

## CURRENT BOOKS

# *The Culture of Success*

*THE WEALTH AND POVERTY OF NATIONS.*

By David S. Landes. Norton. 597 pp. \$30

by A. J. Bacevich

My aim in writing this book," David Landes announces at the outset of this richly rewarding study, "is to do world history." As bold as that goal might be, the author's real ambition is larger still. Persuaded that the growing gap between rich and poor poses "the greatest single problem and danger facing the world of the Third Millennium," he plumbs history to locate the origins of that predicament, explaining why some peoples prosper while others languish in seemingly inescapable backwardness and poverty. This in turn obliges him to examine the processes of economic development and modernization across several centuries.

Yet the author, a noted historian and professor emeritus at Harvard University, has a further purpose as well. *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations* mounts a withering attack on scholarly fashions such as dependency theory, orientalism, and multiculturalism. Rather than honest modes of analysis, in the author's view, these tend to be exercises in blame-laying and moral self-approbation, in which "motive trumps truth" and "audiences know the answers in advance." Preferring "truth to goodthink," Landes skewers the canons of today's academic avant-garde as so much bunkum. He also contends that the venerable Marxist typology of exploiters and exploited—whatever its value as a device to legitimize political agendas—offers no real capacity for understanding why some are rich and others poor. Politics or ideology alone cannot explain the complex process of development.

The author's inquiry into that process is panoramic. Landes is interested in Big Change—and readers who confuse "Big" with the latest eruption of scandal in

Washington may find the expansive scope of his narrative disorienting. For Landes, the Cold War is a mere blip on the radar screen of history. Several hundred years of European colonialism qualify as no more than "a passing phenomenon." This is history rendered as the product of vast impersonal forces and punctuated throughout with the author's own sweeping (and pungent) pronouncements.

The wide swath cut by such an approach underpins the author's central contention: development is above all a function of culture. Indeed, in separating winners from losers in the pursuit of modernity, "culture makes all the difference." Nations that have acquired wealth and power are those in which curiosity and scientific innovation flourish; in which personal values such as self-discipline, self-denial, and initiative are widespread; and in which government protects property, nurtures the entrepreneurial spirit, and respects the primacy of the market. In the end, "everything depends on the quality of enterprise and the technological capability of the society."

Landes supports his case with a region-by-region survey that begins with the Age of Exploration and concludes with the present day. The interpretive framework to which that survey adheres is unabashedly Eurocentric. Credit for devising the concept of modernization—the ideas, arrangements, and institutions that have made the systematic creation of vast wealth possible—belongs to Europe. "The very notion of economic development," Landes asserts, "was a Western invention." Those who argue to the contrary—who insist, for example, that ancient Chinese, Egyptian,

or Aztec technological achievements matched or surpassed those of Europe, or that the West rose to economic and political primacy only through deception and skullduggery—simply delude themselves.

While the title of Landes's book recalls the Adam Smith classic, the content owes much to the equally famous analysis by Max Weber. To explain Western dominance, Landes revives the Weberian thesis of the Protestant ethic as the foundation of modern capitalism. The Protestants of northern Europe, England, and eventually North America embraced universal literacy, which is critical to the creation of a skilled and motivated work force. They scrapped the traditional concept of time as a cyclic phenomenon, devising a linear model more amenable to disciplined and routinized economic activity. They labored tirelessly to bend nature to human needs and, in matters large and small, to decipher how the world worked. "The heart of the matter," observes Landes, lay in the creation of "a new kind of man—rational, ordered, diligent, productive." Moreover, efforts to inculcate these qualities became self-perpetuating: successive generations of believers judged one another by conformity to commonly recognized standards of behavior.

To measure the impact of Protestant values on Europe's capacity for development, one need look no further than to those nations where resistance to the Reformation was most determined. In Catholic Spain, for example, Protestant rationality and diligence smacked of subversion. When Iberia led the way in opening the New World, the result was disaster for all concerned. Instead of facilitating development, empire gave rise to obsessions with gold and exposed an ugly penchant for rapacity. Spain's foray into the Americas led it to exhaustion and bankruptcy. For Latin Americans, the chief cultural legacies of Hispanic rule were an attitude of collective impotence and a "morbid propensity to find fault with everyone but oneself." Development in the region lagged accordingly.

Where Protestants settled the New World, the results were radically different.

Colonists from Holland and England were not notably gentler in their treatment of the indigenous population. (Landes does not blink at the human toll resulting from the arrival of the Europeans—for Native Americans "it was apocalypse.") But their aim was not simply plunder; the New World offered an opportunity to do new things in new ways, and the role of technology was central to the enterprise.

More important even than Europe's move into the New World was the onset of the Industrial Revolution, led by Great Britain in the latter part of the 18th century. Others (including the young United States) copied and built on the British formula and spent a century or more feverishly trying to catch up. The Industrial Revolution produced wealth on a scale hitherto undreamed. But its indirect effects were greater still: it "transformed the balance of power," "revolutionized the social order," and "as much changed ways of thinking as doing things." The Industrial Revolution divided humanity into two camps: winners and losers. "It begat multiple worlds."

Landes takes pains to emphasize that "it was not resources or money that made the difference." Geography is not destiny. Nor is it "want of money that holds back development." In his view, "The biggest impediment is social, cultural, and technological unreadiness—want of knowledge and know-how. In other words, want of the ability to use money."

A comparison of late-19th century China and Japan helps Landes illustrate the critical role of culture. Viewing outsiders with contempt and clinging obdurately to a rigid if superficially harmonious social order, China, for all its size and the richness of its history, epitomized the concept of a nation culturally ill equipped to modernize. In contrast, once the Meiji Restoration had cleared away the undergrowth of samurai culture, Japan—like England, a nation possessing only a modest stock of natural resources—quickly emerged as the economic powerhouse of Asia. According to Landes, "The Japanese were learners because they had unlimited aspirations." Japan even evolved a Calvinist work ethic—"one does not have to

be a Weberian Protestant to behave like one.”

Ibero-America has been burdened with slights and grudges, nursed since the days of formal and informal foreign domination. Until recently, China has been held back by the belief that the barbarians surrounding the Middle Kingdom had little to offer other than tribute. Much of the contemporary Islamic world, according to Landes, suffers from these and other maladies. Like Spain at the height of its empire, the oil-rich countries of modern Islam have been “cursed by easy riches and led down the path of self-indulgence and laziness.” Lacking a skilled and ambitious work force, mistrusting techniques that derive from the hated West, even the wealthy nations of the Arab world seem all but doomed to slide back into poverty once the oil runs out or the developed world devises a cheap alternative energy source.

An even greater impediment to modernization in Islamic nations, according to Landes, is the unequal status accorded women. In his view, traditionalist societies will never be able to compete with societies that draw from the full pool of talent. Landes suggests that the ultimate effect of gender inequity is to demoralize men. “One cannot rear young people in such wise that half of them think themselves superior by biology, without dulling ambition and devaluing accomplishment.”

Thus, barring some unlikely cultural transformation, the Islamic world will fall further behind, a prospect that does not bode well for the rest of us. “Failure hardens the heart and dims the eye,” Landes observes. Particularly in the Middle East, losers seek consolation in religious fundamentalism and bloody confrontation. In nations built on the concept of male privilege, “violence is the quintessential, testosterone expression of male entitlement.”

**T**enacity, technological know-how, and a knack for using money to make money: in the Middle East, in the tattered remnants of the former communist bloc, above all in Africa, cultural arrangements that give these values short shrift point toward an ever-widening gap between the developed and underdeveloped worlds. If Landes has little patience

with explanations that saddle a putatively exploitative West with responsibility for this trend, neither is he sanguine about the prospects of aid from the outside world correcting the problems of the underdeveloped world. Outsiders can do precious little.

His conclusion is a bleak one. We live in a postimperial age in which sovereign states claim a nominal equality, and an age of technological marvels that are ostensibly available to all humanity. But both of these claims of equality are fictions. The reality is that those who have solved the riddle of how to generate wealth are getting wealthier still. Those who remain baffled by that problem stagnate, and in so doing fall ever further behind.

**I**n his most unsentimental moments, Landes seems to suggest an outcome that is bleaker still. Those who have adapted their culture to the imperatives of modernization may have purchased some measure of material comfort, but at a heavy cost. Being rich has not made these nations virtuous. “Other things being equal,” Landes notes, “it is the rich who poison the earth.” Those poisons are themselves cultural as well as material. The new methods devised to create wealth have necessarily destroyed the old, sweeping aside much that is good and humane. Only when we acknowledge the existence of these poisons do we confront the true dilemma of modernization: “change or lose; change and lose.” The choice is not a happy one.

Yet recognizing that the choice may well be inescapable clarifies the dilemmas of the present age. It offers an antidote to the utopian claims offered by the noisy prophets of globalization and universal democracy who promise simple solutions to the world’s problems. Among its many other virtues, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations* provides a compelling reminder that our problems have no easy solution and that whatever solutions we devise will give rise to problems of their own.

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