Islamic mortal threat to the West. One such voice called Islam a “killer culture,” its followers “barbarians.”¹³ Christianity, in contrast, was hailed as a culture of tolerance and peace.

Samuel Huntington saw Islam, not only Islamic fanatics, as a serious problem facing the West and threatening its way of life. He wrote, “The underlying problem for the West is not

Islamic fundamentalism. It is Islam; a different civilization whose people are convinced of the superiority of their culture and are obsessed with the inferiority of their power.”¹⁴ He also considered other non-western nations a threat to the West, especially Asian nations in general and China in particular. “At the micro level, the most violent fault lines are between Islam and its [Christian] Orthodox, Hindu, African and Western Christian neighbors. At the macro level, the dominant division is between the West and the rest, with the most intense conflicts occurring between Muslim and Asian societies on the one hand, and the West on the other,”¹⁵

While Islam and its followers are seen as the West’s eternal enemy, China is seen as Islam’s natural ally in its fight against the West. As a consequence, both Howard Bloom and Samuel Huntington implore the West to divide other nations and use its superior power to suppress, weaken, and dominate non-western states. Huntington wrote, “To minimize its losses requires the West to wield skillfully its economic resources as carrots and sticks in dealing with other societies, to bolster its unity and coordinate its policies so as to... promote and exploit differences among non-western nations.”¹⁶ He further calls, though implicitly, for ethnic cleansing, accusing non-western immigrants of promoting values and traditions that undermine western culture. “Western culture is challenged by groups within western societies. One such challenge comes from immigrants from other civilizations who reject assimilation and continue to adhere to and to propagate the values, customs, and cultures of their home societies.”¹⁷ Howard Bloom warns the West against the impending danger posed by other cultures and religions. “It is important that the societies which cherish pluralism survive. It is critical that they spread their values. It is imperative that they not allow their position in the pecking order of nations to slip and that they not cave in to the onrush of barbarians.”¹⁸

It is clear that the neoconservative forces in America are unwilling to accept anything less than total control of world affairs and other nations. They seem to have learned nothing from their misguided economic and financial policies at home that weakened the American economy; or from their military adventures in Iraq, Afghanistan and other places that undermined American credibility abroad. No one seems to admit, not even President Barak Obama that America cannot maintain its only superpower status forever, and that America

needs to make the necessary mental and actual adjustments accordingly. Nevertheless, the US intelligence community seems to have realized this impending eventuality. A report issued by the National Intelligence Council December, 16, 2012 stated, “the United States government cannot remain the world’s only super power past the year 2030.”¹⁹

But are other peoples really barbarians and Christians and Jews are angels, as Huntington and Bloom and other cultural determinists insinuate? Let us look at history and review some of its records. For a fair comparison, actions, reactions and interactions of peoples and states must be placed within the same historical contexts; they also have to be chosen to represent the same or very close times and events. Otherwise, actions and reactions would be unrelated, and the progress in all human endeavors throughout history would be rendered meaningless.

For example, the predecessors of most ‘civilized’ Americans of today are the barbarians who massacred the indigenous peoples of America, confiscated their property and destroyed their cultures and lives. And the forefathers of the ‘cultured’ Europeans of today are people who never took a bath in their lives when peoples in the East had known bathing for centuries. They are also the people who invented the colonial enterprise and justified the killing of other peoples and the confiscation of their land and the exploitation of their resource. The aristocrats of today, in the East and the West, are mostly the descendants of people who used violence at will and robbed, exploited and enslaved others. In fact, social position in almost every society is little more than the residue of robbery and murder throughout the ages. A few encounters between Muslims on the one hand, and Christians and Jews on the other shall be ²⁰examined.

In 638, the Muslim forces entered Jerusalem after its Christian inhabitants surrendered. But Sophronius the patriarch of the city refused to deliver the Holy City to anyone but to Caliph Umar bin Al-Khattab. “Once the Christians had surrendered,” writes Karen Armstrong, “there was no killing, no destruction of property, no burning of rival religious symbols, no expulsions or expropriations, and no attempts to force the inhabitants to embrace Islam.”²¹ When Caliph Umar arrived, he was invited to tour the city, and while visiting the holy places, the time for Muslim prayer came around. “Sophronius invited the caliph to pray where he was,” beside the tomb. “Umar courteously refused; neither would he pray in Constantine’s Martyrium. Instead

he went outside and prayed on the steps beside the busy thoroughfare of the *Cardo Maximumus*.”²² The reason for refusing the invitation of the patriarch was, as Umar explained later, “that had he prayed inside the Christian shrines, the Muslims would have confiscated them and converted them into an Islamic place of worship... Umar immediately wrote a charter forbidding Muslims to pray on the steps of the Martyrium or build a mosque there.”²³

In contrast, when the Christian Crusaders entered the holy city of Jerusalem in 1099, more than 450 years later, they committed untold massacres against its Muslim and Jewish inhabitants. “For three days the Crusaders systematically slaughtered about thirty thousand of the inhabitants of Jerusalem... Ten thousand Muslims who had sought sanctuary on the roof of the Aqsa [the third holiest place in Islam] were brutally massacred, and Jews were rounded up into their synagogues and put to the sword,”²⁴ writes Armstrong.

Muslim Arabs governed parts of Spain for almost eight centuries; neither Christians nor Jews during that period suffered persecution or even intentional hardship. Historians, Jewish historians included, seem to agree that Jews enjoyed their golden age in Spain under the Arabic-Islamic rule. But when Spain returned to Christian rule around the end of the fifteenth century in the wake of the Arabs’ defeat, no Muslim or Jew escaped persecution. All non-Christians were massacred, expelled, or forced to convert to Catholicism.

When Jewish Zionism began its quest to establish a Jewish state in Palestine, its plans included the forced deportation of Palestine’s people, both Muslim Arabs and Christian Arabs. Terrorist acts were committed against Palestinian Arabs before and after the declaration of Israeli independence in 1948. Jewish gangs and the state’s army killed innocent people and carried out terrorist acts to frighten the Muslim and Christian inhabitants of Palestine and force them to flee their homes and towns and homeland. Nathan Ghofshi, describing the actions of his fellow Jews, said, “Zionists forced the Arabs to leave cities and villages which they did not want to leave of their free will.”²⁵ Yigal Alon, a former Deputy Prime Minister in Israel, wrote in his memoirs that he used psychological warfare “to cause the tens of thousands of Arabs who remained in Galilee to flee.”²⁶ Almost all of the Galilee people who were forced to flee their homes were Christian Arabs, not Muslim Arabs.

A case from contemporary history may be even more instructive. In Bosnia, Serbs who are Orthodox Christians, Croats who are Catholics and Muslims came into conflict. All of them had lived at the time in the same country, under the same political and legal system, adhered to the same ideology, and had the same ethnic background; in other words, all had the same culture and the same life experience. But when the ideological bond fractured and the political process of nationalism was reactivated, the three communities were divided and numerous massacres were committed. Accounts of human rights groups, the UN, and other American and European government agencies indicate that the crimes committed by the Muslims of Bosnia were less vicious compared to the atrocities committed by the Serbs and Croats. Muslims were also more willing to coexist with the others peacefully in one state.

To explain the causes of mutual enmity, Huntington claims that the three peoples of Bosnia belonged to three different civilizations. Bogdan Denitch, a political activist who, unlike Huntington, is a son of former Yugoslavia and a witness to its tragedy, says that all Bosnians are ethnically and linguistically identical. "Both Serbian and Croatian national myths emphasize the centuries of wars against the Ottoman Turks. Muslim Slavs, though ethnically and linguistically identical to the Croats and Serbs, are somehow transformed into the legendary Turkish enemy and made to pay for the years of Turkish dominance."²⁷ Denitch explains how this perception was created and used to justify the killing of the other and the expropriation of their property and humanity. "For the Serbian nationalists, it is self-evident that the Albanians and Bosnian Muslims are in cahoots with the world conspiracy of Islamic fundamentalism. The Croats are obviously an extension of the permanent plot of the Vatican against Orthodox Christianity. For the Croat nationalists, the Serbs represent the barbarian non-European hordes of treacherous Byzantine out to destroy Western civilization and Christian culture."²⁸

Cultures are products of civilizations and, therefore, they derive their major traits from the civilizations that produce them. People, regardless of their cultural backgrounds and religious beliefs and histories adopt the attitudes and values dictated by the civilization in which they live. Muslims living in western countries such as Sweden, Germany and the United States are generally more tolerant and less inclined toward violence than Muslims living in Egypt who are

in turn more tolerant than Muslims living in Saudi Arabia. On the other hand, Christians living in the same western states are generally more tolerant and less inclined toward violence than Christians living in Ireland, who are in turn more tolerant than those living in Serbia and Nigeria. And what is true for Muslims and Christians is also true for followers of other religions.

People, who live in industrial and post-industrial societies, are generally more tolerant than those living in pre-industrial and agricultural societies. A German Muslim, for example, is likely to be more respectful of human rights than a Lebanese Christian. The culture of the first is in essence western whose civilizational context is industrial, while the culture of the second is in essence eastern whose civilizational context is agricultural. Because of such cultural affiliations, many American Muslims with children tend to have Christmas trees during the holidays, and many Christian Arabs tend to fast during the holy month of Ramadan. Democracy, respect for human rights, the rule of law, and religious tolerance as we know them today, are products of mature industrial and post-industrial societies. Therefore, no Christian or non-Christian society living in pre-industrial times is capable of adopting the same attitudes and values dictated by democracy and the rule of law, or have the same respect for human rights.

While religion is the core of all agricultural cultures, nationalism is the core of all early industrial cultures. Democracy on the other hand, is the core of all mature industrial cultures. Individualism, meanwhile, is fast becoming the core of the culture of the knowledge age, to which the emerging global elite belong. It is elite that, while increasingly assuming world leadership, is helplessly losing attachment to traditional ideology and social responsibility. It lives in an age where continuous change is the only unchanging fact of life, and where the culture of individualism is built around two major pillars: the maximization of personal gain, and the minimization of personal pain, nothing more and nothing less.

Every civilization and its peoples, economies and cultures are dependent on the civilization that follows. All nations and states living in pre-industrial times are less advanced, less powerful, less culturally sophisticated, and less self-confident than nations living in the industrial and post-industrial times. And because the political process dominates the lives of

peoples living in pre-industrial times, they are less free and generally bound by religion and nationalism, two ideologies that seldom tolerate political dissent or cultural diversity.

All Third World peoples, regardless of their nationality and religion, may seek to enhance their military power, may condemn western values, may talk passionately about that part of their collective memory that deals with western colonialism; they may also complain bitterly about American policies and the dictates of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). However, they cannot challenge the West or undermine its military superiority, nor can they destroy its civilization upon which they are very much dependent. The West, therefore, has no reason to worry; its nations as a group are more than one full civilization ahead of Third World nations. The frustration of Third World peoples should not be used to invoke age-old hatreds in the hearts of Christians in general and western peoples in particular. Helping Third World peoples get the right education, industrialize and move beyond the age of agriculture and its culture is the shortest, fastest, safest, and certainly most morally rewarding way to spread democracy, promote human rights, foster world peace, and ensure prosperity for all.

Culture and the World Order

As the Cold War ended and the Soviet Union disintegrated, the then existing world order, which regulated international relations for the previous half a century, came to an end. The “balance of power,” which governed East-West relations and kept the peace in Europe for decades, suddenly collapsed, creating a security vacuum in its wake. States that suffered under the old order were happy to witness its demise. Other states and nations that were able to benefit from it or violate international law with impunity under its umbrella, felt the need to resurrect it or replace it with a similar order. Henry Kissinger, for example, still argues that the bi-polar balance of power system is the only workable one.

The United States, being the only superpower left, claimed victory and assumed, without challenge, world leadership. And while the world was looking for a new order to end the controversial legacy of the past and restructure international relations on fairer bases, the United States moved to assert its dominance and ensure American economic, political and

military hegemony. As a consequence, the grievances and legitimate demands of most nations that longed for freedom and economic development were not met, leaving the old problems to fester and become endemic.

Since the political philosophers who represent the heart and mind of western culture are themselves products of the Cold War era, they could not find an alternative concept to the balance of military power. They could only reinvent it, using culture and hatred to replace it. Consequently, “hatred” and “mutuality of enmity” were advanced as principles that govern the relationship between “the West and the rest.” Huntington wrote, “There can be no true friends without true enemies. Unless we hate what we are not, we cannot love what we are.”²⁹ Such enemies, he implies, are all non-western, non-Christian peoples in general, and Muslims and Chinese in particular. “Islamic and Sinic civilizations differ fundamentally in terms of their religion, culture, social structure, traditions, politics and basic assumptions about the root of their way of life.” He goes on to urge the West to hate the East as a way to maintain its unity. “It is human to hate. For self-definition and motivation people need enemies,”³⁰ he asserts.

Such arguments and assertions and the message they carry simply say that the West must hate the East, especially and profoundly the Islamic and Chinese peoples. They also say that the West must do everything it can to limit the potentialities of non-western nations, divide them, and keep them weak and on the defensive at all times. Without such a plan of action, Huntington seems to suggest, the West would not be able to sustain its unity, preserve its supremacy, protect its interests and way of life, and promote its values. A new balance of power based on mutual hatred and perpetual enmity is thus advocated.

Despite the flashiness of the slogan, “The Clash of Civilizations,” the basic assumptions of Huntington’s thesis are flawed, making it neither realistic nor helpful. It, for example, ignores the role of economics in global politics as well as the role of globalization in unifying the world’s business and political elites and spreading the West’s culture of consumerism everywhere. It also ignores the negative impact of such developments on each state’s power base, social and cultural cohesiveness, national sovereignty, and claimed political prerogatives. In fact, the rise of China on the one hand, and the Great Recession on the other prove that the West is unable

to maintain its dominant global position forever, and that the world's economic and knowledge elites have every reason to work together and no reason to hate each other.

While all violence is bad and must be condemned, there is no violence as dangerous as the one committed in words. It poisons the soul, destroys the mind, and transforms good, innocent people into criminals. What we need is not more hatred, enmity and violence but compassion and understanding. The only true path to peaceful coexistence that enhances the humanity of all people lies in building bridges across cultural divides, recognizing and accepting ethnic, national and religious diversity, and helping poorer nations and suppressed minorities free themselves from need and oppression and climb the civilizational ladder.

Social Trust

Trust in society is without doubt an aspect of culture. However, since cultures differ from one another, expressions of trust also differ from one culture to another, and therefore from one society to another. Where trust is a shared habit, society acquires "social capital," whose presence is important to economic development. Francis Fukuyama defines social capital as "a capability that arises from the prevalence of trust in society or in certain parts of it."³¹ Fukuyama argues further that there are societies with more social trust than others (high-trust societies); and there are societies with less social trust (low-trust societies); and that societies with more social trust produce more social capital and, therefore, are better prepared to make progress and achieve prosperity. "High-trust" societies are supposed to enjoy substantial social capital and, therefore, be able to build competitive, vibrant economies. And since "trust is culturally determined," as Fukuyama claims, culture becomes the most important factor determining the economic performance of society. David Landes says, "If we learn anything from the history of economic development, it is that culture makes all the difference."³²

Social capital, which is a function of social trust, facilitates the creation of certain associations in society whose presence is indispensable to economic growth. However, "social capital, the crucible of trust and critical to the health of an economy, rests on cultural roots,"³³ Fukuyama adds. This simply means that culture determines the depth and breadth of trust in

society, and trust determines the proclivity of society to acquire social capital, which, in turn, determines the capacity of society to create the organizations and associations needed to facilitate economic development and progress.

The arguments made by Fukuyama and Landes support the one advanced by Max Weber about a century ago; however, they contradict the argument made by Karl Marx half a century earlier. To Karl Marx, economic conditions and structures shape cultures, but to Weber and Fukuyama, cultural forces shape economic conditions. This simply means that there are thinkers who believe that economic circumstances and production relations are the forces that shape peoples' cultures and determine their destiny, while others believe that cultural habits and values are the forces that shape economic conditions and determine people's future. In fact, there are still others who claim that culture is genetically determined and, therefore, it is incapable of change. In other words, such people claim that there are peoples who are destined to succeed due to their cultural genes; and there are others who are destined to fail due to their cultural genes, and that there is little that can be done to change this fact.

Max Weber, observing the different economic achievements of religious communities in America, was correct to argue that different religious beliefs and values are largely responsible for different economic outcomes. Different attitudes, work ethics and outlooks were capable of generating different economic accomplishments. Karl Marx, observing the disruptive and corrosive influence of capitalism on people's way of life and social relations, was also correct to argue that changed material conditions and economic structures are largely responsible for changing people's ways of living, attitudes and values. Nevertheless, I believe that neither culture alone nor economic conditions by themselves are capable of causing or even explaining the profound sociocultural and socioeconomic and sociopolitical transformations of society.

Cultures, which "involve attitudes as well as skills, languages, and customs,"³⁴ appeared in the early stages of human development as tools and views to deal with the environment, tie people together and help them form communities. Therefore, culture evolved in reaction to changing life conditions and was developed to enhance peoples' ability to deal with their physical and social environments. For example, the development of agriculture, which changed

society's economic conditions profoundly, led to changing the culture of people who adopted agriculture. The practice of farming the land transformed the old, tribal society, creating a new society, a new way of life, and a new civilization. This simply means that the economic aspects of life influence the development of cultures. But once established and accepted the new culture becomes the organizing principle of society, the basis of social relationships, the framework of thinking, and the social tool to deal with life challenges and changed circumstances. Culture, consequently, shapes people's attitudes toward both man and nature, making the economic aspects of life subject to its influence.

Trust, being a cultural habit, exists in all societies, in the poor as well as in the rich ones, in the traditional as well as in the modern. No relationship can be forged or sustained without a degree of trust large enough to enable all participants to feel comfortable working with each other. The form and role of trust, however, differ from one society to another because of differences in social structures and civilizational settings. In traditional societies living in pre-industrial times, trust is more of a habit that reflects values embedded in the social fabric of society. In non-traditional societies living in the industrial and post-industrial ages, trust is more of an attitude that reflects rational thinking. The former tends to be concerned primarily with relationships shaped by values; the latter tends to be concerned primarily with economic interests and relationships shaped by laws and ethical codes of conduct.

Traditional Trust and Social Trust

Traditional trust prevails within largely closed circles such as families and communities of faith. Non-traditional trust, or social trust, prevails in largely open circles, particularly in organizations and within relationships built around interests. And since relationships within smaller circles tend to be stable, traditional trust tends to be stable as well, playing similar roles in all such relationships. Social trust, in contrast, tends to change as business interests change; it thus plays different roles in the lives of different societies and organizations. The first is a function of culture, which seldom changes within one's lifetime; the latter is a function of economic interests that normally live a life of continuous change.

In an increasingly complex world, where global transactions are numbered in the billions every minute, no system can function without social trust. Traditional trust would certainly make things easier and life less stressful, but trusting people who place different values on the same things is not possible. Only social trust based on enforceable laws and contractual arrangements will do. However, as societies move from the agricultural to the industrial age, life becomes more complex, relationships multi-faceted, and interests more prevalent and relevant, causing old traditions and values to fracture. Since cultures change slowly and have always resisted change, all societies in transition experience cultural chaos and a *trust deficit*.

During transitional periods that separate one civilization from another, while traditional trust loses ground as its space shrinks, social trust is still weak because its legal base is yet to be developed and accepted. A trust deficit is created, allowing an environment of corruption, hypocrisy, opportunism and nepotism to grow and prevail. Nevertheless, some people could still be trustworthy in the traditional sense, yet untrustworthy in the social sense. Nepotism is only one example of a behavior exhibiting commitment to traditional family ties and blood relationships and, at the same time, disregard for the law, the public interest and the interests of strangers. While personal and familial loyalty may continue and even strengthen in an environment characterized by political corruption, national loyalty and social responsibility are always weakened.

If you were driving a car in a Third World town where you know most people, you are likely to have little trust in drivers facing you on the road, even drivers you know personally. In contrast, if you were driving in a large American or European city where you do not know anyone personally, you are more likely to trust drivers facing you on the road, even drivers you have never met. Generally speaking, drivers in underdeveloped countries tend to ignore traffic regulations and disregard the law, making it less safe to drive in such countries. In contrast, drivers in western societies tend to respect traffic regulations and abide by the law, making it safer to drive in such countries. So, in the first case, you have little or no trust in the driving habits of other drivers because you know they often ignore the law. However, in the second case, you trust the driving habits of other drivers because you know they seldom violate the

law. Trust in the first case is traditional based on personal knowledge of established habits; in the second, trust is social based on enforceable laws and regulations. Social trust emanates from trusting that others respect the same laws and agreements we respect and abide by.

The so-called “low-trust” societies have plenty of traditional trust, but little social trust; the so-called “high-trust” societies have plenty of social trust, but little traditional trust. Since social trust is more important in industrial and post-industrial societies, traditional trust is not enough because it lacks the capacity to manage complicated transactions that characterize life in such societies. Traditional societies lacking adequate social trust are unable to manage complicated systems and institutions and organizations that characterize industrial societies; and therefore, they are less able to develop their economies and make progress. Yet, they are better equipped to define their identities and maintain the integrity of their families and communities. Minorities whose members are tied to one another by faith and age-old values, tend to exhibit strong allegiance to their traditions and identities, but lack what it takes to make enough scientific and economic progress to live the age and enjoy what it has to offer. In fact, there is no faith based and religiously conservative minority anywhere in the world, be it Moslem or Jewish or Christian or Hindu, that enjoys high standards of living and can relate to the modern world in a purely rational manner.

The Great Recession is an indication of a trust deficit caused by the transition of the American society from the industrial age to the knowledge age. People in banking and finance, mortgage lending and insurance, driven by greed and lack of social responsibility, were able to exploit old laws and regulations, create new, highly complicated financial products, manipulate their clients, and take unwarranted risks that caused a mortgage bubble that led to the 2008 financial crisis. The health reform bill passed by the US congress in 2009 and the financial reform bill passed in 2010 are attempts to close that trust deficit. But since the trust deficit in my view is larger and deeper than most people think, the reform bills are unlikely to prevent by themselves another financial crisis and a deeper recession from happening in the near future. In fact, most people do not understand the meaning and importance of trust deficits; and therefore, they do not know where and when they occur and how to deal with them.

According to Fukuyama, Japan is a high trust society, with plenty of social trust. As such Japan is supposed to be more capable of organizing its economy and economic relationships in ways that improve the productivity of workers and increase the efficiency of business operations. And because of its “propensity for spontaneous sociability,” as Fukuyama claims, Japan is supposed to be more innovative in creating and managing new systems and relationships. In other words, the high-trust societies are supposed to have more dynamic economies and innovative business communities, and faster wealth generating institutions. But for two decades starting with the early 1990s, Japan appeared to have a stagnant economy, largely conservative business elite, and a slow wealth generating society.

In an open society with a dynamic economy, people are more concerned with interests than with values, causing social trust to be more important than traditional trust. In such a society, which the United States represents, contractual arrangements become the norm, and winning, just like losing, becomes an ordinary occurrence with minimal social consequences. In a rather conservative Japanese society, some business managers committed suicide in the 1990s because of business failures and due to the social stigma that goes with failure. In the United States about 1.6 million people declared bankruptcy in 2011 with no Americans committing suicide because of business failure. Meanwhile, many Americans who were convicted of stealing public money, defrauding investors, and committing sexual and other crimes became celebrities. The U.S. today is a country where an infamous person has a good chance of becoming rich and famous, while an honest person has a better chance of dying without either money or fame.

The Chinese society, says Fukuyama, “is regulated not by a constitution and system of laws flowing from it but by the internalization of Confucian ethical principles on the part of each individual as a process of socialization.”³⁵ The same socialization process of ethical principles pervades in most Islamic countries such as Iran, Egypt and Saudi Arabia as well as in most Catholic countries such as Bolivia, Croatia, Ireland and Mexico. The fact that Chinese societies were able to achieve genuine economic development in the last 30 years, while most Islamic and Latin American countries are still unable to do the same, has little to do with either Islam,

Confucianism or Catholicism. Only when China did what Japan had done a century earlier, departed from its traditional value system and communist ideology, and launched a plan to transform its culture that it was able to make meaningful progress. So, the key to societal change and economic development is not reviving old cultural values and traditions but transforming existing cultural values, traditions and attitudes.

The old Chinese ethics to which much credit is being given by Fukuyama and others were described by Hegel about 150 years ago as deceptive and fraudulent. Hegel wrote, “No honor exists and no one has an individual right in respect of others, the consciousness of debasement predominates. [The Chinese] are notorious for deceiving whenever they can. Friend deceives friend and no one resents the attempt at deception. Their frauds are most astutely and craftily performed.”³⁶ Such a judgment, while clearly racist, describes ethics that could not engender social trust or be responsible for the rise of any nation. No one at the time asked Hegel if he had lived in China long enough to understand the Chinese culture or if he had interacted with a Chinese farmer. Large Third World cities like Cairo, Lagos and Mexico City are places where traditional trust is dying, and social trust is unable to be born; large cities in industrial states like London, New York and Rome are places where social trust is in a coma, and no one is aware of what is happening to it. The micro credit enterprise that started in Bangladesh decades ago and became a global phenomenon could not have happened without trust because loans are made without collateral. And though poor women are the major recipients of these loans, the rate of default is near zero, not because of social trust but due to the prevalence of traditional trust.

Plans to organize societies in ways that promote economic development can only succeed if sociocultural incentives and hindrances are flexible enough to facilitate social and economic change. In Southeast Asia, the plan to transform the economy was introduced in conjunction with a program to transform the sociocultural context. In Egypt, Venezuela and Nigeria, the economic plans failed because they did not include similar programs to transform the sociocultural contexts. And when the industrializing Asian nations decided in the mid-1990s to preserve traditions and rely on traditional relationships, both the economy and society suffered a serious setback. Relying on traditional trust, while failing to further develop social trust, had

encouraged cronyism and led to the spread of corruption and unaccountability, causing crisis to engulf society.

Cultural values, traditions and attitudes are generally valid within their own civilizational contexts, and more so within their societal contexts. Therefore, values, traditions and attitudes are relative and should not be judged outside their particular societal contexts. For example, while it is possible and largely fair to compare certain Indian traditions with similar ones in Egypt, it is neither possible nor fair to compare aspects of Indian or Egyptian cultural values with those of Germany or the United States. For example, an attitude that tolerates casual sex in America is considered immoral by cultures rooted in the agricultural age. In contrast, a tradition that punishes political dissent in Egypt is considered unlawful in America.

The high trust/low trust model articulated by Fukuyama is an attempt to explain the differences in economic achievements among nations. However, it ignores three important facts that make its assumptions largely unrealistic and its conclusions highly unreliable, if not harmful.

1. It ignores the fact that cultures are products of civilizations that change greatly and profoundly as society moves from one civilization to another;
2. It ignores the fact that all industrial societies have similar cultures and live in the same industrial civilization and that their economic and technological achievements are at roughly the same level; and
3. It fails to realize that the impact of economy on culture is nearly as important as Marx had argued when society is industrializing, and that the impact of culture on economy is nearly as important as Weber had argued when society is in a largely stable civilizational stage. Therefore, to base the analysis on one view and dismiss the other is to distort reality and produce unreliable conclusions.

Every person has a need to belong to a group in which he can seek and receive recognition. Yet, while seeking social recognition, most individuals find themselves belonging to several groups starting with the family and moving outwards to larger circles that usually end with the state.

As one moves from the smaller, more intimate circles to the larger, less personal ones, his sense of belonging and loyalty weakens progressively. The rules of belonging and competition within smaller circles are usually well defined and strictly observed, but loose and flexible within larger circles. As a consequence, trust, honesty and collective responsibility tend to be strong within family circles, good within clans, weak and shadowy within organizations, and largely non-existent between estranged communities. Social trust in pre-industrial societies, therefore, is very weak not because of culture or religion but because of social and economic structures. Association in such societies is largely vertical, not horizontal; therefore it limits individual social mobility as well as opportunity. Traditional trust and social trust are largely incompatible; where traditional trust is strong, social trust tends to be weak; and where social trust is strong, traditional trust tends to be weak.

While the prevalence of traditional trust deepens mutual obligations within smaller groups, it weakens social trust and social responsibility within larger groups. Members of each group, while trusting each other, tend to vest little trust in members of other groups, especially competing ethnic and religious ones. On the other hand, the prevalence of traditional trust and the mutual obligations it engenders within smaller groups serves to strengthen families and ethnic communities as well as communities of faith, helping them control crime and social vice. They also provide a strong support system to help the poor and the elderly, preventing them from drifting in large numbers into drug addiction, poverty and homelessness. For example, the twenty-one Arab states have a population of about 360 million compared to 310 million for the United States, and a per capita income about 10 percent of that of the United States. However, while the United States has millions of homeless people, the homelessness phenomenon hardly exists in the Arab world. Yet mutual suspicion between different ethnic and religious groups on the one hand, and a general lack of social trust on the other, make conflict in traditional societies easy to ignite but difficult to contain. When conflict erupted in Sudan, Somalia, Lebanon and Algeria, it was bloody and very costly in human and material terms.

Where vertical association is the norm, as is the case in traditional agricultural societies in general, authoritarianism normally thrives and democracy suffers; and where horizontal

association is the norm, as is the case in industrial and post-industrial societies, democracy normally thrives and authoritarianism suffers. Where vertical association is the norm, no member of a small ethnic or religious group is usually able to get more recognition unless someone else gets less. The game in such societies is more of a zero-sum game that facilitates neither social change nor social mobility, nor encourages personal initiative. In contrast, where association is horizontal, most people are able to get more without necessarily causing others to get less, because the game in such societies often produces positive results. Historical records show that since the Industrial Revolution the relative number of losers in all post-agricultural societies has decreased as the relative number of winners has increased.

People living in pre-industrial times are less able to produce and accumulate wealth, even when money arrives without much effort; they are more able to spend it senselessly than invest it wisely as the Spaniards had demonstrated when they colonized Latin America and the oil-exporting Arab, African and Latin American states have demonstrated since the 1950s. While most Arab states were able to build their infrastructure, they have failed to develop their social infrastructure and human capital. Economic restructuring cannot achieve economic development by itself; it needs sociocultural transformation to cause societal development and facilitate progress that touches the lives of all members of society.

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