The Promises and Pitfalls of Using Cultural Explanations to Explain Local Development

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Abstract

Culture and local context are important not only for explaining the behaviour and goals of beneficiaries but also for explaining those of the donor community. James C. Scott (1998) argues that external interventions wreak havoc on local communities because culture and local knowledge are left out of the donor's administrative categories. Therefore, donors need to take culture and local context into account. 1) how culture and local context are to be established; 2) what the pitfalls are; and 3) what research strategies are useful for overcoming these pitfalls. These issues are explored in this paper.

W hy have efforts to improve economic development led to declines in human welfare? Why does such a large gap exist between the ideal image of how a development project will be carried out and how it is actually implemented? Enlightened rationalism would lead us to gather more and better quality data, to ask more questions, and to impose more order on these localities of chaos. Paradoxically, the attempts to impose such order have necessarily led to greater chaos and remarkable development failures.

This paper examines the paradox. In particular, the paper outlines why attempts to adjust development strategies to local realities has failed and under what conditions such adjustments might succeed. For a development agency to adjust to local realities it has to take into account its own culture and context as well as that of the localities in which it intervenes. Turning the analytical lens on both the donor and the recipient, one brings the contradiction into focus. The perceived backwardness of recipient communities relies on the categories made available by the development agency. The way that these agencies "see" precludes tolerance for the learning-by-doing and innovation that lead to sustainable local development.

What has gone wrong?

Three inter-related problems have prevented development agencies from adjusting to local realities: 1) the bureaucratic requirement that information be simplified has rendered important social practices invisible; 2) the historical background and local contexts have not been considered in assessing project feasibility; and 3) tautological thinking has mis-identified the relevant factors for economic development.

Simple categories and myopic vision

James Scott[1] reminds us that the grand schemes that government planners have devised to improve human welfare often have unintended consequences. All of these schemes require that empirical reality be simplified. Such simplifications are understandable from the point of view of the planner. Just as a cadastral map does not indicate every field, bush, and flower along a road, neither do the categories that planners devise for assessing local development. While making the actions of bureaucrats more transparent and outputs more susceptible to monitoring, these simplifications have had negative consequences.

Agricultural projects meant to improve the financial profits derived from timber have resulted in the destruction of entire ecosystems and the obliteration of valuable resources found among the underbrush. What matters in such a system are the number of trees in the forest. All else becomes invisible to the planner. The medicinal herbs, foodstuffs, and symbiotic organisms are present in the forest before its scientific re-organisation, but for the planner these other resources do not exist. The

[1] James Scott, Seeing Like A State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

planner's way of seeing allows her to see some things with remarkable clarity and other things not at all.

The planner's tunnel vision can be disastrous. The scientifically managed forests have placed its owners in a vulnerable financial position because there are no other types of plants in the forest to diversify the investment in the event of a natural disaster. A tree mold leaves the forest devastated. The pedicured rows of trees, though easy to count, show themselves to be a high risk.

Likewise, urban development planners trying to construct the perfect city in Brasilia instead built a city that negates most of the planners' goals: spatial polarisation increased, user satisfaction decreased, and social cohesion declined. Similarly high hopes in Punjab resulted in a large cement public square where the public dare not gather. The enormous slabs of cement trap the heat within the square, increasing the air temperature in an already hot climate. Huddled against the walls of the square, the users of the space stare out onto a wasteland.

James Scott blames these failures on the need of the state to impose order on what seems to be chaos. The state must insist on "legibility" in order to act upon the social world. In order to govern, the state needs to be able to monitor its subjects. Imposing legibility on one's territory is the most effective way for the state to see what its subjects are doing.

Flying over the Midwest of the United States, just west of the Ohio River, one sees the visual order imposed on space. Plots of lands are divided into nearly perfect squares and rectangles. Thomas Jefferson first proposed that land be given such visual orderliness in an effort to reduce fraud. It is much harder for land owners to cheat the taxing authority or potential buyers of their land if the boundaries of that land can be easily defined and its use easily monitored. Pre-existing land use patterns had to be abandoned. Enlightenment rationalism prevailed.[2]

The visual order championed by the planners and the experienced order observable on the ground reflect two ways of seeing. In this sense culture is a mental map, a way of seeing. Unfortunately, development practitioners often talk about the effect of culture on development by referring only to the culture of the intended beneficiaries. There are two cultures in conflict: the culture of the bureaucracy and the culture of the local community. The right to impose one's vision on space depends on one's power of coercion. This coercive power blinds both the state and its challengers to the way that culture works at the level of the state. The rational order of the planners is assumed to be a-cultural, above the idiosyncratic and beyond the superstitious. The backward attitudes of the beneficiaries, in this view, retard economic development.

Ignoring culture and the contexts in which culture operates, the planners offer an explanation of local economic development that is not easily falsifiable. If the plan fails, it is because the local culture militates against development. Local culture is often defined after a project failure. Indicators of a "backward" culture are deduced from the failed case study itself. Such explanations lack other comparison communities in which the same local culture could be identified before the intervention (ex ante) and in which the outcomes of such interventions are not synonymous with the supposed cause. Most explanations of how local cultures prevent economic development are ex post factum. They describe; they do not explain.

The donor community has adopted this very strategy to explain their own development records. If their projects implemented by the state or local development agencies fail, then it is because the state lacks strong institutions or the organisations adequate capacity. If institutional strength and organisational capacity can be established before the intervention takes place (and, to some extent, they can), then projects prone to failure should not be tried. It is far easier to blame one's project failures on the intended beneficiaries or the implementing institutions than on one's own myopic vision of development. Playing both ends against the middle, the donor community escapes scrutiny.

Moving beyond myopia

To expand the vision of the planner it has been suggested that culture and context be taken into account. Such a strategy should not be championed unequivocally. While culture and context offer great promise for understanding local development, they are fraught with dangers. Culture, in particular, is susceptible to grand generalisations. Platitudes parade as scientific explanation. And context has sometimes fallen victim to truisms. To grand generalisations and truisms this paper now turns.

The Pitfalls of Culture

Aware of the danger of grand generalisations, Max Weber admonished social scientists against universal

[2] Ibid., 49-51.

laws. Universal laws of social life operate at such a high level of abstraction that they are vacuous. Such explanations lack the concrete details and historical context that would make such laws meaningful.[3]

Often the product of tautology, grand narratives are the knowledge of the universal or the general. The literal meaning of tautology is to say the same thing twice [*tauto* = redundant, *logos* = saying]. Once discovered as tautological, the hypothesis is quickly disregarded as obviously erroneous. Unfortunately, the self-evident errors of such statements are only self-evident *after* the development community has changed its mind about what *ought to be* the cause of local or national development. Tautologies allow planners to cloak their schemes in scientific language and to put forth ideas that cannot be challenged easily.

Take, for example, the hypotheses about cultural dispositions and national economic development. Bela Balassa debunks the *ex post* "self-evident" truths about how cultural factors have led to remarkable growth in East Asia. The "Chinese factor" has been cited by some for Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand. However, "few explanations have been offered for the success of the? migr's in contradistinction to the lack of economic development of their homeland."[4] Also the Chinese have been in Taiwan for centuries, but development has been unspectacular, if one looks at level of per capita incomes after the war. Balassa then uses the example of Japan, citing a report published in the *Japan Times* on August 18, 1915: to see your men at work made me feel that you are a very satisfied easy-going race who reckon time is not an object. When I spoke to some managers they informed me that it was impossible to change the habits of national heritage.[5]

With economic development, the popular image of the Japanese changed from that of the happy-go-lucky natives to the work-a-holic executives.

It has almost been forgotten that the Confucian ethic had been the cultural explanation some offered for East Asia's remarkable growth in the early 90s, but in the 1950s it was said that the Confucian heritage of Japan and Korea led to their economic stagnation.[6] To see the logical fallacy, reformulate these cultural hypotheses as follows: *An industrious people do industrious things.* The industriousness of the nation is defined by the activities of its inhabitants. Cultural heritage imprecisely labels the level of industriousness found among a nation and the success that such industriousness yields. The effect is indistinguishable from the cause. The explanation is thus defined as tautological.

The Pitfalls of Context

Where development theory has avoided the tautology it has encountered the truism. A truism is a banal statement that is self-evident. Upon hearing a truism, one wonders how it could be otherwise. Robert Putnam's[7] early investigations into the role of social capital on local governance demonstrates how easily this pitfall is taken. Putnam sees civic participation as the explanation for why the regional governments in northern Italy are more responsive and better functioning than those in the south. Although Putnam pays attention to the local context, he is snagged by a truism. To highlight this, Alejandro Portes and Margarita Mooney characterise Putnam's hypothesis thus:

For every political system, If authorities and the population are imbued with a sense of collective responsibility and altruism; Then, the system will be better governed and its policies will be more effective.[8]

Although this set of propositions does not say the same thing twice, it baffles the senses to see how any other outcome could be possible.

The Promise of Context

Avoiding truisms is not sufficient for understanding social life. One must also keep in mind that all events are culturally and historically bound. The job of the social scientist is to create ideal types of that reality. An ideal type is an approximation of reality and serves as a heuristic tool for investigating the empirical world:

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[3] Max Weber, 'Objectivity in the Social Sciences' in Max Weber on the Methodology of the Social Sciences, translated and edited by E.A. Shils and H.A. Finch (New York: Free Press, [1949] 1969), 80.

[4] Bela Balassa, 'Lessons of East Asian Development', Journal of Economic Development and Cultural Change, 36 (1988), S254.

[5] Ibid., S275.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Robert Putnam, Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

[8] Alejandro Portes and Margarita Mooney, 'Social Capital and Community Development' (Working Paper Series, The Center for Migration and Development; Princeton University; Princeton, New Jersey, 2001), 8.

An ideal type is formed by the one-sided accentuation of one or more points of view and by synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete, more or less present and occasionally absence concrete phenomena, which are arranged according to those one-sidedly emphasised viewpoints into a unified analytical construct *(Gedankenbild)*.[9] The ideal type is a means for investigating local communities. They are never an end in themselves.

Mark Granovetter[10] relies on Clifford Geertz's work to develop ideal types of social organisation. These ideal types explain why Balinese enterprises fail but Chinese ones succeed. All small enterprise owners face a common dilemma. As enterprise owners become more financially successful, they become the targets of favour-seeking friends and kin. If an entrepreneur tries to accommodate too many friends and relatives, he finds that his once profitable enterprise has become a welfare hotel. Granovetter developed ideal types as heuristic tools for understanding how the local context and cultural repertoire available to these two groups of enterprises affect their economic trajectories.

Both the Balinese and the Chinese participate in small groups in which reciprocity exchanges occur. The difference between these two ethnic groups is that the Balinese entrepreneurs are visited frequently by relatives and friends who need favours whereas the Chinese are not. One of Clifford Geertz's informants noticed a difference in the way that Balinese and Chinese businesses staffed their enterprises:

[if you go into a Balinese business,] there are a half-dozen directors, a book-keeper or two, several clerks, some truck drivers and a hoard *(sic)* of semi-idle workers; if you go into a Chinese concern of the same size there is just the proprietor, his wife, and his ten-year-old boy, but they are getting even more work done."[11]

This description of the Balinese and the Chinese small businesses accentuates the salient features of each enterprise. Social scientists interested in the economic development of small enterprises can take this description and use it as an investigative tool. Are the small businesses in the local community of interest inundated with workers or are these enterprises lean? What kinds of social obligations do entrepreneurs have to friends and kin? Are these obligations arranged horizontally among equals or vertically among persons of different status?

Geertz uses the history of these localities to explain why these enterprises are organised differently. The Chinese in Java occupy a minority position, so there are fewer people who will request favours from the Chinese. The Javanese belong to many groups, called *seka*. Their memberships in such groups overlap, and their solidarity is dissipated across this multiplicity of groups. The historical context weakens the claim that there is something inherent in Chinese culture that makes the Chinese more efficient capitalist.

Indeed, Chinese culture does not shield Chinese entrepreneurs in China from friends or relatives in need of jobs, loans, or other favours. Siu-Lun Wong writes that some Chinese entrepreneurs will leave their home communities in search of places where they will encounter few relatives. They can only reduce their social obligations to their friends and kin by severing those ties. This gives the entrepreneur the "immigrant advantage" of being outside of his native community where he is obligated to others and they to him.[12]

The Promise of Culture

The practices that Geertz identifies demonstrate how the social organisation of enterprises and the position of entrepreneurs within networks helps us understand why some enterprises are successful while others are not. These explanations rely on the local context in which the entrepreneurs operate as well as the history of these groups. These contextual factors do not serve as substitutes for understanding the role that culture plays.

Culture is often credited with retarding development. Used in this sense, culture is the mental map that local people use for making decisions. The challenge to social science is developing a rigorous approach to identifying what culture is. To establish culture one needs data. How can one observe the non-material map that guides actors to do some things but not others? This presents a great challenge to the planner and the social scientist. Without observable behaviour, one is left with speculation—the self-evident and the tautological. Inferences from observable behaviour are mere refractions through the prism

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[9] Weber (1969), 90.

[10] Mark Granovetter, 'The Economic Sociology of Firms and Entrepreneurs' in A. Portes (ed.), The Economic Sociology of Immigration: Essays on Networks, Ethnicity, and Entrepreneurship (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1995)

[11] Geertz cited in Ibid., 144.

[12] Siu-Lun Wong cited in Ibid., 145.

of the researcher's mind. Rather than explaining how the natives think, the researcher at best can explain how the researcher thinks the natives think. These abstractions are useful if inter-subjectively valid within a community of researchers, grounded in empirical reality, and useful for making predictions.

Social scientists can sketch a group's social values by observing what practices are rewarded and which ones punished. Rewards and punishments may be material or social. For example, one might ask under what conditions community members are ostracised. What kinds of behaviour will cause an individual to "lose face" in what kinds of transactions? How strong is the social machinery for distributing sanctions in the community? Alejandro Portes and Julia Sensenbrenner[13] adopt this approach in understanding the different economic outcomes for immigrants in the United States. Rather than culture, they call it "value introjection" and categorise it as a source of social capital.

The social ties that one has with others result in the emergence of group values (culture) and these values affect what goals people within the community will seek. The community's values do not prevent individuals from pursuing various courses of action. However, these values do make the pursuit of some goals easier than others. Interviews with members of a community will reveal whether individuals will be called derogatory names for pursuing certain forms of employment or will be shunned by the community for not repaying a loan to her neighbour. An individual can defy these local values but does so at her own peril.

To the extent that local values are constituted from systematic observation, the researcher can develop testable propositions. If non-routine behaviour is usually frowned upon and social sanctions strong, then the community is less likely to be receptive to innovation. The enforceable trust that some communities possess, while a form of social capital, might also block innovation and change. To understand how the sanctioning apparatus will be deployed, one must understand what the community values.

An understanding of local values (culture) and the sanctioning capacity of the community (context) enable development agencies to break the cycle of failure. If the planner knows that some communities are receptive to innovative projects and have the sanctioning capacity to monitor and control those projects on their own, then the planner can surrender her traditional categories of thought and allow communities to try new approaches to local development. Likewise, if a new development project is tried in a community that is not receptive to innovation and where the sanctioning machinery is strong, then the planner can anticipate that the project will have effects other than those intended.

The Conundrum

Although culture and context are critical for understanding local development outcomes, the way that donor agencies define development precludes taking culture and context into account. The donors and the implementing agencies must impose legibility on the world. Inputs and outputs need to be counted, paid for, and recognised. This need for legibility often leads to one-size-fits-all prescriptions. The planners themselves do not think that all communities are the same, but for the purposes of institutional accountability, the planner must act *as if* all communities are roughly equal. The only way to take culture and context into account is to abandon accountability as it is currently practised. However, if accountability is abandoned, then one opens up opportunities for malfeasance. Legibility brings some areas of social life into focus and ignores most of the rest. The call to take culture and context into account is a call to see what is now not seen. And the way to see the unseen is to abandon our current methods for monitoring development projects. Paradoxically, in order to see one must stop looking.

These recommendations seem anarchic, yet such fluidity is what characterises success. Innovation occurs because someone does something out of the ordinary. Given the record of development failures in local communities, a changed record of success would be nothing short of innovation. This paper has argued that the development community confronts a paradox. In order to promote development, the bureaucratic agencies must hold accountability in abeyance. Legible plans are fixed, not fluid, by definition. Plans that take culture and context into account become less legible but more closely tied to reality and more difficult to monitor. The culture of development organisations militates against taking culture and context into account. Local development is retarded from above, not below.

[13] Alejandro Portes and Julia Sensenbrenner, 'Embeddedness and Immigration: Notes on the Social Determinants of Economic Action', American Journal of Sociology, 98 (1993), 1320-50.

The Way Out of the Conundrum

There are two ways out of the conundrum. First, development agencies should surrender their categories when those agencies support development projects in strong communities. Strong communities are those with a demonstrable social machinery for distributing rewards and punishments. In such communities, malfeasance will be dealt with speedily. Those facing punishment will have recourse to the state (voice) in the event of violence or exit if they find the penalties too great. Second, members of the international community must voice their opposition to failed development programs. These failures must be linked in the public imagination. So long as failures are seen as idiosyncratic and the results of local culture, the way that the culture of the donor community contributes to these failures remains hidden. Voicing one's opposition to development failures and linking those failures to the way that international organisations "see" is an important, and inherently political, step.

Bringing culture and context into one's account of local development is not merely technical. It is value laden and must be recognised as such. Challenging the way that development organisations see the world must move beyond sensitising notions if the challenge is to bear fruit. Local communities do not need more sensitive development practitioners (although this would not be a bad start). These communities most sorely need a new lens through which development is refracted, understood, and *practised.* What is ultimately at stake is how social categories will be shaped, how the language of development will be ordered, and how relevant parties will obtain access to this language. In his treatise on cultural power, the late sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has placed the challenge squarely before us:

> Knowledge of the social world and, more precisely, the categories which make it possible, are the stakes par *excellence* of the political struggle, a struggle which is inseparably theoretical and practical.[14]

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[14] Pierre Bourdieu, 'Cultural Power' in Cultural Sociology, L. Spillman (ed.), (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, Inc.), (2001), 69-76.