

# Cultural Difference: The Deeper Issues

by *Lawrence M. Mead*

## Introduction

In a recent book, I argued that America is culturally divided. Most Americans who descend from Europe display an individualist temperament. That is, they chiefly seek their own goals but are also restrained by moralistic notions of right and wrong that they internalize in childhood. Minority groups, however, all descend from the more cautious non-West, where most people adjust to their environment rather than seeking change, and right and wrong are shaped more by the expectations of other people than by internalized standards. Many scholars of world cultural differences have said this.<sup>1</sup>

That might seem like a merely academic idea, but the establishment reacted with little short of panic. I had written several earlier books on poverty and welfare, all of which easily found publishers and reviewers. But all my former publishers declined *Burdens of Freedom*, as did several other prominent houses. Fortunately, Encounter Books accepted it. But then, in the four years since the

book came out, it received only three reviews—all favorable—and no university or think tank has allowed me so much as to give a public talk about it.

What is so frightening about cultural difference? In this paper I will try to explain. Cultural difference does arouse political objections, but above all it questions something never before doubted in American commentary—that the United States is a universal nation that is open to anyone, from anywhere, who seeks a life of freedom. That vision, it turns out, presumes an individualist culture, which is found only in the West. We have never admitted the problems that non-Western peoples pose for us, as they also do for Europe. We think our problem is only racism. But culture, not race, is the true limitation to the American vision.

## Rejecting Racism

*Burdens'* most immediate offense was that it redefined our social problems in terms of culture rather than race. In the orthodox view, America suffers from poverty and inequality mainly because whites refuse to treat non-whites as

equals, especially blacks. On the evidence, however, the great majority of whites gave up racism decades ago. They no longer view blacks as inferior. Their objection today is far more to cultural difference: many blacks and other minorities do not function well in an individualist society. Many fail to get ahead, and many display unusually high levels of crime and other social problems, so they do not inspire the same trust as whites. Nor is cultural difference merely a euphemism for race. Scholars of world cultures make quite clear that culture has no necessary connection to race. This great problem would remain even if whites suddenly became completely colorblind about race, or if all blacks became white. The solution is for blacks to assimilate to mainstream society.

The antiracism movement blames all black problems entirely on white racism. White elites do not dispute that idea, but few can really believe it. The hard truth is that minorities must adopt an individualist way of life if integration is ever to succeed. That is far tougher than to harass our dutiful white upper class over racism.

## Rejecting Sameness

Besides redefining race as a cultural problem, *Burdens* called for limits on immigration. In this connection, as with race, the establishment refuses to discuss cultural difference. Rather, it trumpets *sameness*—the conviction that newcomers from anywhere in the world are no different from the native born and should be accepted as such. Thus,

we should have no fear of opening our borders to the multitudes now fleeing collapsing countries in the Middle East, Latin America, and elsewhere.

A cultural analysis, however, calls for caution. The vast influx of immigrants during the Progressive era, a century ago, is fondly remembered as having assimilated well. The difference was that the earlier waves *nearly all came from Europe*, many from countries that today are nearly as rich and modern as America. So these newcomers were largely attuned to individualism coming in. Today's immigrants, however, nearly all come from the non-West, where countries of origin are far poorer and less developed. Migrants come here mainly to escape adversity, not to seek freedom and its burdens, and those demands often defeat them.

Especially, much of Hispanic America has failed to progress in school and suffers family breakdown nearly as much as blacks. Asians have done well in school, but less well in careers, because they fear to assert themselves in ways needed to succeed here. Without cutting immigration sharply, America would inevitably become a non-Western country. It would lose the dynamic and civic qualities that come from an individualist culture, and which have empowered it to lead the world.

## Why Poverty Persists

To focus on cultural difference also casts an embarrassing light on the failure of American anti-poverty policies. Ever since the War on Poverty in the

1960s, government has shown that it can raise the income of the poor simply by giving them more money and other benefits. But it has failed to increase their skills by much at all, and it has not overcome the patterns of life that largely produce long-term poverty—failure to work steadily, obey the law, and avoid single parenthood. Especially, no benefit or incentive—not even guaranteed jobs—has shown a power to induce poor adults to work more steadily than they do.<sup>2</sup>

The orthodoxy is that poverty is entirely due to lack of opportunity. Offer poor adults better chances, most experts say, and they will seize them and get ahead. But this again assumes sameness—that the poor are individualists just like the better-off. This especially is the belief of economists, who have designed most anti-poverty programs. But the response to government largess has been tepid at best. Analysts and policymakers have ignored the essential *personal* difference between all the non-Western groups and mainstream society—their much greater passivity and lesser self-command, on average, compared to groups who descend from Europe.

To assume cultural difference is much more realistic. The long-term poor are mostly black and Hispanic, with origins in the non-West and, in the black case, also slavery and Jim Crow. For most members of these groups, life means reacting to immediate necessities, not achieving one's own purposes. Most non-Westerners respond more strongly

ly to authority than incentives. They do what they are told, not what they themselves decide. That is why our most effective social programs have been directive. They do not just offer benefits and choices. They also tell clients firmly what they *should* do to get ahead—get through school, get and keep a job, avoid trouble with the law, and avoid procreation outside marriage.

Direction is only the beginning of freedom. The essence of mainstream culture is that the forces of authority have migrated from outside to inside the self. Individualists thus can tell themselves what to do and not do; few need government to tell them. That is how the West permits a free society and yet maintains order. The non-West, however, has never made that shift. There the forces of order remain largely external. To truly thrive in this society, black and Hispanic children and youth must internalize the rules for good behavior at a young age, as too few now do.

## A Civic Culture

Western culture is inner-driven and moralistic. And individualists also tend to believe in abstractions that go beyond the immediate realities they perceive. Western political systems honor norms such as freedom, equality, democracy, and the rule of law. Such values are never perfectly achieved, yet they are still taken seriously, and we achieve them more fully over time. That is the main reason why the United States and other Western countries generally avoid serious corruption or misrule.

The non-West claims to honor the same norms, but they are not believed with the same force. So these countries have much less capacity to form and sustain a civic culture. There is deference to those in authority, but the latter do not defer in the same way to public norms. Consider, for instance, the chaos and corruption that suffused recent elections in Brazil.<sup>3</sup> Western publics carry their institutions in their heads, whereas in the non-West government largely remains something external, which people feel they can evade when necessary or convenient.

The need to preserve a civic culture is one more reason to limit immigration. Coming as they largely do from the non-West, today's migrants mostly arrive without the positive attitudes that promote a free yet orderly society. Their sense of obligation to others is typically limited to their own family or ethnic group, without the broader trust toward strangers that individualist norms expect. Immigration at present rates thus threatens the civic culture of the West.<sup>4</sup>

## Extreme Demands

Another result of cultural difference is that politics becomes immoderate.<sup>5</sup> From the ancients onwards, political theorists taught that a democracy, where the masses rule, could endure only if people limited their demands on government. Fortunately, the nation's majority culture has curbed that danger. Individualism promotes a strong sense of personal agency. Most people, even the less fortunate, believe they can ad-

vance themselves largely by their own efforts, so they make only limited demands on government. That was why the labor movement in the United States was moderate rather than socialist as in many other countries, and why the political parties traditionally were not extreme.

But non-Western culture is less confident, with a weaker sense of agency. Black leaders claim their group is oppressed by the same society which most whites experience as free. That is because blacks attribute much more power to the environment and less to themselves. So their political demands swing between extremes. Much of the time blacks are silent, believing they are invisible to the powerful. But at times of crisis their demands become messianic. The civil rights movement sought justly to abolish Jim Crow, but it also transformed society through affirmative action. More recently, the antiracism movement has sought to downgrade law enforcement and promote "equity" for minorities and women, at whatever cost to fairness for white men and, at least in college admissions, Asians. The Biden administration embraces this agenda.

Demands this extreme were new. The working class, feminist, and gay movements achieved their principal demands for greater economic opportunity without great difficulty, although their more recent demands for transgender rights are more contentious. Due chiefly to cultural difference, however, poverty and racial demands run far deeper. To many, black inequality remains a perma-

ment blemish that never goes away. The press highlights unusually high black unemployment or poverty rates every time statistics for these problems are announced. The assumption is always that only society is responsible, and only radical change can suffice.

Race is probably the main reason the political parties have polarized since the 1980s. Poverty is becoming more entrenched, and immigration is uncontrolled. These problems are discussed largely in terms of race and racism, ignoring cultural differences. Vulnerable identity has become a totem that cannot be questioned. Demands couched in terms of victimhood cannot be compromised. Democrats favor voting reforms that would supposedly expand black access, while alarmed conservatives overreact with reforms that critics say would restrict voting, especially by blacks.

## Moral Inequality

A related implication of cultural difference is moral inequality. All our principal religious traditions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—make attention to the poor or outsiders a priority. To most Americans, this obligation can extend not only to people we know but to others we do not know, even to desperately poor people on the other side of the world. Driven by these obligations, earnest Americans began trying to save the less fortunate—spiritually as well as economically—as soon as the early nineteenth century, and ever since.

Such norms bear most firmly on the West, where the culture is moralis-

tic, judging right and wrong by general standards. But for the non-West moral obligations toward others are usually limited in practice to one's own social connections.<sup>6</sup> So *within* the West, disadvantaged groups become morally privileged. They get far more aid and attention from mainstream society here than they would in the old country, and they need to give little if anything in return. To the establishment, the needy—especially if they are non-white—have only rights and claims, and those aiding them can have only obligations.

In 1835, Tocqueville in *Democracy in America*, celebrated the capacity of early Americans to form private associations for many civic purposes. But their ability to do this depended crucially on the fact that nearly all early Americans had come from Europe. They thus shared the individualist ethos of civil cooperation even among strangers. The mostly-European immigrants of a century ago showed a similar capacity. But most of today's immigrants, who come from the non-West, show nothing like this temperament. As Peter Skerry wrote, Hispanic neighborhoods display “the almost total absence of organized political life.”<sup>7</sup>

Cultural difference always makes affluent white Americans the givers, never the receivers. As poverty has become entrenched among non-Western groups, and as non-Western immigration has grown, this moral inequality has only grown. Rising social pluralism, largely due to immigration, is breaking down what sociologists call “social capital”—the ability of ordinary citizens to expect

cooperation from one another. Distrust is growing even among whites, the group that chiefly formed an American community in the first place.<sup>8</sup>

## A Universal Nation?

Ever since the Founding, American leaders have claimed that theirs was a universal nation. Supposedly, anyone could come here from anywhere and lead a democratic life, because we believed, as Lincoln said, that “all men are created equal.” Americans contrasted themselves with European countries, where aristocrats were still favored over ordinary people.

Such a society was certainly unique within the West at that time. But the West as a whole was different from the rest of the world. Somehow, Europe evolved a society that was far more dynamic and civic than elsewhere. Even the unprivileged showed more initiative in improving things, and rulers governed better, than in the non-West. Europe never became as democratic as the United States because class differences were sharper, but it was similarly dynamic and well-governed, and this was why the West as a whole came to dominate the world.<sup>9</sup>

In the usual account, the great flaw in the American story is racism. Allegedly, the Founders were racists who accepted slavery, and although their successors abolished it, America has never really accepted blacks as equal citizens.<sup>10</sup> But *at first*, race was nothing like this central to the nation. In the Founders’ time, the most important political divisions were

between classes, not races. In Europe, people had only recently become aware of non-white peoples, due to imperialism. They permitted non-white slavery in many of their colonies, but soon forbade it at home. Race never became a fundamental issue in European politics until very recently, due to non-white immigration from the non-West.

The American Constitution as written shows concern about class far more than race. The Founders feared the populist excesses of democracy which had occurred at the state level. That danger came from the European population. The Founders dealt with race at all only because Southern slavery obviously conflicted with the new nation’s egalitarian principles. Thus, in a compromise, some constitutional provisions protected slavery in the short term, but it was not generally endorsed.<sup>11</sup> Rather, broad support for egalitarian principles inspired opposition to the “peculiar institution,” eventually leading to the Civil War to abolish it. Southern leaders realized they had to secede and frame their own, racist constitution if slavery was to endure.<sup>12</sup>

The recent threats to constitutional principles have come, not from the original neglect of black rights, but from the recent over extension of those claims. The civil rights reforms of the 1960s have spawned a system of preferences for minorities and also women in education and employment that amount to a second constitution. These groups are now systematically favored at the expense of white men. The felt necessity to integrate blacks has overridden all

other principles. Race and gender have displaced class as the supreme constitutional concerns.<sup>13</sup>

## Passivity

Cultural difference, however, has proven too much for preferences to overcome. Other than Asians, all minorities still do worse than average in education, income, and wealth, and are much more involved in crime, single parenthood, and other social problems. In the orthodox view, again, all this is due to white racism.

But this simply ignores the importance of cultural difference. Throughout their history in America, blacks on average have been far less ready to assert themselves and get ahead than the norm. Much, if not all, of their current inequality results from this. This reluctance reflects their origins in the non-West, where attitudes are far more passive than in the West, as well as the perpetuation of that culture under slavery and Jim Crow. Southern plantation owners imported slaves in part *because* they were passive. Otherwise owners could not obtain the hands they needed to till their fields.<sup>14</sup> Slave society was alien to the rest of America, *not so much racially as culturally*, due to its sharp difference from mainstream individualism.

Most slaves apparently accepted their subordination to Southern whites without protest, as no European population would have done. While there were several slave revolts, none of them seriously threatened white control. More surprising, one would have expected most

slaves simply to run away to the North, where they could get paid for working. Enough slaves did that to motivate the Fugitive Slave Law, which forced Northern states to return runaway slaves to the South. But slave resistance was never enough to threaten the slave system.

Some liberals imagine that Southern whites maintained their control simply through terror, such as lynching, but the slave populations were simply too large for this. In 1860, slaves comprised 32 percent of the population of Southern states, with the figure running as high as 55 percent in Mississippi.<sup>15</sup> Blacks are only 13 percent of the national population today. No state at that time possessed the governmental apparatus needed to oppress so large a group. The South was far more suspicious of big government than the North, as it remains today.<sup>16</sup>

Passive acceptance by most slaves, then, must explain why it was chiefly whites, not blacks, who had to fight to destroy slavery. The Civil War began as a war to preserve the union but ended also as a war to abolish slavery. While some slaves did escape to the North and fought in the Union armies, the Civil War cost over 600,000 lives, the vast majority of them white. When black advocates demand reparations today, they totally ignore this enormous white sacrifice. Much in contrast, in revolutions in Haiti and Cuba, slaves fought far more for their own emancipation.<sup>17</sup> American slaves showed no comparable resistance to the South, either before or after the Civil War.

Even after liberation, most blacks did not immediately leave the South to seek better opportunities in the North. Rather, they remained in the South under Jim Crow, many becoming sharecroppers working for white landlords. For many, it was as if slavery had never ended. Only cultural difference can explain this.

Only in the twentieth century did large numbers of blacks move to the North.<sup>18</sup> Only then did they face serious pressure to join the individualist culture of mainstream society. In this freer America, they fared far less well than the immigrants of the Progressive era, who had flooded into the country from the more backward parts of Europe. Many fewer blacks than whites got through school, let alone college, and thus qualified to move up from unskilled work to white-collar positions. White racism is insufficient to explain this.

A black middle class that accepted individualism did emerge, and it successfully led the campaign to abolish Jim Crow in the 1960s. These blacks dramatized the potential of cultural assimilation to resolve the race problem. But most blacks have perpetuated a non-Western mindset, living mainly from day to day, rather than for the future, and suffering unusual social problems. Those problems actually escalated in the 1960s and 1970s—*after* civil rights. The near-total collapse of the black family produced soaring black crime and welfare. The usual view, again, blames these adversities entirely on white offenses, but in recent decades cultural difference is a far better explanation.

## Culture Not Race

While the United States avoided constitutional commitments to slavery and finally abolished it, many Americans for generations still looked down on blacks as inferior. That belief followed all too easily from the black predominance in low-skilled jobs. Yet over time those hostile attitudes faded because too many blacks achieved better education and higher-status positions.<sup>19</sup> This progress contradicted racist notions of black inferiority.

While the establishment still harps on racism as the master cause of black disadvantage, that view is hard to square with the clear official preferences favoring blacks, other minorities, and women that government and the nonprofit sector have enforced for nearly half a century. Ostensibly, reserving education slots and good jobs for blacks and other minorities is supposed to offset ongoing discrimination, but what it really offsets is continuing cultural difference—the lesser tendency of all these groups to assert themselves on their own compared to the average. Affirmative action creates more the appearance than the reality of assimilation.

Racism has also become less plausible because Hispanics have come to have social problems and difficulties getting ahead very similar to those of blacks—even though they were never enslaved, never faced the same discrimination, and have mostly come here voluntarily. The same as for blacks, their main problem is not white bias but a too-cautious,



more disorganized, non-Western temperament.

Even Asians must assimilate more fully if they are to achieve their full potential in America. Some think that the “model minority” contradicts the cultural view of immigration that I have taken here. But in fact, Asians clearly excel only so long as they are in school. There what success requires is defined by higher authority—the rote learning that education demands in Asia. From college onwards, however, success in America requires an ability to make personal argument, set one’s own goals, and take risks. That is what European Americans typically have, and Asians usually lack. That is why they underperform as leaders, as business research shows.<sup>20</sup>

Although every non-Western group has a different story, what they all share is difficulty in embracing an individualist way of life. What stands out about the European population is not that it is white but that it is inner-driven. European Americans above all show a capacity for sublimation—the ability to *take on* external goals and values *inwardly* and then organize their lives around them. In a deep sense, their outward freedom rests on an inner *unfreedom*. No non-Western minority shows this.

Further evidence for this view comes from Europe. There, slavery never was a large presence domestically, yet all these countries now struggle with minorities due to immigration, much as America has done. Here too non-white groups from outside the West have difficulty organizing their lives to keep order, com-

pete, and succeed. Here too, journalists and intellectuals endlessly cite white racial bias as the cause, but open discussion of cultural difference is banned.

And as in America, the larger danger is that perpetual claims of racism will destroy a civil politics and promote a growing moral inequality. White people—and especially white men—will be forced to accept responsibility for everyone else. Minorities and women will receive whatever preferences it takes to quell claims of racism and sexism. And the original idea that there can be equal opportunity *for individuals* without reference to identity will be forgotten.

In view of cultural difference, blacks would probably have had a hard time in America even if slavery and discrimination had never existed. After all, they were moving, largely without choice or selection, from the world’s most passive culture to its most assertive. Today, in contrast, much smaller numbers of blacks come to America from Africa or the Caribbean and have no such problems. The reason is that they now come by choice and are highly selected to be individualists themselves.

The Hispanic story is similar. The millions of migrants now overwhelming our southern border are fleeing collapsing countries in Latin America. They are not choosing a life of freedom. They are simply seeking survival. So again, a clash of cultures and a painful adjustment are inevitable.

## Assimilation

In short, just anyone cannot come to America and expect immediate acceptance. There is no condition concerning race or wealth, but there is about culture: only individualists will feel at home. Those who come from the non-West without those attitudes must accept hard knocks until they learn to take care of themselves. Getting ahead and also democratic politics demand a view of life where people are competitive and basically self-reliant, make only limited and civil demands, and do not project responsibility for themselves onto others.

The chief black problem is no longer racism but a way of life alien to this society. Nothing stops the group from assimilating to an individualist life. When they do that the race problem will fade. Yet change is hard. Studies suggest that it takes several generations for immigrants to fully acclimatize to America.<sup>21</sup>

Humanity displays no universal psychology, so no society—not even America—can be a universal nation. America, rather, is simply an exemplar, for good or ill, of the individualist way of life. At its origin, that was all it ever aspired to be. America and the West have led the world only because no other region ever took on the individualist calling. It is a mountain that only Westerners ever aspired to climb.

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1. For the contrasts of Western and non-Western culture, my sources include several sociologists of world cultural differences, for instance Geert Hofstede, *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1980) and Richard E. Nisbett, *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently . . . and Why* (New York: Free Press, 2003)
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3. Jon Lee Anderson, “Lula’s Restoration,” *The New Yorker*, January 30, 2023, 30-41.
4. Paul Collier, *Exodus: How Migration Is Changing Our World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).
5. This section relies on Lawrence M. Mead, “Cultural Change and Political Character,” *Perspectives on Politics* 49, no. 4 (2020): 258-68.
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7. Peter Skerry, “‘This Was Our Riot, Too’: The Political Assimilation of Today’s Immigrant,” in *Reinventing the Melting Pot: The New Immigrants and What It Means to Be an American* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), ch 17.
8. Robert D. Putnam, “E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-first Century: The 2006 Johan Skytte Prize Lecture.” *Scandinavian Political Studies* 30, no. 2 (June 2007): 137-174.
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10. Nikole Hannah-Jones, “The Idea of America,” *New York Times Magazine*, August 18, 2019, pp. 14-26.
11. The Constitution allowed states to count three-fifths of slaves toward the enumeration of population that determined seats in the House of Representatives, and curbs on the importation of slaves are disallowed until 1808 (Art. 1, secs. 2 and 9).
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15. *Historical Statistics of the United States* (1970).
16. Daniel L. Elazar, *American Federalism: A View from the States*, 3rd ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), ch. 5.
17. Ada Ferrer, *Cuba: An American History* (New York: Scribner, 2021).
18. Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America* (New York: Knopf, 1991).
19. Howard Shuman, Charlotte Steeh, Lawrence Bobo, *Racial Attitudes in America: Trends and Interpretation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985).
20. "The benefits of being bold," *The Economist*, February 29, 2019, p. 53. It's East Asians that typically underperform in business. South Asians (from India and Pakistan) do much better, because those that come to America are far more attuned to individualist mores before they come here, even if their home countries are not. This partially reflects the British-based education system in India and Pakistan.
21. See citations in Mead, *Burdens of Freedom*, chap. 11, note 66.