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Culture as Explanation: Neither All Nor Nothing

The *Cornell International Law Journal* has invited the participants in this symposium to evaluate the interplay of legal, political, economic and cultural elements of the United States-Japan trade relationship. As I have spent most of my adult life in academic anthropology, it is inevitable that I should have a great deal more to say about the cultural factors in that relationship than about the others. This paper is primarily an effort to introduce some of the aspects of the current ferment in the domain of cultural analysis. It is my hope that by so doing it will be easier to show how (not whether) culture must necessarily enter into any discussion of political, economic and legal issues.

Let me begin, with calculated perversity, by setting out as clearly as I can the scale of the problem posed by the use of the concept of culture at all. I can do no better than cite a recent summary of the situation by a social theorist:

The conceptualization of culture is extraordinary in two respects. It has displayed the weakest analytical development of any key concept in sociology and it has played the most wildly vacillating role within sociological theory.

(1) At the *descriptive* level, the notion of 'culture' remains inordinately vague despite little dispute that it is indeed a core concept. In every way 'culture' is the poor relation of 'structure.' Definition of the former has not undergone an elaboration equivalent to that of the latter. Consequently there is no ready fund of analytical terms for designating the components of the cultural realm corresponding to those which delineate parts of the structural domain (roles, organizations, institutions, systems, etc.). Methodologically, such is the poverty of conceptualization that there are as yet no 'units' for describing culture: essentially cultures are still 'grasped,' in contrast to structures which are now 'analyzed.' Basically the notion of cultures *being* structured is uncommonly rare outside of structuralism: instead of different 'cultural structures' there are endless 'cultural differences.'

(2) At the *explanatory* level, the status of culture oscillates between that of a supremely independent variable, the superordinate power in society and, with a large sweep of the pendulum, a position of supine

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dependence on other social institutions. Hence, in various sociological theories, culture swings from being the prime mover. . . to the opposite extreme where it is reduced to a mere epiphenomenon. . . .¹

The situation would seem to be quite unpromising. Might it not be better to jettison such an indeterminate concept and get on with our analysis of structure: of the units and measures of the real world of legal, political and economic variables? Perhaps so, but C. Wright Mills warned us a very long time ago to beware of crackpot realists—no less than crackpot idealists. I still think the concept of culture is indispensable, precisely because there is a middle ground between the extremes with which the lengthy quotation above closes. Culture as an explanation is neither all (the prime mover) nor nothing (a mere epiphenomenon).

There are many ways of approaching the analysis of the interplay that is our focus here. One is to argue that the legal, political and economic elements themselves are heavily infused with cultural meanings. Another is to take the position that culture provides the context within which all legal, political and economic decisions are made and relationships acted out. From this viewpoint it can be argued that binational trade relationships are to be understood, in part, in light of the cultural baggage brought to the negotiating table by both parties. Note, please, that I have said “in part.” Of course our explanations of contemporary phenomena cannot be entirely cultural, just as they cannot be exclusively legal or political or economic. Why, then, is the importance of cultural factors too often acknowledged, only to be so regularly dismissed? The explanation lies, I think, in what may be regarded as a cultural quirk of western social science itself—the tendency to place such high value on parsimony.

It goes without saying that the elegant parsimony of economic explanations results from the ability (and willingness) of economists to construct variables of a particular kind. *How* cultural factors operate in any given situation is a question widely unasked because it appears to be impossible to specify those factors with the rigor required to incorporate them into the realm of what are called real, explanatory variables. But complicated relationships and highly complex issues may well turn out to have complicated and complex explanations.² It is of no little importance to see that the greater the extent to which complex cultural and historical factors color a troubled international relationship, the less amenable it may be to satisfactory mutual adjustment.

1. M. ARCHER, *CULTURE AND AGENCY: THE PLACE OF CULTURE IN SOCIAL THEORY* 1 (1988).

2. Anyone who has watched the television program “Wall Street Week” will have been captivated by the technical analyst’s routine retreat to pop psychological explanations of market behavior when it becomes evident that the technical indices provide none. Such fall-back explanations reached a crescendo following October 19, 1987, when virtually every commentator observed that “since the sell-off made no sense, the only explanation is psychological.” The concept of culture often is used as residual explanation in analogous contexts.

Just this point has been made recently in a review by Glen S. Fukushima of a collection of essays on American and Japanese perspectives on law and trade issues.³ He notes that the U.S. legal system apparently is based on certain assumed principles of economic behavior that do not hold in Japan, and that it therefore cannot deal adequately with Japanese international economic behavior.⁴ The authors of one of the papers being reviewed propose the creation of a common set of rules by which both countries would abide.⁵ Fukushima points out that such a scheme could not work, for “we would be establishing similar rules to treat fundamentally different sets of economic assumptions and practices.”⁶ The alternative is adoption of non-legal measures, he suggests, perhaps tempered with broad administrative discretion, that would help the United States deal effectively with this particular trading partner.⁷

But would it really help? Given the two countries’ very different assumptions about a wide range of issues—legal, economic, political, and cultural—how shall we arrive at an understanding? Obstructing the way is a cultural factor, unique to neither, that renders it extremely difficult to establish agreement on whose rules to adopt and in what measure:

If we encountered a Canadian and a Russian arguing about the appropriate rules for the game of hockey, we would feel no compulsion to enter the debate in the interests of demonstrating one right and the other wrong. We would observe—correctly—that what is judged acceptable is strictly a matter of personal preference. The inquisitive social scientist might attempt to specify the rules actually used in each country, but one set of rules would have no intrinsic superiority over any other . . . [W]e must beware of our natural tendency to label as intrinsically superior those rules that happen to appeal to us.⁸

For “personal preference” substitute “cultural preference,” and there you have it. The United States wants to deal effectively with Japan in the realm of international economic behavior no less than Japan wants to deal effectively with us. Which of the two is to call the shots, make the adjustments, and establish the rules? The answer lies, surely, in determining where the power lies.

But this line of discussion has taken us too far from the issue of cultural factors. Ethnocentrism, the certainty that the way of doing things with which one is familiar is superior to all others, is an excellent example of a factor that is not specific to “Japanese culture” or “Ameri-

3. Fukushima, Book Review, 47 *J. ASIAN STUD.* 897 (1988) (reviewing *LAW AND TRADE ISSUES OF THE JAPANESE ECONOMY: AMERICAN AND JAPANESE PERSPECTIVES*) (G. Saxonhouse & K. Yamamura eds. 1986)).

4. *Id.* at 898.

5. *Id.*

6. *Id.*

7. *Id.*

8. P. McCLELLAND, *CAUSAL EXPLANATION AND MODEL BUILDING IN HISTORY, ECONOMICS, AND THE NEW ECONOMIC HISTORY* 31 (1975).

can culture.” It is generically cultural, however, and like racial attitudes, which are also cultural, historical and institutional, it plays a crucial role in our binational relationship.

The distinction between cultural factors that are exclusively Japanese (usually referred to as “elements of Japanese culture”) and those that are simply cultural in the broadest sense, i.e., not limited to a single society, people, language group or region, is an important one. This is so because it allows us to avoid the trap of thinking of “a culture” as an immutable set of practices, beliefs and meanings. In an older anthropological discourse, it was common to speak of “Zuni culture,” “Zande culture,” and even “Chinese culture.” It was a more comfortable world then, a world in which entities could be thought of as self-contained and in which it was possible to speak of “cultures coming into contact.” Today, I would suggest, the concept of culture has changed so radically that it may best be thought of as a moving target rather than a fixed entity.

That is to say that the culture of the Japanese in 1989 is like that of 1889 in some ways, but obviously very different in others. Whether the elements of the culture of the Japanese today (or a century ago, for that matter) are newly acquired items, traditions of long standing, or hybrids of highly diverse origins is of no real moment. Let me offer just one example that I have used elsewhere. In recent years it has become a “tradition” in Japan to schedule performances of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony to usher in the New Year. For contemporary Japanese, *dai-ku* is as much a part of routine New Year’s observances as are glutinous rice-cakes (*kagami mochi*), Buddhist temple bells ringing out the old year (*joya no kane*), and all the rest of the festive activities spelled out in countless guidebooks. “But it’s not *Japanese!*” my students protest when told of the Ninth’s integration into the complex. True enough, but then neither were glutinous rice-cakes and Buddhist temple bells, once upon a time, just as in that same sense Christmas trees and Charles Dickens are not “American.”

If culture is a moving target, as I have suggested, then those elements that make a binational relationship a troubled or placid one may well change over time. The result of having to interact on a constantly shifting terrain may prove to be the inevitability of continual adjustment and rethinking of relative positions. In short, I think it highly unlikely that the United States and Japan can ever nail down each other’s culture once and for all, and fix it so that friction is reduced.

I do not mean that there are no continuities at all, however. For there is something about the moving target that I shall call “Japanese culture” that does command our attention. At any given time, it represents the current state of assumptions, attitudes, meanings and ideals (as well as ideology in the non-pejorative sense) of the people with whom we happen to be dealing. How they respond to suggestions and demands, what demands and suggestions they make, and how the next round of interactions will develop, all depend in large part on what

experiences and training the members of the society share. That is to say that what each generation considers its culture is made up in important ways of what it has been taught and what it has learned. It follows that for all the contingency and indeterminacy, there is some continuity after all.

Before sharing with you two illustrations of what I regard as continuity in Japanese international behavior that is essentially cultural in character, let me point out that the utility of the concept of culture in discussions such as ours has been called into question in some quite highly respected quarters in recent years. One of the most dedicated of the anti-culturalists is the political scientist Chalmers Johnson. In his review of a book on labor relations in Japanese heavy industry by Andrew Gordon, Johnson is scarcely able to contain himself, for he has discovered (as he believes) that Gordon, "historian of the complex ways that institutions come into being," has laid to rest the notion that cultural factors are of any importance at all.⁹ Dismissing "those allegedly intrinsic cultural traits . . . that the Japanese worker is supposed to possess," Johnson advises those interested in how modern Japanese society was formed (or concerned to learn the "secrets" of Japan's industrial success) to pay less attention to what is billed as "Japan's unique culture" and study more Japanese history and the institutions of society.¹⁰

The admonition is a curious one, for it involves at least two assumptions that are as common as they are unwarranted. The first concerns the concept of culture, which is totally misrepresented. It is an error that Gordon does not make, as we shall see. The second reveals a profound misunderstanding of the nature of history and institutions. As is clear from the context, Johnson views culture as a chimera, which it is not, whereas he accords history and institutions a concreteness, a reality, that in fact cannot be claimed for them. Like culture, both are constructs in precisely the same senses. None of the three explains anything; rather, all are ways of thinking about a welter of events and actions in order to render them coherent.

Japan does not have a single history; any reader of the competing versions of the last 120 years, for example, will know how divergent the interpretation of events can be. The history of the development of labor relations in Japanese heavy industry is very differently perceived by management on the one hand and labor on the other. Institutions are no more concrete, no more real. The most cursory glance at the contending interpretations of the nature of labor unions, the Imperial House, and *Zengakuren* (just to take three examples) lays that comforting thought to rest.

What is more, in his haste to slay the dragon of culture (dragons and chimera are closely associated) Johnson misreads Gordon, whose

9. Johnson, Book Review, 41 *MONUMENTA NIPPONICA* 245, 246 (1986) (reviewing A. GORDON, *THE EVOLUTION OF LABOR RELATIONS IN JAPAN: HEAVY INDUSTRIES, 1853-1955* (1985)).

10. *Id.* at 247.

own position is unambiguous. It is clear that Gordon sees important continuities between the Tokugawa past and Japan's modern period. These are not only historical and institutional, but cultural as well.

Preindustrial practices or values did not determine the course of subsequent development, but a legacy from the past did influence managers and workers as they defined the labor relationship. This legacy embraced patterns of behavior and organization, as well as attitudes, but it drew only in part on a value system of the feudal era stressing obedience, loyalty, hard work, and paternalistic "beautiful customs." . . . The tendency of Japanese workers to organize their unions in factory or workshop units is a . . . basic trait of the labor relationship with roots in the past. . . . With no tradition of effective guild networks to serve as a model . . . [they] organized by workshop and factory with hardly a second thought.¹¹

Labor-management relations in Japanese heavy industry, it is clear, are the result of a perpetually changing amalgam of all three elements—partly cultural, partly historical, and partly institutional.

So there is a legacy from the past that can be detected in the Japanese present. It seems only fair to call it evidence for some degree of cultural continuity. There remains only the question as to whether this legacy has made any contribution to Japan's post-World War II success.¹² Is United States industry the victim of some newly devised set of institutions and laws that give Japan an unfair edge (to use the Sunday supplement formula), or were the Japanese "succeeding" long before they attracted undue notice in Detroit and Youngstown? If they have a history of success, the inevitable question must be whether it is gained by virtue of their ineffable difference from all competitors or because they simply have mastered the rules of a game devised by others.

Hear now the testimony of a renowned British anthropologist, writing of his return to the Torres Straits in 1898 after a decade's absence.¹³ The time, of course, is just 30 years after the Meiji Restoration:

The township of Thursday Island, or Port Kennedy, as it is officially termed, has increased considerably during the past decade. . . . There is the same medley of nationalities—British, Colonial, French, German, Scandinavian, Greek, and other European job lots, in addition to an assortment from Asia and her islands. . . . One great change in the population is very striking, and that is the great preponderance of the Japanese. So far as I can remember they were few in number ten years previously, and were, I believe, outnumbered by the Manila men; now they form the bulk of the population, much to the disgust of most of the Europeans and Colonials. Various reasons are assigned for this jealousy of the Japanese, and different grounds are taken for asserting that the

11. A. GORDON, *THE EVOLUTION OF LABOR RELATIONS IN JAPAN: HEAVY INDUSTRIES, 1853-1955*, at 416-17 (1985).

12. I leave in more capable hands the task of analyzing the extent of the Confucian contribution. See, e.g., R. DORE, *TAKING JAPAN SERIOUSLY: A CONFUCIAN PERSPECTIVE ON LEADING ECONOMIC ISSUES* (1987).

13. A. HADDON, *HEAD-HUNTERS: BLACK, WHITE, AND BROWN I* (abr. ed. 1932). The Torres Straits separate Papua-New Guinea and Australia's Cape York Peninsula.

influx should be checked, and restrictions enforced on those who have already settled.

It appeared to me that the bedrock of discontent lay in the fact that the Japanese have beat the white men at their own game, mainly because they live at a lower rate than do the white men. A good proportion of the pearl-shelling industry is now carried on by the Japanese, who further play into each other's hands as far as possible. A good example of their enterprise is shown by the fact that they have now cut out the white boat-builders. A few years ago, I was informed, some Japanese took to boat-building and built their first boats from printed directions in some English manual. Their first craft were rather clumsy, but they discovered their mistakes, and now they turn out very satisfactory sailing-boats. It is impossible not to feel respect for men who combine brains with diligence, and who command success by frugality and combination.

The white men grumble that the Japanese spend so little in the colony and send their money away; but the very same white men admit that they would themselves clear out as soon as they had made their pile. *Their intentions are the same as are the performances of the Japanese*; but the white man cannot, under the present conditions, make a fortune quickly, and certain of them cannot keep what they do make. . . .

Some white men contend that as this is a British colony, and has been developed by British capital and industry, the Japanese should not be allowed to reap the benefit; but a similar argument might be applied to many of the industrial enterprises of the British in various parts of the world. As an outsider, it appears to me that it is some of those very qualities that have made the British colonist what he is that manifest themselves in the Japanese. In other words, *the Japanese are feared because they are so British in many ways*, saving perhaps the British expensive mode of life. *It is probably largely this latter factor that renders the Japanese such deadly competitors.*¹⁴

The pearl-shell and boat-building industries had been taken over—in a period of less than ten years, apparently—by “men who combine brains with diligence, and who command success by frugality and combination.”¹⁵ And those who had lost out in the competition were urging the imposition of restrictions on the winners. What an extraordinary circumstance! There was no MITI functioning as the “visible hand,” no tilted playing field, no legal discrepancies with respect to the enforcement of anti-trust laws. The Japanese in the Torres Straits a century ago do seem to have got along quite well without direct economic and political support. It was not about such matters that the locals were complaining.

It may be objected, nonetheless, that the Torres Straits were not, after all, exactly at the center of the action of Japan's expansion into world markets. The charge is a fair one, so let me turn to a very different kind of enterprise, on a much larger scale, in an arena vastly more important. In a stunning, recent paper, my colleague Sherman Cochran has explored the activities of the Mitsui Trading Company in China

14. *Id.* at 2-3 (emphasis added).

15. *Id.* at 2.

before the first World War.¹⁶ Founded in 1876,¹⁷ just eight years after the Meiji Restoration, Mitsui Bussan entered the Chinese market (cotton purchases and yarn sales) in 1877.¹⁸ Being totally inexperienced in such enterprises, they followed the lead of Western traders by leaving the business in Chinese hands save for top management.¹⁹ They soon altered course.²⁰

In 1898, the very year that Haddon made his return visit to the Torres Straits to find the Japanese in control of two industries in which they had no part ten years earlier, Mitsui Bussan changed its policies.²¹ The company initiated a program of sending junior-high and high school graduates to China for five years of study of the language, customs, and business practices.²² In 1899 a second program for older, more experienced employees was introduced; they were sent for three years.²³ All Japanese apprentices and trainees were required to live with Chinese families, to dress as common Chinese workers dressed, and until 1911 to wear the queue!²⁴ The next step, taken between 1899 and 1901, was to abandon the use of Chinese compradors altogether.²⁵ By 1902, Mitsui Bussan's profits from cotton purchases and yarn sales had tripled.²⁶

It is true that Mitsui Bussan's access to the Chinese market was facilitated by the terms of the Treaty of Shimonoseki that ended the China-Japan War in 1905,²⁷ but Japanese companies enjoyed no trading advantages that Western companies did not promptly secure for themselves under terms of their respective governments' most-favored-nation agreements with the Ch'ing.²⁸ In addition, for a brief period in Northeast China, between 1905 and 1907, the Japanese government did extend direct aid to Mitsui Bussan.²⁹ Open competition between the Japanese and Western companies resumed, however, when that direct aid ceased.³⁰ Nevertheless, in 1911 the Japanese share of the market in cotton textiles exceeded that of the Americans for the first time.³¹ The trend continued: the share of cotton cloth imported into China by Japan

16. S. COCHRAN, JAPAN'S CAPTURE OF CHINA'S MARKET FOR IMPORTED COTTON TEXTILES BEFORE WORLD WAR I: THE ROLE OF MITSUI TRADING COMPANY (to be published in the Proceedings of the Second Conference on Modern Chinese Economic History, Taipei, 1989).

17. *Id.* at 8.

18. *Id.* at 9.

19. *Id.*

20. *Id.*

21. *Id.*

22. *Id.*

23. *Id.* at 10.

24. *Id.*

25. *Id.* at 11.

26. *Id.* at 15.

27. *Id.*

28. *Id.*

29. *Id.* at 17-21.

30. *Id.* at 21.

31. *Id.*

had stood at 2.7% in 1902, a year in which the United States figure was 26.8%.³² By 1930, the U.S. share had shrunk to 0.1%, and Japan's accounted for 72.2%.³³

The Americans did make one abortive attempt to rally against Japanese competition.³⁴ In 1911, the British-American Tobacco Company ("BAT") entered the cotton textiles market, but closed out its campaign in less than one year.³⁵ In 1914, an agent of the United States Department of Commerce, writing of the reasons for the American failure, said the following of BAT:

[BAT] might have been successful if they had worked at it longer, but they started out with the idea of selling for cash only and did not get in with the [Chinese] merchants because they would not cater to the established business customs of the local trade.³⁶

Needless to say, the Japanese had done just that, and sold on credit.³⁷ The Americans appeared to have had the very contemporary sounding concern with short-term profit and some difficulty in seeing the advantage of catering to local custom.

Cochran attributes Mitsui Bussan's success in the Chinese market primarily to the company's managerial skills, rather than to political intervention on its behalf or economic factors *per se*.³⁸ He sees no reason for concern for the tilt of the playing field.

The total picture is a very complicated one, to be sure, and I only summarized Cochran's sophisticated analysis. Nonetheless, I think I have not misrepresented it in suggesting that he provides ample evidence that business cultures differ in many important ways. The Japanese approach to the Chinese market was based on very different assumptions about the relationship between agent and client (were there American junior personnel in China who wore the queue?) and about what concessions and compromises one might need to make to capture a market (did the Americans not realize the folly of cash-only policies?).

Writing about his own experiences much later, one of Mitsui Bussan's salaried employees commented on how they bested the American competition. Allowing for a degree of overstatement, it is nonetheless instructive:

American merchants used American representatives to send their goods from Shanghai to Chinese wholesalers in Newchang and other cities. So it took time and money. But Mitsui people sold Japanese cotton goods directly to Chinese, put up with loneliness, slept on horse dung, and made such efforts that it brings tears to one's eyes. This was the reason

32. *Id.* at Table 4.

33. *Id.*

34. *Id.* at 30-32.

35. *Id.*

36. *Id.* at 32.

37. *Id.* at 31.

38. *Id.* at 35.

that Japan could expel the American power.³⁹

In conclusion, let me emphasize that I am suggesting that cultural elements have always been important to an understanding of international trading relations, and further that they are ignored at any country's peril. Of course, political, economic and legal concerns are immensely important as well. They are never the whole story, however, and both the Japanese and Americans must learn to disaggregate the many factors that influence any given period of their relationship. Cultural factors may loom large in some contexts but play a minor role in others. They cannot serve as the entire explanation for any given development, but they are certain to be of some moment in every case.

39. *Id.* at 26-27.