Cultural Failure

All cultures are equal (I work at a state university) but some are more equal than others (I have a brain and value reason). Culture is a set of positive (or negative) externalities imposed on an individual who, for various reasons, belongs to a certain group or club. While individuals have free will and can act in ways opposite to the culture of the groups or clubs to which they belong, there are costs to doing so.

If I belong to a rugby club but only want to practice soccer during rugby workouts, I would quickly become an outcast from the club. To the extent that I derived value from that club membership, I would be imposing self-inflicted wounds by acting counter-cultural. When identifying with the culture of a society (a country, a religious group, or an ethnicity) has positive externalities (economies of scale in defense, a sense of community in a religious journey, a feeling of self-worth) people gain from identifying with the culture.

However, when identifying with a culture with negative externalities (disdain or contempt for people, outside the culture, a feeling of inferiority, or disregard for reason or the rule of law) people voluntarily accept harm to their being in a misguided attempt to belong. Furthermore, by perpetuating cultural values with negative externalities, people impose costs on future members of the community.

What cultures are hazardous to people’s well being? A culture that subjugates women, for instance, keeps women from reaching their full potential to flourish as human beings while giving men an unjust sense of entitlement to be served (ex: The Taliban). A culture that allows slavery is a destructive culture because it again destroys peoples’ ability to flourish while giving others an unjust sense of entitlement (ex: 19th Century US slave states). These types of cultures actively stand in the way of human flourishing.

There are other cultures that have a similar impact. (I will refrain from giving explicit examples for fear that someone will be blinded by the assertion that I am “attacking” their culture). When a culture encourages its members to kill or harm members outside their culture, it is an inferior culture. When a culture condones spousal abuse it is an inferior culture. When a culture has a high level of substance abuse, it is an inferior culture. When a culture has an inordinate number of children out of wedlock it is an inferior culture. (The single largest source of poverty in the US is children born out of wedlock).

When a culture disrespects property rights and the rule of law, it is an inferior culture. When prison time is looked upon as a badge of honor, it is an inferior culture. When a culture discounts education and self-improvement, it is an inferior culture. When a culture promotes an entitlement mentality it is an inferior culture. When a culture does not believe that people of other cultures are not valuable as individuals deserving of dignity, it is an inferior culture.

To live in a world where all cultures have to be treated with equal respect is abhorrent to the notion of reason. Nazi culture is not just as good as Boy Scout culture. While all cultures are not deserving of respect or admiration (and some are worthy of downright contempt), the individuals who belong to those cultures are deserving of respect and dignity. Too often people take criticism of their culture as an attack on their person. (This is probably because many people actually want to attack both a culture and the people who identify with the culture). However, they are not the same thing.

A culture of poverty may be hard to change in the short run. The same can be said for a culture of entitlement, debt, or covetousness. Nevertheless, if the American economy is going to thrive where individuals are allowed to flourish, we are going to need a cultural awakening. Pretending that all cultures are equal is not only naïve, it is counterproductive. Exalting or promoting failed cultures is even worse – not that politicians would ever do that.

Economic historian, [Deirdre McCloskey, explores](http://www.deirdremccloskey.com/academics/) the importance of cultural changes in bringing about the industrial revolution in the first place with her work on “The Bourgeois Era”. Her work is an important admission, from a bright economist, that culture plays a role in the development and success (or failure) of a society.