

WHAT DOES CULTURE MEAN FOR THE UNDP?

The implicit cultural logic within the human development framework

ABSTRACT

'Culture' is one of those concepts so widely used that it tends to fall into ambiguity and vagueness. Institutions dealing with power use them quite often in order to produce profuse, but somehow vacuous, discourses. That would be the case of the influential Human Development Reports (HDR) of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). After evidencing there is not a clear, plain, unitary idea of what 'culture' means in these yearly published reports, this research makes explicit – through a hermeneutical approach - the cultural logic underlying the 'human development' framework. UNDP turns qualitative culture into a quantitative matter. Thus development discourse becomes one of identity. While explicitly speaking about cultural diversity, implicitly it splits the world in a binary, dichotomic way: the West and the Rest, Developed and Developing, Us and Them. Hence, instead of a supposedly universal discourse promoting change, we find a culturally and historically defined one that reinforces – in a subtle way – the hegemonic epistemological and political patterns that sustain the present status quo.

Keywords:

Culture, human development, UNDP, power, hegemony, discourse

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Introduction: Culture as a double-edged sword

'Culture' is one of those complex concepts, which is unable to easily pinpoint. It has been so widely used, in so many ways, that a consensus around its meaning is even difficult to imagine. Kroeber and Kluckhohn found more than 150 definitions of 'culture' in the 50s (Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952) and Baldwin et al. did the same with similar outcome at the beginning of the XXI century (Baldwin *et al.* 2006). That's why Raymond Williams considered it one of the most complicated words in English, 'mainly because it has now come to be used for important concepts in several distinct intellectual disciplines and in several distinct and incompatible systems of thought.' (Williams 1985, p. 87)

Thus such complex concepts that often fall into vagueness and ambiguity – 'freedom' would be another good example – become a double-edged sword. When thoroughly defined they can be a sharp analytical tool to fathom complex phenomena – such is the case of their careful use in Social Sciences and Humanities. But they can also be used to create profuse discourses that, covered under that ambiguity and vagueness, are designed to say nothing at all – such is the case of many of the discourses that emerge from social and political institutions dealing with power.

The main objective of this research is to analyze a case of this second kind. For that we will focus our attention in the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and specifically in the influential, developmental discourse it produces every year through its Human Development Reports (HDR). The UNDP was created in the 60s to foster development in underdeveloped countries. But it was in the 90s when it became one of the references in mainstream development thinking. Its new framework – called Human Development, based on Amartya Sen's philosophical ideas – was supposed to become the solution to excessively narrow, economic, utilitarian, hegemonic development theories.

By carrying out a simple hermeneutical approach, we will demonstrate that while *explicitly* using 'culture' vaguely to speak about development in a politically correct way, the UNDP *implicitly* strengthen the epistemological and political *status quo*. Through a subtle technification of this concept, the HDR presents an improved version of the old sociocultural evolutionism. The cultural-qualitative arguments offered in the nineteenth century turn now into a technical, quantitative, (supposedly) objective discourse based on facts and data. While no longer speaking about 'savage-others' by making reference to their habits and customs, the HDR speak about 'developing-others,' based on statistical facts, but with similarly evolutionary undertones. As we will see, what supposedly is a technical, universal discourse turns into one of identity, culturally and historically located.

Thus the double-edged sword is at work. Many development theorists consider the Human Development framework an exemplary case of sensitive, right consideration of culture and cultural diversity in development thinking (i.e. Rao and Walton 2004). Meanwhile the UNDP becomes an inconspicuous guardian of those modern (cultural) values and concepts that, somehow, shaped the contemporary world – which, supposedly, the UNDP is trying to change.

In order to substantiate this hypothesis we will, in the first part of the text, evidence that we cannot find in the HDR a clear, plain and unitary idea of what culture is. Considering this explicit vagueness, in the second part we uncover the implicit way UNDP is considering culture. Following Appadurai's reflections, in the third part we highlight how this implicit way to understand culture is used to point 'others', creating a subtle identity discourse. We will see how, for this, the UNDP carries out a subtle technification of culture. Finally, in the last part, we evidence that what was supposed to be a critical discourse drifts into a conformist one: change is not the goal, just adapting 'others'.

What does 'culture' mean in the HDR of the UNDP?

Checking the HDR and the way 'culture' is used within them, we will notice an important lack of clarity and coherence that makes the UNDP fall into some contradictions and weakly grounded statements. In this first part of the paper we will first demonstrate that there is not a single definition of culture in the reports, and then we will highlight many of the contradictions that consequently emerge.

Things are not clear

Let's begin by asking: is there a single and coherent idea of what culture is in the HDR? The answer is undoubtedly negative. We find that coexisting in the HDR are many different ways to understand 'culture'.

It is sometimes understood as *the way people use to express themselves*, in a quite materialistic sense. For example when stating that culture can be created 'through language, through ritual, art, music and dance or through literature or storytelling' (UNDP 1993, p. 22), or when 'dishes, furnishings, clothing, architecture, landscapes' are considered a part of a 'flourishing culture' (UNDP 1998, p. 59).

We also find culture as *a set of values, principles and standards* shaping and conditioning our behaviour, usually biased towards the existence of tradition. For example when saying that there are 'strongly held cultural norms about which jobs are suitable for women and against mixing men and women in the workplace... [Changing] it will take a major adjustment in social and cultural norms' (UNDP 1995, p. 37). Also when explaining that 'legislation that differentiates between men and women is grounded in interpretations of cultural traditions' (UNDP 1995, p. 43).

Culture is also shown, in a quite functional way, as *the accumulated knowledge used to face new situations and to solve problems*. That's the case when saying that 'unless the political culture also changes—unless citizens come to think, feel and act in ways that genuinely accommodate the needs and aspirations of others—real change [to a bigger respect for minorities] will not happen' (UNDP 2004, p. v). When speaking about countries facing the transition from socialism to capitalism in the early 90s, the UNDP comments that 'newly privatised companies need to operate in an "enterprise culture" for there to be any real progress... changing this culture – by providing adequate training for new entrepreneurs' (UNDP 1993, p. 49).

We could carry out a more thorough analysis, but this sample is enough to prove that many different ways to understand 'culture' coexist in the HDR. This wouldn't be a problem itself, but as we will show now, this lack of clarity often entails some incoherence and contradictions. Let's consider some of them.

Some incoherence and contradictions

In the 2004 report, focused on cultural diversity, the UNDP says that 'proponents of cultural determinism often label large parts of the world as simply "African" or "Islamic". But culture is not a homogeneous attribute. There are huge variations in language, religion, literature, art and living styles within the same cultural "group"' (UNDP 2004, p. 38). A coherent criterion has been defined in these lines. But in the next page of the very same report we find that 'explaining growth rates, for example, economic policy, geography and the burden of disease were all found to be highly relevant. Cultural factors—such as whether a society is Hindu or Muslim—were found to be insignificant' (UNDP 2004, p. 39). Labeling a large part of the world as African or Islamic is, for the

UNDP, a misunderstanding of cultural diversity, but a few lines after Hindu and Muslim are considered explanatory cultural factors.

The previous example takes us to a new question: is religion (Hindu, Muslim, etc.) cultural or are both religion and culture independent dimensions of human life? Again, the 2004 report – which claims to be especially sensitive with cultural issues – shows some incoherence. In the main introduction of the report we can read: ‘finding answers to the old questions of how best to manage and mitigate conflict over language, religion, culture and ethnicity has taken on renewed importance’ (UNDP 2004, p. v). So language, religion, culture and ethnicity should be understood as independent, mutually excluding fields or dimensions. But some pages later we are told that ‘identities based on common cultural characteristics, such as religion, language or ethnicity, appear to promote stronger loyalty among group members than identities based on other characteristics’ (UNDP 2004, p. 42). Suddenly language, religion and ethnicity are, in fact, cultural characteristics.

Finally, another contradiction emerges if we ask the reports if culture influences development: the answer depends on the report we choose. In 2002 the UNDP writes:

Democracy requires a long process of political development. It needs basic institutions, formal and informal, of the state and outside it. It will not thrive without the spread of democratic culture—of values and principles that guide the behaviour of individuals and groups. (UNDP 2002, p. 61)

So democratic culture is an essential factor to make political development thrive. But in 2004 the report says:

Cultural determinism—the idea that a group’s culture explains economic performance and the advance of democracy—as an obstacle or a facilitator, has enormous intuitive appeal. But these theories are not supported by econometric analysis or history. (UNDP 2004, p. 5)

So, does culture influence development (political development in this case)? It depends on the report you read. We can only state that reports are really contradictory when trying to find out if culture influences development.

We end this analytical first part of the document concluding that the way the UNDP uses the concept ‘culture’ in its HDR is not an example of clarity and coherence. Conversely to what many development thinkers say, hardly an institution showing such a fuzzy use of this concept can represent an exemplary case of the right consideration of culture and cultural diversity.

The *implicit* cultural dimension in the HDR

We have to assume that by reading the reports we cannot specify what ‘culture’ means for the UNDP. It is time to ask: what does ‘culture’ *really* mean in the HDR? The *explicit* use of culture offers a fuzzy and unapproachable idea of what the UNDP considers culture to be. We will try, in the second part of this work, to fathom the implicit cultural dimension, *say to make explicit the implicit cultural logic in the reports*. In the next pages our research will follow the next three steps. First of all we will define the cultural space implicit in the HDR. Then we will try to figure out which is the logic within this cultural space. Finally, we will show what the ‘ideal culture’ is. It could be useful, for a

easier understanding of the explanations, watching the Figure 1, after a few following lines.¹

The cultural space implicit in the HDR: the power vector and the functionality vector

The cultural realm implicit in the UNDP's HDR has two dimensions: one defined by the *power vector* and the other one by the *functionality vector*. When reading the HDR one has the sensation that both powerful and weak cultures exist. For example: 'In some cases minority cultures are being swamped by dominant cultures whose power has been amplified with [economic] growth' (UNDP 1996, p. 4). Powerful and dominant cultures are swamping the weak and minority ones. Cultural power would be a synonym of having the capacity to culturally influence other groups. Thus, weaker cultures would be the influenced ones. We find a similar idea when the HDR states:

Global integration is proceeding at breakneck speed and with amazing reach. But the process is uneven and unbalanced, with uneven participation of countries and people in the expanding opportunities of globalisation—in the global economy, in global technology, in the global spread of cultures and in global governance. (UNDP 1999, p. 30)

The process is 'uneven and unbalanced' because powerful cultures have more opportunities to 'spread their culture'. In the 2004 report, referring to weak and influenced cultures, we read about the positive opportunities 'that local cultures have — and can be helped to have — to protect their own and to resist being outgunned by the forces of cultural invasion' (UNDP 2004, p. 20). This subtle ranking of powerful and

¹ We find here a paradox: to define the implicit 'cultural' dimension in HDR we use the words 'culture/cultural'. Anyone could ask: what does 'culture' mean in this paper? (the biter bit!). Soon, in the next part of the text, we will see how Arjun Appadurai's way to understand culture is the one that better fits our needs. For the time being, and summing up excessively Appadurai's ideas, 'cultural' should be any characteristic that allows a group speaking about 'us and them,' dividing the world between 'us and others'. We will get back to this subject later.

weak cultures allows us to consider that, implicitly, *a power vector that goes across the cultural realm exists.*

The other vector is the one based on a supposed functionality of cultures. The idea that cultures are more or less functional underlies in the reports. Assuming that culture is – and has to be – useful in any sense, some cultures are more functional than others. Those with more functionality are able to adapt to changes in their living atmosphere, but those less functional and, therefore, less adaptable, tend to disappear.

Oral cultures are particularly at risk since the current trend is towards less emphasis on memory and more on literacy and mechanical reproduction, substituting books for the spoken word... Similarly, many communities have communicated from one generation to the next through such intricate skills as weaving and carving-skills constantly being eroded by mass industrial production (UNDP 1993, p. 23).

Oral cultures (transmitting knowledge orally) are at risk: cultures based on mass industrial production are more functional, so they will substitute them. If oral cultures are not capable of adapting to the new situation, and thus recover some functionality, they will fade and disappear.

We find another good example in the report published in 1991. UNDP tells us about a project trying to substitute modern medicine for traditional healers in Lesotho,

but not having much success. People still preferred to use the traditional healers. The problem was that the public health workers only gave lectures on preventive health, while the traditional healers offered cures. The solution was

to integrate the traditional healers into the formal health system – and allow the government health workers to provide curative remedies. (UNDP 1991, p. 73)

So, why didn't the traditional, cultural knowledge disappear? Because it was able to adapt to the new context and offer some functionality. If the modern medicine had worked from the beginning, the traditional health knowledge would have been set aside and, finally, it would have disappeared.

So, we can assert that, as we found with the power vector, *another vector exists which also goes across the cultural realm: the functionality vector*. Those two vectors define the cultural dimension implicit in the HDR, a kind of two-dimensional cultural field (see Figure 1).

The logic within the implicit cultural space of the HDR: the cultural progress

It is time to think about the logic prevailing in this cultural field we have just defined. The key idea is that both vectors are directly correlated: *the more functional a culture is, the more powerful it becomes*. That would be the general cultural logic implicit in the HDR: those cultures which best adapted to changes in the context and, thus, got more functionality, are the most powerful ones and tend to influence others. On the contrary, those that didn't adapt, lose their functionality and, consequently, become weak cultures (influenced) and tend to disappear.

It is not difficult perceiving this logic in some of the examples we quoted before. Let's remember the case of the oral cultures: they were forced to 'compete' with much more functional ones (the industrialised ones), so they were relegated to the group of weak cultures. Oral cultures were not, by far, able to influence and change more powerful cultures, but, on the contrary, industrialised ones could change the weak ones in such

a strong way that they were at risk of disappearing. As we stated before, the more adaptable and functional a culture is, the more powerful and influential it becomes. That's the direct correlation between both vectors.

The main consequence of this correlation is that it makes possible the emergence of a central concept in the implicit cultural logic in the HDR: *cultural progress*. Following the same logic we explained earlier, those cultures with more skills to adapt to changes, hence more functional, hence more powerful, are the cultures that have more cultural progress. Equally, but in the opposite sense, the non-adaptable, non-functional and non-powerful ones are less culturally progressed. In Figure 1, the diagonal line crossing the cultural field would be the one representing the concept of cultural progress. We can find this implicit logic all along the HDR. For example:

The overall assessment: the HDI – though much broader than GNP – should still be regarded as a partial measure of human progress. It should thus be supplemented by other qualitative and quantitative studies of aspects of human progress – for example, political freedom, cultural progress or improved physical environment – until a way is found to incorporate these dimensions into the HDI. (UNDP 1995, p. 121)

Cultural progress, as the political freedom or the improvement of the physical environment, is one of the aspects of human progress that would be worthy measuring. So the cultural progress exists: some groups are culturally more progressed than others. Why are functional-powerful cultures the progressed ones? UNDP implicitly considers that more functional-powerful cultures are culturally more progressed. Next quote, taken from the 2009 report, gives us a clue in this sense:

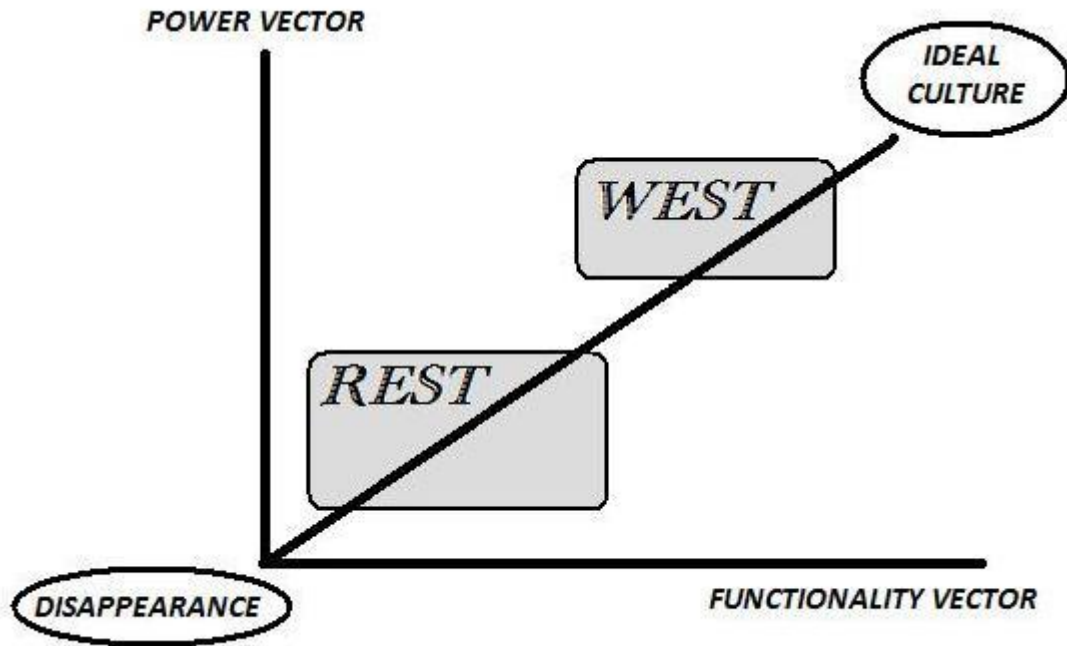
Norms adopted in a migrant's new home—such as a higher age of marriage and lower fertility, greater educational expectations of girls, and labour force participation—can filter back to the place of origin. This diffusion process may be accelerated in cases where the social and cultural gap between sending and receiving countries is large. (UNDP 2009, p. 76)

Two main ideas in this quote: 1) a 'cultural gap' exists between migrant-receiving and migrant-expelling countries, and 2) first ones influence culturally the second ones ('filter back to the place of origin'). Migrant-receiving countries are more culturally functional and powerful so they influence culturally the weak ones, say the migrant-expelling ones. Soon, when we present the concept of *ideal culture*, we will see why UNDP implicitly considers that more functional and powerful cultures are more culturally progressed.

The ideal culture

Once we have outlined the cultural dimension implicit in the HDR (both cultural vectors) and the logic working on it (their correlation and the consequent concept of cultural progress), it is now time to face the third step we set earlier. We will focus our attention on both ends of the cultural progress line so we can situate the disappearance zone and the ideal culture.

FIGURE 1: The Cultural Space in the UNDP's HDR



We have mentioned before that, in the implicit cultural logic of the HDR, weak and non-functional cultures are at risk of disappearance. The less functionality, the less power: and the less power a culture has, the bigger the influence received is. Following this causal logic, many non-modern cultures finally fade and disappear. Modernity is too efficient to compete at the same level.

‘Another effect of many forms of modern economic growth has been to homogenise diverse cultures. There are thought to be about 10,000 distinct cultures – but many are being marginalised or eliminated, some deliberately’ (UNDP 1996, p. 61). As we quoted before, this homogenisation process is ‘uneven and unbalanced’ (UNDP 1999, p. 30). It is not a process of hybridisation, but a process of effacing the weak cultures. That’s why we say that, as we can see in Figure 1, at the bottom of the cultural progress line we find the *disappearance zone* of cultures.

What do we find at the opposite end of the cultural progress line? In the highest point of the line, setting a teleological goal that confers coherence to the whole cultural logic implicit in the reports, we find the *ideal culture*. This culture would be, following the HDR's cultural implicit logic, a kind of humanity's culture, a globally shared culture. A pure and essential one gathering the finest cultural elements supposedly present in all the cultures.

That's why we call it 'ideal': following platonic philosophy, this pure and essential culture, which escapes all kinds of localisms and concreteness, seems to be one of the paradigms in the classical philosopher's metaphysical ontology. Thus, as we could find in the platonic ideal realm the virtue that would guide us to the goodness and the correct actions, the ideal culture – globally shared values – is the key for a global moral: 'All cultures share a commonality of basic values that are the foundation of global ethics' (UNDP 2004, p. 90).

Which are those commonality of basic values shared by all the cultures? Reading the HDR we find out that they are some of the core principles of modern liberalism: freedom, democracy and individualism. For example: 'The fight for... freedoms, across all cultures and races, has been the bond holding the human family together' (UNDP 2000, p. 128); 'Democracy is a universally recognised ideal, based on values common to people everywhere regardless of cultural, political, social or economic differences' (UNDP 2002, p. 55); 'Human freedom is vital for human development. People must be free to exercise their choices in properly functioning markets, and they must have a decisive voice in shaping their political frameworks' (UNDP 1990, p. 1); 'The mark of all civilisations is the respect they accord to human dignity and freedom' (UNDP 2000, p. 1). Freedom is an essential value in human life; democracy is the most suitable way to establish a political order respecting everyone's liberties; and individuals are the natural

beneficiaries of freedom, using it to make independent political or economical choices. And, what's more important, all these values are globally shared by all humanity.²

Being this ideal culture – placed in the upper limit of the cultural progress line – the keystone of all the UNDP's theoretical framework, it is interesting pointing that this teleological goal is a utopian one, unreachable.

Democracy and human development have something else in common. They are both more a journey than a destination — a promise rather than a list. Societies can be more or less democratic, just as people can have broader or more constrained choices to lead lives they value. But there is no defined end point. No society is ever completely democratic or fully developed.³ (UNDP 2002, p. 61)

The West and the Rest

Now we have outlined the cultural space underlying the HDR, we can reflect on the consequences of such implicit conception. We will see how the supposedly cultural discourse of the UNDP turns into a technical one: the development discourse becomes into one of identity.

² That's why, in the quote referring to immigration and speaking about the 'cultural gap' and cultural norms filtering back to the origin, we said that functional-powerful cultures where more culturally progressed: the kind of norms they emanate are close to the ideal culture. 'Cultural gap' wasn't a synonym of 'culturally different', but a subtle way for saying 'occupying different positions in the cultural progress line'.

³ Strong platonic ontology's influence again: unreachable ideas and the imperfect material world.

Technification of culture

Let's begin remembering that human development is considered, by the UNDP, as the widening of opportunities and capabilities of people – widening of reachable functionings, so widening of individual freedom to act in the social, the political, and the economical realm. Given that the ideal culture represents the supreme ideas of freedom, democracy (political freedom) and individualism, and following the implicit cultural logic we have 'dis-covered', we can conclude that the more human development a group of people achieves, the closer to the ideal culture they are, so the more culturally progressed they are. Thus, given the goal is the same – ideal culture –, *human development is synonym of cultural progress.*

Since the first HDR, in 1990, the Human Development Index (HDI) has been an attempt to measure human development. Through three quantitative statistical sub-index – including health, education and income – UNDP yearly offers a ranking of all the countries in the world categorized as 'high, medium or low developed countries'. The higher the HDI, the freer a country is supposed to be in general terms.

The subtle but strong link between culture and development we have just pointed has a significant consequence: *the quantitative, statistical HDI becomes a measurement of cultural progress* – HDI measures human development, which we concluded was synonym of cultural progress. This way, the UNDP eludes the complex, and many times slippery, realm of culture and exchanges it for the solid, quantitative and objective concept of development. The qualitative culture is replaced by the quantitative development. The cultural discourse is turned into a technical, statistical one. The implicit cultural logic is explicitly deployed through the concept of development.

Nineteenth century sociocultural evolutionism used to rank human groups considering their cultural evolution (i.e. Tylor's savagery, barbarism, and civilisation). Nowadays political correctness wouldn't allow this kind of rankings based on cultural matters. It would be even more unthinkable in the case of a United Nations' program⁴. The technification of the cultural dimension through the concept of human development and the calculation of the HDI permit UNDP to produce an identical ranking (low development, medium development, high development) adducing it is based on quantitative and objective data. The implicit meaning is the same but the explicit sense is politically correct. This indirect quantification of culture (through the HDI) makes it much easier to maintain evolutionist implicit assumptions: the ranking is not based on some qualitative observations (mere opinions) but in positivistic, objective statistics. Now, we don't have to say 'them' or 'savage', we just say 'with HDI lower than X'. As we will see soon, 'technical knowledge' is enough to point those outside the Western cultural borders.

This development-culture link creates a symbolic division of the world: in one hand we find developed (high HDI), industrialized, modern Western countries, in the other hand we have the rest. Western, developed countries are more culturally progressed, so they influence other weaker cultures (remember both vectors and the cultural progress line).

[The] problem concerns the asymmetry of power between the West and other countries and the likelihood that this asymmetry will translate into destruction of local cultures (poetry, drama, music, dancing, food habits and so on). Such a

⁴ UNDP is very aware of it: we cannot find 'under developed' countries in their reports, but just 'developing' countries.

loss, it is plausibly argued, would culturally impoverish non-Western societies.
(UNDP 2004, p. 20)

Culture to point others

At this point Arjun Appadurai's reflections about 'culture' will be very helpful for us. In his well-known book *Modernity at Large* this author suggests a shift in the way to conceptualise culture:

Stressing the dimensionality of culture rather than its substantiality permits our thinking of culture less as a property of individuals and groups and more as a heuristic device that we can use to talk about difference.

But there are many kinds of differences in the world and only some of these are cultural. And here I bring in a second component of my proposal about the adjectival form of the word culture. I suggest that we regard as cultural only those differences that either express, or set the groundwork for, the mobilization of group identities. (Appadurai 2003, p. 13)

Culture wouldn't be a substantial phenomenon but a dimensional one: a kind of 'heuristic device' remarking differences between groups. Among every type of difference, those stressing group identities would be the cultural ones. In other words, culture would be the way to understand identity differences to remark who we are, and thus who others are. 'Cultural' are not the set of properties of my group, but the amount of differences that distinguishes my group from others.

Is this the way the HDR are implicitly using the concept of culture? We think so. UNDP is just remarking the differences between the western countries (industrialized, modern,

highly developed... so culturally progressed) and other countries: the West and the Rest (us and them). Ideal culture is the key concept. Some political and moral values and principles (freedom, democracy and individualism mainly... ideal culture) are the chosen characteristics that define a cultural group: the West. We hardly find substantial descriptions of cultural characteristics of the West in the HDR, but some 'differences that either express, or set the groundwork for, the mobilization of group identities'. This way, those elements (that we said were moral and political) are implicitly redefined as *cultural*. Who are we? Those respecting or fighting for freedoms, those supporting democracy, those near the ideal culture and its core – essential, pure – values. Who are they? Those not respecting individual freedoms, those preventing democracy, those not sharing humanity's essential values. Us and them. The West and the Rest.

Western countries have different languages, traditions, ways of life, etc. But the UNDP considers that all of them share those common principles (ideal culture) that make them Western, and differentiate them from non-Western ones. We find even less substantial similarities within the huge group of the Rest. But that's not necessary: they are simply the Rest, those outside the borderline dividing them and us.

Through the technification of culture we have highlighted before, the UNDP avoids a tricky situation: defining explicitly the cultural borders between the West and the Rest. Making it would be an unreachable task, more argued than accepted. As the HDI is a relative index that can only be calculated in relation to others, the resulting ranking is also a relative one: one country is *more developed* than another one. This relative ranking tells us that those in the top are for sure Western. Those in the bottom aren't. Where is the borderline? It doesn't matter. We all know who the purely Western are, we all know who the non-Western are, and all the rest are divided in a relative way: some of them are 'more Western' than others. There is no need for an explicit and definite border, just for two nodes: pure Westerns with high human development and pure non-

Westerns with low human development. *The borderline exists, but in a symbolic dimension*, not in a concrete and explicitly definite one.

There is an interesting paragraph in the 2004 HDR (in fact, the first paragraph of the introductory overview) that will allow us to realise more clearly this implicit cultural division of the world.

How will the new constitution of Iraq satisfy demands for fair representation for Shiites and Kurds? Which—and how many—of the languages spoken in Afghanistan should the new constitution recognise as the official language of the state? How will the Nigerian federal court deal with a Sharia law ruling to punish adultery by death? Will the French legislature approve the proposal to ban headscarves and other religious symbols in public schools? Do Hispanics in the United States resist assimilation into the mainstream American culture? Will there be a peace accord to end fighting in Côte d'Ivoire? Will the President of Bolivia resign after mounting protests by indigenous people? Will the peace talks to end the Tamil-Sinhala conflict in Sri Lanka ever conclude? These are just some headlines from the past few months. Managing cultural diversity is one of the central challenges of our time. (UNDP 2004, p. 1)

The best way to fathom all the implicit cultural information in this paragraph is trying to answer this simple question: from UNDP's point of view, where does the cultural diversity create conflicts and problems? Our answer has three parts. Firstly, cultural conflicts are common *outside the cultural borders of the West*. Iraq, Afghanistan, Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire, Bolivia and Sri Lanka in this case. Their only common characteristic is being part of the Rest. Secondly, cultural conflicts appear *in the border* between the West and the Rest: in a clear but subtle reference to the Muslim veil, when French (Westerns) have to face the issues emerging in their coexistence with others

(perhaps politically French, but culturally *others*) or when Americans (Westerns) have problems with those (Hispanics, so *others*, part of the Rest) resisting the 'mainstream American culture' (sic). Finally, we don't find any mention at all to cultural conflicts *inside* the Western culture's borders. The implicit cultural logic and the consequent use of culture in the HDR is again clear: there is a cultural (symbolic) line dividing the West and the Rest; no substantial characteristic defining any of the groups, just some selected component to remark the difference – Appadurai: culture as 'a heuristic device that we can use to talk about difference'. As ideal culture – freedom, democracy, etc. – is the essence of the West's identity, outside that cultural borderline cultural conflicts are common, also in the borderline (the frontline), not inside it.

Why do the HDR work with this idea of culture? Now we can answer that it is used just to point others, to create a subtle, implicit, symbolic, binary division of the world: us and other... the West and the Rest.

Conclusion: A subtle drift from criticism to conformism

The implicit cultural logic in the reports and its sequent technification of culture through the concept of development has another important effect: the main objective is not changing the existing political and economical institutions, but adapting the excluded people to them. The ideal future for the UNDP is not the one in which unfair institutions are erased, but the one in which everyone is *inside* the cultural borderline. The critical attitude turns into a conformist one.

Nestor García-Canclini explains it in a clear way. In his book *Diferentes, desiguales y desconectados* (2004) the author offers a review of how the way to understand society and culture has changed during last decades due to the globalisation increasing processes. One of his main ideas is that the concepts of difference (*diferencia*) and

inequality (*desigualdad*) have lost strength and the inclusion/exclusion pair has replaced them. While difference is based on ethnical and national considerations and inequality in class terms, inclusion/exclusion dimension rests in the concept of net. Those who are able to take advantage of the globalisation processes are connected to the net, so included. Those who don't, stay disconnected, so excluded.

Differences and inequalities stop being fractures to overcome (...). An evidence is the weakening of these concepts and their substitution by inclusion or exclusion. What does the predominance of this vocabulary mean? Society, conceived before in terms of strata and levels, or distinguishing according to ethnic or national identities, is now thought under the metaphor of the net. (García-Canclini 2004, p. 73)

Inequality – as García-Canclini considers it, in a Marxian way – is not a key concept in the HDR. Class-centered analysis is not the main explanatory tool of the UNDP: not in the national ambit, neither in the global one. Difference is widely considered but, as we have pointed through this paper, in a quite vacuous way. Explicitly diversity is important and it has to be respected; implicitly diversity is reduced to a binary solution: us and them, Western and non-Western, developed and developing.

In the UNDP's theoretical framework humans are all the same. It doesn't matter the class structure affecting them, it doesn't matter identity and cultural issues influencing them: if they can make use of their liberty – if they have capacities and opportunities – they are developed, therefore included. Difference and inequality are only important *if they have any influence over freedom*. Freedom is the key concept: free people are connected, non-free people aren't. Countries highly ranked in the HDI list are mainly including their citizens in the global society, countries lowly ranked aren't.

García-Canclini regards that this change not only has happened in the hegemonic discourse, but also in the critical one.

This turn of the difference and the inequality issues to the inclusion/exclusion one is not only noted in hegemonic discourses. We also find it in the critical thinking. (...) From humanitarian aid to new forms of activism, their purpose, more than changing unfair orders, is to reintegrate excluded ones. (García-Canclini 2004, p. 74)

As we pointed before, the wanted future we find in HDR is not one without unfairness-producing relations and institutions, but one in which everyone would be *inside* the cultural borderline. As we pointed in the introduction, through its implicit cultural logic, the UNDP reinforces the existing epistemological and political *status quo* and avoids a real change: the main objective is simply adapting those not adapted. The problem is that *this desired future is nothing but a simplistic and unrealistic idealisation of the present.*

We conclude our research considering the double-edged sword has been clearly unhidden. Such a common concept – culture – can conceal, beneath a naive politically correct surface, an entire conceptual structure conceived in order to reinforce, in a subtle, implicit way, an exclusionary ideological apparatus. While many thinkers consider we can find in the UNDP an exemplary case of right consideration of cultural diversity, this international institution is a silent guardian of the dominating power narratives and, this way, of the political and epistemological hegemonic structures.

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