

Comments on Michael Walton's "Culture matters for poverty, but not because of a culture of poverty"

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General comment

- ❑ Convincing argument that there is no such thing as a ‘culture of poverty’
- ❑ Interesting tools to understand changing patterns of inequality traps throughout history and different political contexts
- ❑ Still, the question remains: why persistency of some group-based differences?

Temporality (1)

- ❑ Appadurai's critique that culture has often been seen as primarily concerned with the past (traditions)
- ❑ Appadurai's concept of the 'capacity to aspire', this is to 'conceive of, plan, organize and take action with respect to future paths' => this capacity is unequally distributed across different groups in a society
- ❑ = crucial debate for the dialogue between economists and anthropologists who are often accused of not being able to make predictions (and policy recommendations)

Temporality (2)

- ❑ Habitus (Bourdieu): relationship between power and culture (p. 10), but the habitus also connects the past, the present and the future
- ❑ Alban Bensa: more than concerned with the past, for long, anthropology focused on the reproduction of the same (rituals, traditions, the 'eternal present') and didn't pay enough attention to events, changes, ruptures
- ❑ Solution: to historicize cultures (here inequality traps)

Relational definition of culture

- ❑ “Ethnic groups and boundaries” (F. Barth 1969): first relational theory of ethnicity
- ❑ Do we need to go ‘Beyond Culture’ (Gupta and Ferguson 1992)?
- ❑ We all agree that an essentialist view on culture is not acceptable anymore, that we have to focus on its relational, fluid dimension

Can culture explain collective behavior ?

- ❑ But even with a relational view on culture, there is the implicit assumption that people behave the way they behave because they belong to a ‘culture’ (even a fluid, dynamic, contested, relational one).
- ❑ Their belonging to (a) certain culture(s) provides them collective meanings about the world, which lead to (and explain) collective actions
- ❑ Jean Bazin’s *Questions of Meaning*:

Can culture explain collective behavior ?

(2)

- ❑ As ethnographers, we witness actions which appear profoundly foreign to our mode of understanding since anthropology was created as a sciences of cultural difference (this applies in particular to poor, marginalized populations),
- ❑ When these actions appear as weird, irrational, counter-productive, we assume that the driving force behind them is a set of meanings (a shared view on the world, a ‘culture’): ‘they behave like this because their culture makes them believe this is right, correct, desirable’ (even though it may lead to poverty and exclusion).

Describing the rules

- ❑ For Bazin, anthropology is not condemned to remain a knowledge of cultures
- ❑ What we can do is to provide a description of human actions that helps us understand collective actions (= to describe a set of rules that are sensible, accepted, plausible, expected): if we establish the rules of the game, prediction becomes easier

When positive analysis becomes normative

- Trying to understand is a basic principle of charity, to show that other cultures have their coherence: people are not stupid, they just see things differently
- But often anthropologist have defended cultural peculiarities, in the name of this principle of charity (and even when these peculiarities are ethically questionable), when economists had much more normative positions

How to avoid the charity/denunciation dilemma?

- “Saying, while watching pilgrims, ‘all those nice people are wrong’, is judging them and not studying their behavior. Explaining why they are wrong, what misleads them, is to justify their judgment, not understand their practice. But saying that they are not wrong (or not very wrong, or not more wrong than the others) is not to gain a deeper understanding of what they are doing (it is at best empathize with them)”
(Bazin 1991:507)
- This applies as well to the mechanisms of poverty

Interactions between identity and politics: policy

- ❑ Political parties (p. 27)
- ❑ Categories of ethnopolitical practice (ethnic entrepreneurs) \neq categories of social analysis (identity, ethnicity for social scientists)
- ❑ (Bourdieu: categories of practice/categories of analysis)
- ❑ Brubaker's *Ethnicity without groups* (2002)

Poverty, culture and globalization

- ❑ Impact of migrations in a globalized world (debate: does poverty leads to migration?)
- ❑ Recent crisis in Italy with the Roma population after a woman was murdered
- ❑ Stability of inequality traps throughout history but also in different geographical contexts => why persistency of some group-based differences?