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Culture and the economy: Landes and the Wealth of Nations

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My brief is to look from an anthropological point of view at the concept of culture in relation to social and economic history and I do this merely by examining one work, that of David Landes in *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations*.¹ Since this topic is a highly debated one I need to say where I'm coming from. When I use the word culture I do so in a general anthropological way, not in the popular sense where the word refers to 'high culture, and by extension to parallel 'artistic' activities at more democratic levels. But I do not confine it, as many American anthropologists do, to belief systems, systems of meaning I use it as most British anthropologists have done, as the virtual equivalent of the social in the Durkheimian sense, which in there is a rough equivalent to Ruth Benedict's 'learned behaviour'. In other words, it is an inclusive concept that follows the definition of E.B. Tylor in 1881 and includes 'material culture' as well as ideologies and family structure. When I claim I am interested in the history of human culture, I do so in the wide sense, ignoring the utility of the distinction between the social and the cultural that is embodied in much of American social science and between social and cultural history (the former seen as concerned with the collective, the cultural with the individual). The insistence on the independence of the cultural by American anthropologists and of the social by French sociologists were part of 'professional' attempts to establish those fields as independent of other disciplines. The concepts are set up in opposition to others to define one's own activities in opposition to that of others which one sees as neglecting topics with which one wants to deal. That is perhaps seen most clearly in the establishment of the Department of Social Relations at Harvard in the 1940s. The social system was divided into four sub-systems, one concerned with the economy, one with the personality (psychology), a third with the social (sociology), the fourth with the cultural (anthropology). To

1 D. Landes, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations: why some are so rich and others so poor* (London 1998).

the latter was loosely assigned beliefs, values and symbolic behaviour, a less than satisfactory division for most European social scientists.

One of the most systematic and prominent attempts to introduce culture as a variable into economic history has been the work of David Landes and which carries the subtitle 'Why are some nations so rich and some so poor'? In the final chapter (29) Landes summarises his answer. For over a thousand years 'the key factor – the driving force – has been western civilisation and its dissemination' – the knowledge, the techniques, the political and social ideologies.

He strongly regrets the line of thought which attempts to modify this position (by asking did Europe really have comparative advantage in 1000 AD, was all development diffusion? Who contributed the gun powder and the printing press?) And his thesis boldly returns to the position of Max Weber both in hypothesis and in approach. 'If we learn anything from the history of economic development, it is that culture makes all the difference. (Hence Max Weber was right on). Witness the enterprise of expatriate minorities – the Chinese in East and Southeast Asia, Indians in East Africa, Lebanese in West Africa, Jews and Calvinists through much of Europe, and so on and on. Yet culture, in the sense of inner values and attitudes that guide a population, frightens scholars. It has a sulfuric odour of race and inheritance, an air of immutability. In thoughtful moments, economists and social scientists recognise that this is not true, and indeed salute examples of cultural change for the better while deploring changes for the worse'. (p.516) To such an approach he contrasts not only 'anti-Europeanists' but technicians who 'would rather do: change interest rates...'

He does recognise one major criticism of culture as an explanatory variable. If it does so much, 'why does it not work consistently?' Why have the Chinese 'long been so unproductive at home and yet so enterprising away'. The answer is that 'culture does not stand alone; the same values thwarted by bad government at home can find opportunity elsewhere. Hence the special success of emigrant enterprise'. So 'culture's response to economic enterprise are limited'. In Thailand young men spent less time in monasteries; business calls, illustrating 'culture's response to economic growth and opportunity'. (p.517) The reverse is also probable – cultures may work against enterprise, as in Russia, though some elements are 'enterprising', especially among non-Russian minorities. (p.518)

What do we gather from this summary? Culture seems to be resistant to economics, and refers specifically to 'inner values and attitudes', such as the Protestant (Calvinist) ethic. It can support or limit 'enterprise', as can governments. It is not unchangeable, yet it is of long duration – Europe had it right from 1000 CE but Britain 'lost out' in the Second Industrial Revolution.

So Landes resorts very frequently to 'culture' as an explanatory variable. But what does that mean? To an anthropologist virtually every human action is contained within that notion, which has been defined as 'learned behaviour', by others more vaguely as symbolic behaviour, a definition which shifts the focus more to-

wards ‘inner values’ of which he speaks. On the other hand, culture is for Landes not limited to these inner values. Of the achievements of South Korea and Taiwan he writes that they ‘reflect ... the culture of those societies: the family structure, work values, sense of purpose’. (p.437) With regard to the achievements of Holland, he comments: that is where culture came in: ‘it defined patterns of recruitment, avenues of opportunity, and sources of satisfaction’. (p.447) Britain’s ‘abdication’ from its earlier greatness at the time of the Second Industrial Revolution was the result of ‘want of knowledge, imagination and enterprise’. Some have sought to explain these shortcomings ‘by exogenous factors, notably culture’ (p.458), by the triumph of anti-business. Culture gives but it also takes away.

Elsewhere, especially regarding the East, the problem of the lack of development is seen as having partly to do with the ‘social’ fact that all those countries are despotisms (p.410). However the trouble he argues also lies ‘with the culture’ ‘which (1) does not generate an informed and capable work force; (2) continues to mistrust or reject new techniques that come from the enemy west (Christendom); and (3) does not respect such knowledge as members do manage to achieve...’. (p.410) Arab failings in these respects ‘go way back’. (p.411) In Egypt the primary problem of development lay in ‘its social and cultural incapability’. (p.405) It is difficult to see something as all-embracing as culture, however defined, acting in this way. While some of these strictures may have a measure of validity in limited spheres, they are clearly wrong in others. Otherwise how would Iran have developed an oil industry or Iraq weapons of mass destruction? It is not the total culture that is characterised by ‘incapability’, even if it could be claimed that certain sectors can be. The whole discussion is pitched at an unacceptable level of overgenerality.

If culture is exogenous, as he claims, what constitutes the (endogenous) system? Given that Landes is an economic historian, he is presumably erecting the same system boundaries as economists; outside the economy, every other factor is ‘social’, in his case usually cultural. Marx’s variables would fall within, Weber’s outside. One can perfectly well understand that a group of specialists may want to place limits on the variables they wish to consider in any situation or situations, but such a decision is either pragmatic or formalistic; to set aside all other variables as social or cultural meaning and is therefore without much meaning and represents an avoidance of rather than an approach to analysis. The practice appears to offer an explanatory framework (‘culture intervenes here’) but in fact does nothing of the sort. The concept lacks specificity.

Culture is usually seen as a set of long-enduring background variables. Not that it cannot change – as we have seen Landes admits of this possibility (p.447). But the concept refers to ‘social’ rather than ‘individual’ factors. The Japanese resistance to foreign imports came from ‘deep-rooted, culturally determined consumer preferences’. It is difficult to imagine what consumer preferences are not ‘culturally determined’ unless we are referring to idiosyncratic individual choices but many

are not deep-rooted. While the author admits these cultural factors can change, he is only too often stresses the deep roots and talks, as in the case of France, of national traditions going back to Colbert (p.469). Again he quotes with approval the comment that the Japanese 'national character' is strikingly marked (p.351), a notion which again refers to long-standing, indeed primordial, tendencies.

In a recent book Partha Dasgupta adopts an eclectic view of 'culture' as a variable in economics, referring specifically to Landes' work. Culture is defined more directly as 'a community's shared values and dispositions'.² But he also remarks that culture can be regarded as 'patterns of behaviour of differentiating groups',³ patterns that modify 'the most efficient mode of organisation'. These differences are grounded in beliefs, including the beliefs people hold about one another. So that culture can be looked upon simultaneously as common behaviour, shared beliefs, and common values and dispositions, but always outside 'the most efficient' (i.e. economic) form.⁴ In that sense it is residual.

To the archaeologist, like the anthropologist, culture is a general attribute of man, what White called 'man's extra-somatic means of adaptation',⁵ while a culture is the specific adaptation of a human group to the particular problems of its environment.⁶ In both these senses, it can hardly be a variable since it is inclusive. A consequence of using it as such is that one may tend to overlook more specific factors that could appear under this general rubric. In this context he does seem to give too little attention to knowledge industries and to the modes of communication with which they are so classically associated. Yet the rapid dissemination of knowledge through printing in an alphabetic script was undoubtedly of major importance in its spread and accumulation in Renaissance Europe.

In approaching the question of culture as a variable in economic analysis, we are first struck by the yawning gap between the usage of economists and of other social scientists, especially anthropologists. For the former it is a residual category of variables exogenous to economics; for the latter is inclusive and often comprises the totality of human behaviour (equivalent in some schemes to the social) of which economics is part. One only has to think of the sociologist Parson's four sub-systems of the social system of which economics was one (adaptive). It should be added that here Parsons thinks of culture (as distinct from the social) as being itself another of these subsystems, concerned with beliefs and values, an area which

2 P. Dasgupta, P. 'Economic progress and the ideology of social capital', in: P. Dasgupta and I. Seragelding, (eds.), *Social Capital: a multifaced perspective* (Washington 2000) 373.

3 Idem, 375.

4 Idem, 379.

5 L.A. White, *The Evolution of Culture* (New York 1959) 8.

6 C. Renfrew, C., *The Emergence of Civilisation: the Cyclades and the Aegean in the Third Millenium B.C.* (London 1972) 4.

he like Geertz sees as the special province of the anthropologist. Many Europeans closer to classical sociology would disagree.

Let us now turn to Landes' more specific arguments. Most social and economic historians, even the most enlightened like Max Weber and Immanuel Wallerstein, begin with the self-evident truth that Europe today is better off than other parts of the world. The problem arises in their attempts to explain what must, in my view, be seen as a recent and possibly temporary advantage. Landes is no exception. He begins the book as he means to end it. The division between two power blocks, East and West, has subsided; today the challenge is not even between North and South but between the West and the Rest. The West has substantially higher income per head than any other part of the world and even two hundred and fifty years ago it was considerably ahead of China and India. It is a gap still growing and is manifest in the better health (with more animal protein) of the West, and in its greater control over population 'They [the rest] try to ensure a secure old age... by having lots of children' (p.xx). The latter point certainly needs querying. Having more children could also be a measure, like the standard of living, of a society's success. In any case, the great expansion of population occurred latterly in Europe, and never until very recently in Africa, the original home of mankind and still much less densely populated than the continents to the north and west (even than the 'New World'). That continent 'controlled' its growth better than any.

To those who look more widely and argue that the West-Rest dichotomy is simply false, Landes replies that ... 'for the last thousand years, Europe (the West) has been the prime mover of development and modernity' (p.xxi). That proposition seems an exaggeration for many spheres of human activity (the printed word, for example), especially in terms of length. Moreover the comparison with China and India is almost entirely economic in the limited sense and does not take into account the depth of civilisation, the quotient of sunshine, the standard of cuisine, and similar factors. It is undoubtedly true for example that the majority of Chinese have eaten much better (though with less animal protein!) than most of the British. But to those who say his claim is euro-centric, he replies that he prefers 'truth to goodthink'. But with Pilate we must ask what then is 'truth'?

In looking around for the reasons behind this state of affairs, Landes searches for discriminating feature of the West that might have contributed to the Industrial Revolution. One feature he seizes upon is 'the scientific revolution' of the early modern period. He refers in a footnote to Needham's work on science in China and to similar enquiries about other traditions. Of both these traditions and their students he is curtly dismissive. He suggests that such scholars would be better employed in asking why Chinese science 'failed', that is, had not continued as it had earlier promised. But that is a question we could as well apply to the achievements of Greece and Rome, or even to the scientific, technological and industrial activities of Great Britain in the nineteenth century. There was no continuous tradition in Europe back to classical times; the coming of Christianity set back some of

these intellectual areas of activity for at least 1000 years; even in the Renaissance, Galileo had his problems in discerning the truth and this impediment continued through to the time of Darwin. Even today the difficulties have not altogether disappeared in the West, though anti-science and even 'anti-business' take different forms.

Part of the present economic superiority of Europe clearly has to do with the Industrial Revolution. Why did it take place only there? Indeed even the majority of Europe, Italy in the Renaissance, Holland in the Golden Age, is excluded from consideration. 'It happened in Britain'. Why? Firstly 'I would stress *build-up* – the accumulation of knowledge and know how; and breakthrough' (p.200). Islamic and Chinese civilisations made improvements, but the process came to an end; whereas 'we have continuing accumulation'. That was not always the case. The West certainly fell back in the early Middle Ages (the Dark Ages), after the achievements of classical Mediterranean society. It is true that more recently it has experienced a growing autonomy of intellectual inquiry, the creation of a language of proof, the routinisation of research and increased speed of communication. Nevertheless these changes which took place in the nature of the hard sciences, going back in the case of proof to Aristotle and even further to the Ancient New East, were not products of the Western European (let alone British) psyche alone. Self-congratulation on the wider front is out of place. In any case may we not loose that lead (again) to the East? Indeed have we not already done so in some technological spheres, although speed of communication and the further advance of technology, science and knowledge generally may have reduced the chances of a total change of direction? Not our psyche, not our culture, but world culture.

At the time of the Renaissance, European science thrived on institutionalisation, on the formation of academies – the first in Rome in 1603. In publications – 'nothing like these arrangement and facilities for propagation was to be found outside Europe' (p.205). Certainly Europe made an important contribution, especially with the adoption of printing adapted to movable alphabetic type. But others in the East did the basic work in some of these fields, of which printing was one, and it is an exaggeration to say they experienced 'nothing like' these developments.

Europe had a certain advantage regarding industrialisation and he sees that advantage as lying more specifically with Britain. The 'first industrial nation' 'trained a factory labour force and accumulated capital as it went'. Its industry 'diffused' elsewhere, through spies, emigrants and learners. But he writes as if it was the first time this had happened in world history when it had after all been the same story with printing and before that with Italian textile machinery, and with silk itself. Indeed 'diffusion' tends to take place wherever an individual or group has achieved some breakthrough, some advantage in knowledge or action. Obviously the 'improver' often tried to prevent others gaining the knowledge that gave him a competitive advantage. But in the long term he could not succeed; no group, no country, no culture, is an island.

Landes becomes hyperbolic on this subject of British advantage so that his argument often runs away with him. By the eighteenth century, he maintains, Britain was well ahead – in cottage manufacture (putting-out), the seedbed of growth, in the use of fossil fuel, in the technology of those crucial branches that would lie at the core of the Industrial Revolution: textiles, iron, energy and power. Then there was the efficiency of Britain's commercial agriculture and transport. Landes comment on the French Revolution is that it 'brought political turmoil, interrupted communications and imposed a time-out' (p.235) while England got on with the job. That is not how Wordsworth and many of his contemporaries saw it; French 'political turmoil' changed the world. More specifically the whole industrialisation of food owes much to French inventiveness in this period.

These British advantages (those that existed) were a recent development. Commercial agriculture was more 'advanced' in Holland and Italy from which two countries England learnt a lot. Textile production was certainly more developed on the continent until the eighteenth century and the production of silk, an important leader in this field, was more complex in Italy and France; from these countries England greatly profited. And 'improvers' in these spheres were yet more widespread and existed in many other places, including China, where agriculture and for a time textile production had been more advanced than in the West. Nevertheless he sees 'the early technological superiority' in England in general terms as 'the result of work, ingenuity, imagination, and enterprise'. (p.215). In England and not elsewhere? Was the earlier supremacy of Italy, or of the Arab world, or of China not due to similar factors? Were these 'non-material values ['culture'] and institutions' absent? Did only we possess the attributes leading to modernity? We were, he claims, nearest to the ideal case of a social system, which turns out to resemble closely the contemporary United States of America. Once again Landes goes on about his ideal society in a hyperbolic vein. 'This society would value new as against old, youth as against experience, changes and risk as against safety. It would not be a society of equal shares...' (p.218). It is not surprising to find him concluding that 'the first industrial nation came closest to this new kind of social order' (p.219), soon to be followed by America.

However, it is not only the Industrial Revolution that gave Europe the advantage. Landes sees the major change as coming much earlier in the period 1000-1500 CE, based on the medieval economic revolution in agriculture and energy. How far, he asks, should we push back 'the origins of English social precocity?' (p.219; England sometimes takes over for Britain). Here he goes back to its 'culture'. Following Macfarlane he discerns the roots of individualism sprouting in the Middle Ages and attributes much to the Magna Carta of 1215 which gave political and civil freedom, first to the nobles after which these benefits were extended to the common folk. Compared to the continent, 'Englishmen were free and fortunate' (p.220). Landes sees England as one of the first nations, founded well before the Industrial Revolution and the Italian Renaissance, and one whose freedom he

finds so different from 'the dumb submission of the Asian *ryot*' (p.220). Has he not heard of subaltern studies, of the resistance of *dalits*, of the activities of Chinese bandits on the water margins, and of the many more organised rebellions in those parts? Were they more submissive than the European peasantry of feudal times? That would be an impossible judgement to make.

Fortunate they were as well as free because according to Sir John Fortesque in the 1470's our neighbours drank water instead of beer, wore no wool and ate brown bread. What then had happened to the wine of France (not to speak of the beer of Germany), to the wool industry of the north, to the silks of the south or to the abundance of wheat (not oats or rye) in that region? The comparison is not to be taken as anything but an ethnocentric declaration that neglects such preferences as for rye bread (found even in American sandwich bars).

Following the work of historical demographers, mobility is seen as one of the attributes associated with the Western European family, specifically with the English and their high proportion of in-living servants. Of course, all service, whether in-living or on a daily basis, involves mobility, involves working in other people's houses, on their farms or in their workshops. In any case there was a considerable degree of mobility (transhumance) in other pastoral and mountain communities (in Europe and elsewhere) and it is perhaps no accident that the Basques (like the Scots) were great travellers or that the colporteurs of Oisans came from a mountain village in the Alps. Even farmers in the Lot and Aveyron drove their cattle in the summers to the high hill pastures of Aubrac for several months, while many peasants from the Rouergue left for Languedoc to take part in the grape and olive harvests in the Mediterranean areas. There are few communities that were completely sedentary in a static sense. Mobility was certainly not the sole prerogative of the English.

Landes' europhile (indeed anglophile) prejudices invade all spheres. In discussing the prevalence of Aids in Africa, 'originally overwhelmingly in heterosexual contacts' and affecting men and women equally, he mentions the suggested causes as being 'widespread and expected male promiscuity, recourse to anal sex as a technique of birth control, and the persistent wound of female circumcision....., intended as a deterrent to sexual pleasure and appetite' (p.12). Where did these suggestions come from? There is no evidence of greater male promiscuity in Africa and certainly not for greater anal intercourse. What does male promiscuity mean in a polygynous society, which may well make it possible to confine sex to marriage to a greater extent than in the case of European monogamy? As for anal sex as a technique of birth control, that is presuming Africans wished to control births and that if they did they had no other means. And while it is possibly true that clitorodectomy limits sexual pleasure for some, I know of no evidence that it was intended to do so anymore than was male circumcision, also a European and Mediterranean practice, which does not rate a mention. Indeed it was often 'intended' to promote childbirth and motherhood. What in any case has circumcision to do

with Aids? As in so many other contexts, Landes is searching assiduously for ways in which Europe and European practices triumphed in a struggle for existence that left them on top. But social evolution works in a quite different manner from 'natural' selection and has been characterised by many changes in who takes the lead in human development at any specific juncture. Clearly Africa did so at the beginning, when it provided a favourable climate for man's early development and for his burgeoning work ethic.

That fact counters Landes' claim about 'work in a cool climate'. From the standpoint of geography, he argues, 'The unevenness of nature shows in the contrast between this unhappy picture [in the tropics and dry lands] and the far more favourable conditions in temperate zones; and within these, in Europe above all; and within Europe, in western Europe first and foremost' (p.17). For him even the great advances of the Bronze Age in the dry lands of the Ancient Near East apparently count for nothing. The tropical climate promoted many early developments of mankind. The tropics and the dryer regions also made the major contribution to the repertoire of cultivated crops in the Neolithic when agriculture first developed. and it was the drier regions of the Ancient Near East, of Egypt, of north India and of north China that led the way in the immensely important Urban Revolution of the Bronze Age that saw the invention of writing, the wheel and of so much else on which we daily depend. Where were the colder climes, regarded as so stimulating for the work ethic, when this happened? The preferences of the Bangladeshi diplomat for cooler conditions, of which Landes makes so much (p.15), have little to say for world history over the long run.

But as we have seen he sees the superiority of Europe is not only in the economy, in learning and in climate; that continent is also said to have unique political advantages. In characteristic euro-centric fashion, Landes opposed democratic Europe to the despotic 'Orient', an invidious distinction that appears (in the European literature) as early as the Greeks ('democratic', except for slaves) and the Persians ('despotic', except for representation), which also promoted private property as opposed to 'ruler owns all' (p.31), a system said to characterise not only the Near East, India and China, but also those medieval invaders from Scandinavia (the Normans), the Asiatic Hungarians and the Muslims. This contrast is far too crude both at the political level and at that of land tenure. There have been plenty of 'democratic' regimes in the East. Oppenheim reports 'republican' institutions in Mesopotamia; Thappar does the same for Ancient India. Every 'despotic' regime has some consultative procedures; every democratic one some authoritarian ones. The stark opposition is equally unacceptable in terms of land tenure, where we are always dealing with a 'hierarchy of estates', as Henry Maine insisted. Some rights may be vested in the ruler, others in the local landowner, others in the resident or cultivator. That is as true today as it was in the medieval period. Indeed for the medieval period in Kerala, South India, a contrast has been drawn between the

high concentration of local rights in that region as compared with European land-holding. Clearly in every state system, some rights must rest with the sovereign power and some with the user of the land; a division is critical and universal, though the balance differs.

In political terms European exceptionalism (chapter 3) is seen to be based on the democratic commune (following the thesis of Pirenne and others) which guaranteed the law and opportunities for commercial enterprise. In a footnote (p.528) he dismisses Rowe's analysis of Hankow and Perdue's of Hunan which made a case in these respects for the Asiatic city (already set apart by Weber).⁷ That dismissal simply will not do, for the failure to recognise the commercial character of the Asiatic city overlooks the very extensive economic achievement of the Chinese, Indians and others. On the one hand he recognises that Chinese agriculture was the most successful in the world, above all in encouraging the reproduction of human kind (although he tends to reverse the causal sequence in favour of early marriage leading to masses of children, leading to the need for food). On the other hand he sees the Chinese bureaucracy (an institution praised by Max Weber as a key to modernisation) as an aspect of despotic rule, in which all property was owned by the elite: "what did ordinary people exist for, except to enhance the pleasure of their rulers?" (p.32) And he continues "Certainly not to indulge a will of their own." The unsurprising but quite mistaken conclusion is that 'In these circumstances, the very notion of economic development was a Western invention.' (p.32) 'Aristocratic (despotic) empires ... did not think in terms of gains in productivity.' However in China it was the government that was so keen on extending the double cropping of rice.⁸

The European commune is attributed to the contest for power among independent societies, providing for a government by merchants, with 'exceptional civil power including its ability to confer social status and political rights', 'crucial' to business and to freedom from interference. In fact communes were never altogether free from interference from governments and outside forces, and their freedom was made more precarious by the constant competition between states which Landes praises but which resulted in many wars of conquest and destruction. In Europe war raged frequently until the middle of the twentieth century (though latterly often exported to the 'colonies') and now rages again; 'World Wars were European inventions. So much for the vaunted advantages of fragmentation. So that whatever differences existed between cities in the East and West were shaded and never of the absolute kind that Landes and some other Europeanists suggest.

7 W.T. Rowe, *Hankow: commerce and society in China, 1796-1889* (Stanford, CA 1984); P. Perdue, *Exhausting the Earth: state and peasant in Hunan, 1500-1850* (Cambridge, MA 1987).

8 F. Bray, 'Patterns of evolution in rice-growing societies', *Journal. of Peasant Studies* 11(1984) 3-33.

The idea that because the Chinese defined themselves and their empire as lying at the centre of the world, with everywhere else lost in barbarian darkness, meant they had ‘no other place to go’ (p.36) is highly questionable. In the first place most people have in the past defined themselves in similar terms and if that had meant a reluctance to travel among barbarians, America would never have been colonised. In any case there was certainly a Chinese expansion, not only around its borders but into to Indonesia and Indo-China, and later much further afield, despite the restrictions that were imposed from time to time.

Landes sees these non-European empires as characterised by brittleness. But what about the Roman empire and all the colonial ones, not to speak of those of Hitler and Mussolini. Europe had no unique safety valve of its own. Nor were her exploiters less exploitative, in the Americas for example. The development of industrial capitalism was significantly assisted not only by ‘Protestant savings’ but by the not inconsiderable amounts coming from ‘booty production’, from the exploitation of American silver, or from the acquisition of Indian treasures and of African slaves.⁹

Landes sees the republican idea (here he is a good American) as being established in the classical world and as dying hard, always waiting in the shadows (of which there were many) to be revived. With the fall of the republic came the collapse of property rights, which owed their revival later on to the renewal of the classical legacy, or to nomadic German custom and to the Judaeo-Christian tradition (p.33). Then why not to other nomads in the north of China, to the classical legacy in the Near East and Central Asia, and to the Muslim branch of the Judaeo-Christian traditions (with very similar legal systems) throughout Asia.¹⁰ Euro-centrism cannot provide a clearer example of selection than this attribution. In any case ‘republican’ institutions existed in parts of India, China and the Near East while historical and sociological analyses show that despotism was rarely if ever of the extreme kind envisaged by Marx, Wittfogel, Landes and other European authors; men and women elsewhere succeeded in having something to say in the running of their lives, especially merchants. Alternative assumptions, arising from a self-congratulatory vision based on an indisputable series of recent achievements, make nonsense not only of the past but of the present too. There was no European monopoly of inventiveness in earlier times, as Needham’s magisterial study of

9 See for example A.G. Frank, *ReOrient: global economy in the Asian age* (Berkeley, CA 1998), who takes a very different line from Landes, as do a number of the new world historians. (For example K. Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: Europe, China, and the making of the modern world economy* (Princeton, NJ 2000) and J.M. Blaut, *Eight Eurocentric Historians* (New York 2000).

10 M.W. Mundy, ‘The family, inheritance and Islam: a re-examination of the sociology of *fara’id* law’, in: A.Al Azmeh (ed.), *Social and Historical Contexts of Islamic Law* (London 1988).

Chinese science and technology clearly establishes, although it is true that at a certain point in time (later than Landes suggests) the tempo of European inventions became more rapid (as a result of the scientific and then the industrial revolutions) than had previously been the case.

Landes is aware of the objection that Europe too has experienced the emergence of despotisms (and of kingdoms as well!); indeed they 'abounded' but were mitigated 'by law, by territorial partition and ... by the division of power between the centre (the crown) and local seigneurial authority' (p.36), a situation that he sees as giving rise to competition. In other words even European despotism (and dictatorship) were to be distinguished in a general way from all others. However the idea that law was to be found in Europe and not elsewhere is untenable; even on a strict definition of the concept, codes existed under Hammurabi, Asoka and in other empires. So too conflicts between the centre and the periphery were intrinsic to all centralised polities; they were especially strong under feudalism which was more characteristic of the West than the East, but with feudalism went the decline of classical 'civilisation' and the culture of cities. The advantages and disadvantages of smaller political units have been much debated; as I have argued competition also encourages warfare and can therefore clearly be destructive as well as constructive; the larger markets of China (as with the USA or the EU) had many advantages over smaller units in the development of manufactures. But all Landes' assumptions privilege the direction of European advantage.

For Landes the fall of Rome was 'Europe's great good fortune' (p.3); fragmentation placed a brake on centralised political oppression. He also sees power in Europe as being restricted by the division between church and state. Of the religious claims to power or to control power, Landes writes 'All of this made Europe very different from civilisations around'. Contrary to Europe, in Islam 'religion was in principle supreme', with government being that of holy men. (p.38), whereas Christianity recognised a split between the secular and the religious. That recognition meant that 'Europe was spared the thought control that proved a curse in Islam' (p.38). In China, which was religiously freer, the mandarin and the imperial court played a similar role, stifling innovation and producing 'a centrally and intellectually homeostatic society' (p.38). By contrast the Judaeo-Christian tradition (interpreted as excluding Islam) came to the aid of Europe, though no consideration is given to the possibility that the 'backwardness' of that continent in the early Middle Ages could be related to the dominance of the Christian church. There was extensive 'thought control' in medieval Europe and later, and on the other hand there were also enormous innovations elsewhere, in 'homeostatic' China for example.

In furtherance of this same line of thinking he sees property rights as going 'back to biblical times' and as transmitted by Christian teaching. The notion that property concepts were radically different from those of the surrounding kingdoms (p.34) and hence paved the way for Europe and civil society is quite unsustainable. What

are all those written tablets in Mesopotamia about if not property? Property rights in Judaic times were clearly related to those of Near Eastern contemporaries and predecessors, including those Persians he regards as being the epitome of Asiatic despotism. The tablets of Assyria and Sumeria are replete with transactions of rights in goods and land, despite the 'hydraulic' (read 'despotic') nature of their societies.

Finally Landes has a simple but widespread view of development. 'Every country has its own resources and capabilities, and if it permits reason and the market to rule, its economic development will follow ...' (p.236). In Europe each 'developed its own path to modernity' – in accordance with reason and the market. It is not too difficult to see what the market is, but what is reason? Economics without culture? But that is a situation that cannot exist; one is forced to take account of socio-cultural factors that are bound to impinge upon the economy as well as upon reason since all are part of the same social system. As with other attempts to introduce culture as a variable, the analysis gets obscured by generalities. Culture is not separable from economics but part of it and its rationality. To make any progress with the great questions that Landes raises we need to do two things, set aside as far as possible euro-centric prejudices (where in the extreme case, our culture is something others cannot attain), and treat other socio-cultural variables in as precise terms as we would economic ones, and to avoid using culture as a way of indicating deep-rooted thoughts and practices, especially those that promote the West at the expense of the Rest. Such variables have to be considered systematically, comparatively and not ego- or euro-centrally.

What use then is the concept of culture for social and economic historians? None at all, I would suggest, if it is simply used as a residual category, a blanket term for the non-economic aspects of social life. Clearly we need to consider those aspects which may be highly relevant to economic action, including economic rationality and performance, as well as (depending on context and problem) the contribution of 'high' culture and of the more personal sources to which some 'cultural historians' have drawn attention. But we need to do so not in terms of a global concept of culture but of the consideration of particular socio-cultural factors, seen as endogenous to the system.

In a recent essay by Yengoyan entitled 'Theory in anthropology; on the demise of the concept of culture', he claims that 'culture is the subject matter of anthropology' (p.373); indeed it is for him what holds its diverse fields together.¹¹ He admits this is not true of 'British anthropology', nor is it the case in most of Europe. Some see it as 'a guiding yet vague principle', others as a fiction, yet others as a spurious issue. Yengoyan himself sees the concept as threatened on the one hand by 'positivistic scientism combined with behaviourism' involving a move

11 A.A. Yengoyan, 'Theory in anthropology: on the demise of the concept of culture', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 28 (1986) 368-374.

from 'the concept of culture as an explanatory framework' to a concern with 'cultural specifics'. On the other hand it is threatened by the notion of ideology as distinct from culture ('axioms ... we do not question'). Culture however is a concept which like others we certainly have to question as an explanatory variable and considering the use of it made by some social scientists especially economists and including Landes as a residual category, it seems preferable to take a hard analytical look at the situation and to opt for 'cultural specifics' Whether inclusive or residual, the general concept does not take the reader very far.