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The Culture of Nations

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Diplomats in New York rack up a lot of unpaid parking tickets, but not all rack them up at the same rates. According to the economists Raymond Fisman and Edward Miguel, diplomats from countries that rank high on the Transparency International corruption index pile up huge numbers of unpaid tickets, whereas diplomats from countries that rank low on the index barely get any at all.

Between 1997 and 2002, the U.N. Mission of Kuwait picked up 246 parking violations per diplomat. Diplomats from Egypt, Chad, Sudan, Mozambique, Pakistan, Ethiopia and Syria also committed huge numbers of violations. Meanwhile, not a single parking violation by a Swedish diplomat was recorded. Nor were there any by diplomats from Denmark, Japan, Israel, Norway or Canada.

The reason there are such wide variations in ticket rates is that human beings are not merely products of economics. The diplomats paid no cost for parking illegally, thanks to diplomatic immunity. But human beings are also shaped by cultural and moral norms. If you're Swedish and you have a chance to pull up in front of a fire hydrant, you still don't do it. You're Swedish. That's who you are.

Walter Lippmann got to the crux of the matter in a speech 65 years ago. People don't become happy by satisfying their desires, he said. They become happy by living within a belief system that restrains and gives coherence to their desires:

“Above all the other necessities of human nature, above the satisfaction of any other need, above hunger, love, pleasure, fame — even life itself — what a man most needs is the conviction that he is contained within the discipline of an ordered existence.”

People need the coherence their culture provides and value it even more than easy parking.

For several decades a veteran foreign aid worker, Lawrence E. Harrison, has contemplated the power of culture in shaping behavior. He's concluded that cultural differences mostly explain why some nations develop quickly while others do not.

All cultures have value because they provide coherence, but some cultures foster development while others retard it. Some cultures check corruption, while others permit it. Some cultures focus on the future, while others focus on the past. Some cultures encourage the belief that individuals can control their own destinies, while others encourage fatalism.

In a new book, "The Central Liberal Truth," Harrison takes up the question that is at the center of politics today: Can we self-consciously change cultures so they encourage development and modernization? Harrison is writing about poverty, but this is incidentally a book about the war on terror, and whether it is possible to change culture in the Middle East and the ghettos of Muslim Europe.

On the one hand, Harrison is an optimist. He has taken his title from one of Daniel Patrick Moynihan's greatest observations: "The central conservative truth is that it is culture, not politics, that determines the success of a society. The central liberal truth is that politics can change a culture and save it from itself."

But when Harrison turns to how politics can change culture, you find he is a man who has been made aware of the limitations on what we can know and achieve. Harrison and a team of global academics studied cultural transformations in Ireland, China, Latin America and elsewhere. They concluded that cultural change can't be imposed from the outside, except in rare circumstances. It has to be led by people who recognize and accept responsibility for their own culture's problems and selectively reinterpret their own traditions to encourage modernization.

Harrison observes that gigantic investments in education, and especially in improving female literacy, usually precede transformations. Chile was highly literate in the 19th century, and in 1905, 90 percent of Japanese children were in school. These investments laid the groundwork for takeoffs that were decades away.

Harrison points to many other factors — leaders who encourage economic liberalization, movements that restrict the power of the clerics — but the main impressions he leaves are that cultural change is measured in centuries, not decades, and that cultures are separated from one another by veils of complexity and difference.

If Harrison is right, it is no wonder that young Muslim men in Britain might decide to renounce freedom and prosperity for midair martyrdom. They are driven by a deep cultural need for meaning. But it is also foolish to think we can address the root causes of their toxic desires. We'll just have to fight the symptoms of a disease we can neither cure nor understand.