

# Race, Culture, and Equality

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Although the original title of my talk was "Conquests and Cultures," my recently published book with the same title is the last volume of a broader three-volume study of worldwide cultural differences and their economic and social impacts. So I would like to use the opportunity of this occasion and this distinguished audience and institution, not to plug a book, but to discuss some broader themes and conclusions that I have reached after 15 years of researching and writing the three books in this series on the history of peoples and cultures around the world. I would also like to talk about how those broader themes and conclusions might apply to some of the racial, ethnic, and cultural dilemmas confronting us today.

During the long years that I spent researching and writing this trilogy I was struck again and again with how common huge disparities in income and wealth have been for centuries, in countries around the world--and yet how each country regards its own particular disparities as unusual, if not unique. Some of these disparities have been among racial or ethnic groups, some among nations, and some among regions, continents, or whole civilizations.

In the nineteenth century, real per capita income in the Balkans was about one-third that in Britain. That dwarfs intergroup disparities that many in the United States today regard as not merely strange but sinister. Singapore has a median per capita income that is literally hundreds of times greater than that in Burma.

During the recent rioting in Indonesia, much of it directed against the ethnic Chinese in that country, some commentators found it strange that the Chinese minority, which is just 5 percent of the Indonesian population, owned an estimated four-fifths of the capital in the country. But it is not strange. Such disparities have long been common in other countries in Southeast Asia, where Chinese immigrants typically entered poor and then prospered, creating whole industries in the

process. People from India did the same in much of East Africa and in Fiji.

Occupational differences have been equally unequal.

In the early 1920s, Jews were just 6 percent of the population of Hungary and 11 percent of the population of Poland, but they were more than half of all the physicians in both countries, as well as being vastly over-represented in commerce and other fields. In the early twentieth century, all of the firms in all of the industries producing the following products in Brazil's state of Rio Grande do Sul were owned by people of German ancestry: trunks, stoves, paper, hats, neckties, leather, soap, glass, watches, beer, confections and carriages.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, just three countries produced most of the manufactured goods in the world--Britain, Germany, and the United States. By the late twentieth century, it was estimated that 17 percent of the people in the world produce four-fifths of the total output on the planet.

Such examples could be multiplied longer than you would have the patience to listen.

Why are there such disparities? In some cases, we can trace the reasons, but in other cases we cannot. A more fundamental question, however, is: Why should anyone have ever expected equality in the first place?

Let us assume, for the sake of argument, that not only every racial or ethnic group, but even every single individual in the entire world, has identical genetic potential. If it is possible to be even more extreme, let us assume that we all behave like saints toward one another. Would that produce equality of results?

Of course not. Real income consists of output and output depends on inputs. These inputs are almost never equal--or even close to being equal.

During the decade of the 1960s, for example, the Chinese minority in Malaysia earned more than a hundred times as many engineering degrees as the Malay majority. Halfway around the world at the same time, the majority of the population of Nigeria, living in its northern provinces, were just 9 percent of the students attending that country's University of Ibadan and just 2 percent of the much larger number of Nigerian students studying abroad in foreign institutions of higher learning. In the Austrian Empire in 1900, the illiteracy rate among Polish adults was 40 percent and among Serbo-Croatians 75 percent--but only 6 percent among the Germans.

Given similar educational disparities among other groups in other countries--disparities in both the quantity and quality of education, as well as in fields of specialization--why should anyone expect equal outcomes in incomes or occupations?

Educational differences are just one source of economic disparities. Even at the level of craft skills, groups have differed enormously, as they have in urbanization. During the Middle Ages, and in some places long beyond, most of the population of the cities in Slavic Eastern Europe were not Slavs. Germans, Jews, and other non-Slavic peoples were the majority populations in these cities for centuries, while the Slavs were predominantly peasants in the surrounding countryside. Prior to the year 1312, the official records of the city of Cracow were kept in German--and the transition that year was to Latin. Only decades later did Poles become a majority of the population of Cracow. Only over a period of centuries did the other cities of Slavic Eastern Europe acquire predominantly Slavic populations. As late as 1918, 97 percent of the people living in the cities of Byelorussia were *not* Byelorussians.

Until this long transition to urban living took place among the Slavs, how could the wide range of skills typically found in cities be expected to exist in populations that lived overwhelmingly in the countryside? Not only did they not have such skills in Eastern Europe, they did not have them when they immigrated to the United States, to Australia, or to other countries, where they typically worked in low-level occupations and earned correspondingly low incomes. In the early years of the twentieth century, for example, immigrants to the United States from

Eastern and Southern Europe earned just 15 percent of the income of immigrants from Norway, Holland, Sweden, and Britain.

Groups also differ demographically. It is not uncommon to find some groups with median ages a decade younger than the median ages of other groups, and differences of two decades are not unknown. During the era of the Soviet Union, for example, Central Asians had far more children than Russians or the peoples of the Baltic republics, and so had much younger median ages. At one time, the median age of Jews in the United States was 20 years older than the median age of Puerto Ricans. If Jews and Puerto Ricans had been absolutely identical in every other respect, including their cultures and histories, they would still not have been equally represented in jobs requiring long years of experience, or in retirement homes, or in activities associated with youth, such as sports or crime.

Nothing so intractably conflicts with our desires for equality as geography. Yet the physical settings in which races, nations, and civilizations have evolved have had major impacts on the cultures developed within those settings. At its simplest and crudest, the peoples of the Himalayas have not had an equal opportunity to acquire seafaring skills. Nor have Eskimos had an equal opportunity to acquire knowledge and experience in growing pineapples or other tropical crops.

Too often the influence of geography on wealth is thought of narrowly, in terms of natural resources that directly translate into wealth, such as oil in the Middle East or gold in South Africa. But, important as such differences in natural wealth are, geography influences even more profound cultural differences among the people themselves.

Where geography isolates people, whether in mountain valleys or on small islands scattered across a vast sea, there the cultural exposures of those people to the outside world are very limited and so, typically, is their technological advancement. While the rest of the world exchanges goods, knowledge, and innovations from a vast cultural universe, isolated peoples have been largely limited to what they alone have been able to develop.

Few, if any, of the great advances in human civilization have come from isolated peoples. As the eminent French historian Fernand Braudel put it, the mountains almost always lag behind the plains--even if the races in the two places are the same. Potatoes and the English language both reached the Scottish lowlands before they reached the highlands. Islam reached North Africa's Rif mountains long after the people in the plains had become Moslems.

Geographically imposed cultural isolation takes many forms and exists in many degrees. Cities have long been in the vanguard of human progress, all over the world, but cities do not arise randomly in all geographic settings. Most of the great cities of the world have developed on navigable waterways--rivers or harbors--but such waterways are by no means equally or randomly distributed around the world. They are very common in Western Europe and very rare in sub-Saharan Africa. Urbanization has long been correspondingly common in Western Europe and correspondingly rare in sub-Saharan Africa. One-third of the land mass of Europe consists of islands and peninsulas but only one percent of the land mass of South America consists of islands and peninsulas.

Navigable waterways have been economically crucial, especially during the millennia of human history before the development of railroads, trucks, and airplanes. Before the transcontinental railroad was built, it was both faster and cheaper to reach San Francisco from a port in China than from Saint Louis. People in the city of Tbilisi bought their kerosene from Texas--8,000 miles away across water--rather than from the Baku oil fields, less than 400 miles away across land.

Such vast differences in costs between water transport and land transport affect what can be transported and how far. Gold or diamonds can repay the costs of transport across thousands of miles of land, but grain or coal cannot. More important, the size of a people's cultural universe depends on how far they can reach out to other peoples and other cultures. No great civilization has developed in isolation. Geography in general and navigable waterways in particular set the limits of a people's cultural universe, broadly or narrowly. But these limits are by no means set equally for all peoples or all civilization.

For example, when the British first crossed the Atlantic and confronted the Iroquois on the eastern seaboard of what is today the United States, they were able to steer across that ocean in the first place because they used rudders invented in China, they could navigate on the open seas with the help of trigonometry invented in Egypt, their calculations were done with numbers invented in India, and their general knowledge was preserved in letters invented by the Romans. But the Iroquois could not draw upon the knowledge of the Aztecs or the Incas, whose very existence they had no way of knowing. The clash was not between the culture created by the British versus the culture created by the Iroquois. It was a clash between cultural developments drawn from vast regions of the world versus cultural developments from a much more circumscribed area. The cultural opportunities were unequal and the outcomes were unequal. Geography has never been egalitarian.

A network of rivers in Western Europe flow gently through vast plains, connecting wide areas economically and culturally. The rivers of tropical Africa plunge a thousand feet or more on their way to the sea, with cascades and waterfalls making them navigable only for stretches between these natural barriers--and the coastal plain in Africa averages just 20 miles. Regular rainfall and melting snows keep the rivers of Western Europe flowing throughout the year but African rivers have neither--and so rise and fall dramatically with the seasons, further limiting their usefulness. The two continents are at least as dramatically different when it comes to natural harbors. Although Africa is more than twice the size of Europe, it has a shorter coastline. That is because the European coastline continually twists and turns, creating innumerable harbors, while the African coastline is smooth, with few harbors. How surprising is it that international commerce has played a much smaller role in the economic history of Africa than in that of Europe in general and Western Europe in particular?

These particular geographic disparities are by no means exhaustive. But they are suggestive of some of the many ways in which physical settings have expanded or constricted the size of the cultural universe available to different peoples. One revealing indication of cultural

fragmentation is that African peoples are 10 percent of the world's population but have one-third of the world's languages.

In controversies over "nature versus nurture" as causes of economic and other disparities among peoples and civilizations, nature is often narrowly conceived as genetic differences. Yet geography is also nature--and its patterns are far more consistent with history than are genetic theories. China, for example, was for many centuries the leading nation in the world--technologically, organizationally, and in many other ways. Yet, in more recent centuries, China has been overtaken and far surpassed by Europe. Yet neither region of the world has changed genetically to any extent that would account for this dramatic change in their relative positions. This historic turnaround also shows that geographic limitations do not mean geographic determinism, for the geography of the two regions likewise underwent no such changes as could account for the reversal of their respective positions in the world.

Back in the fifteenth century, China sent ships on a voyage of exploration longer than that of Columbus, more than half a century before Columbus, and in ships more advanced than those in Europe at the time. Yet the Chinese rulers made a decision to discontinue such voyages and in fact to reduce China's contacts with the outside world. European rulers made the opposite decision and established world-wide empires, ultimately to the detriment of China. In short, geography sets limits but people determine what they will do within those limits. In some parts of the world, geographic limits have been set so narrowly that the peoples of these regions have never had the options available to either the Europeans or the Chinese. Isolation has left such regions not only lagging economically but fragmented culturally and politically, making them prey to larger, more prosperous, and more powerful nations.

We have seen how cultural handicaps have followed Eastern Europeans as they immigrated overseas, leading to lower levels of income than among immigrants from Western Europe who settled in the same places, whether North America or Australia. If Africans had immigrated voluntarily to the Western Hemisphere, instead of in

bondage, is there any reason to believe that their earnings would have achieved an equality that the Slavic immigrants failed to achieve?

There is no question that Africans and their descendants faced the additional barrier of color prejudice, but can we measure its effects by assuming that black people would have had the same income and wealth as white people in the absence of this factor--especially in view of the large disparities among different groups of white immigrants, not to mention the rise of some non-white groups such as Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans to incomes above the national average?

Put differently, geography has not only cheated many peoples of equal cultural opportunities, it has also cheated all of us today of a simple criterion for measuring the economic and social effects of other variables, such as prejudice and discrimination. Nothing has been more common in human history than discrimination against different groups, whether different by race, religion, caste or in innumerable other ways. Moreover, this discrimination has itself been unequal--more fierce against some groups than others and more pervasive at some periods of history than in others. If there were not so many other powerful factors creating disparities in income and wealth, it might be possible to measure the degree of discrimination by the degree of differences in economic outcomes. Even so, the temptation to do so is seductive, especially as a means of reducing the complexities of life to the simplicities of politics. But the facts will not fit that vision.

Anyone familiar with the history of race relations in the Western Hemisphere would find it virtually impossible to deny that blacks in the United States have faced more hostility and discrimination than blacks in Latin America. As just one example, 161 blacks were lynched in one year in the United States, but racial lynching was unknown south of the Rio Grande. People may debate whether race relations in Brazil, for example, have ever been quite as good as sometimes represented, but there is little or no debate that they have been better than in the United States.



If discrimination were as all-purpose an explanation of economic differences as is often supposed, we might reasonably expect blacks in Brazil to have come closer to economic parity with whites there than blacks in the United States have come to achieving parity with white Americans. In fact, however, Brazil has larger black-white disparities in income than does the United States. As inconsistent as this may be with discrimination as a dominant explanatory factor, it is perfectly consistent with cultural explanations.

Blacks in the United States have had more centuries of acculturation to Western civilization than blacks in Brazil. Brazil continuously imported Africans in large numbers up through the middle of the nineteenth century, while most people of African ancestry on American soil were born on American soil as far back as colonial times. Perhaps an even stronger case against the predominance of discrimination as an explanation of economic disparities would be a comparison of blacks in Haiti with blacks in the United States. Since Haiti became independent two centuries ago, Haitian blacks should be the most prosperous blacks in the hemisphere and American blacks the poorest, if discrimination is the overwhelming factor, but in fact the direct opposite is the case. It is Haitians who are the poorest and American blacks who are the most prosperous in the hemisphere--and in the world.

None of this should be surprising. The fact that discrimination deserves moral condemnation does not automatically make it *causally* crucial. Whether it is or is not in a given time and place is an empirical question, not a foregone conclusion. A confusion of morality with causation may be politically convenient but that does not make the two things one.

We rightly condemn a history of gross racial discrimination in American education, for example, but when we make that the *causal* explanation of educational differences, we go beyond what the facts will support. Everyone is aware of times and places when the amount of money spent educating a black child was a fraction of what was spent educating a white child, when the two groups were educated in separate systems, hermetically sealed off from one another, and when worn-out textbooks from the white schools were then sent over to the black schools to be used, while new and more up-to-date textbooks were

bought for the white children. The number of days in a school sometimes differed so much that a black child with 9 years of schooling would have been in class the same number of days as a white child with only 6 years of schooling. It seems so obvious that such things would account for disparities in test scores, for example.

But is it true?

There are other groups to whom none of these factors apply--and who still have had test score differences as great as those between black and white children in the Jim Crow South. Japanese and Mexican immigrants began arriving in California at about the same time and initially worked in very similar occupations as agricultural laborers. Yet a study of a school district in which their children attended the same schools and sat side-by-side in the same classrooms found IQ differences as great as those between blacks and whites attending schools on opposite sides of town in the Jim Crow South. International studies have found different groups of *illiterates*--people with no educational differences because they had no education--with mental test differences larger than those between blacks and whites in the United States. Nor is this necessarily a matter of genetics. During the First World War, black soldiers from Ohio, Illinois, New York, and Pennsylvania scored higher on mental tests than did white soldiers from Georgia, Arkansas, Kentucky, and Mississippi.

What is "the" reason? There may not be any such thing as "the" reason. There are so many cultural, social, economic, and other factors interacting that there was never any reason to expect equal results in the first place. That is why plausible simplicities must be subjected to factual scrutiny.

Back in 1899, when the schools of Washington, D.C. were racially segregated and discrimination was rampant, there were four academic high schools in the city--three white and one black. When standardized tests were given that year, the black academic high school scored higher than two of the three white academic high schools. Today, nearly a century later, even setting such a goal would be considered hopelessly utopian. Nor was this a fluke. That same high school was

scoring at or above the national average on IQ tests during the 1930s and 1940s. Yet its physical plant was inadequate and its average class size was higher than that in the city's white high schools.

Today, that same school has a much better physical plant and per-pupil expenditures in the District of Columbia are among the highest in the nation. But the students' test scores are among the lowest. Nor was this school unique in having had higher academic achievements during a period when it seemingly lacked the prerequisites of achievement and yet fell far behind in a later period when these supposed prerequisites were more plentiful.

This is obviously not an argument for segregation and discrimination, nor does it deny that counter-examples might be found of schools that languished in the first period and did better in the second. The point here is much more specific--that resources have had little or nothing to do with educational quality. Numerous studies of schools in general have shown that, both within the United States and in international comparisons. It should be no surprise that the same applies to black schools.

Politically, however, the disbursement of resources is by no means inconsequential. The ability to dispense largess from the public treasury has for centuries been one of the signs and prerogatives of power in countries around the world. In electoral politics, it is vital as an element in re-election. But the ultimate question is: Does it in fact make people better off? How that question is answered is much less important than that it be *asked*--that we not succumb to social dogmas, even when they are intellectually fashionable and politically convenient.

It is also important that economic and other disparities be confronted, not evaded. Best-selling author Shelby Steele says that whites in America today are fearful of being considered racists, while blacks are fearful of being considered inferior. Social dogmas may be accepted because they relieve both groups of their fears, even if these dogmas neither explain the past nor prepare for the future.

It should be axiomatic that there is not unlimited time, unlimited resources, or unlimited good will among peoples--anywhere in the world. If we are serious about wanting to enlarge opportunities and advance those who are less fortunate, then we cannot fritter away the limited means at our disposal in quixotic quests. We must decide whether our top priority is to smite the wicked or to advance the less fortunate, whether we are looking for visions and rhetoric that make us feel good for the moment or whether we are seeking methods with a proven track record of success in advancing whole peoples from poverty to prosperity.

In an era when esoteric theories can be readily turned into hard cash from the public treasury, our criteria must be higher than what can get government grants for middle-class professionals. It must instead be what will rescue that youngster imprisoned, not only in poverty, but also in a social and cultural isolation that has doomed whole peoples for centuries in countries around the world. When we promote cultural provincialism under glittering labels, we must confront the hard question whether we are throwing him a lifeline or an anchor.

History, geography, and cultures are influences but they are not predestination. Not only individuals but whole peoples have moved from the backwaters of the world to the forefront of civilization. The late Italian author Luigi Barzini asked of Britain: "How, in the first place, did a peripheral island rise from primitive squalor to world domination?" The story of Japan's rise from a backward country in the mid-nineteenth century to one of today's leading economic powers has been at least equally as dramatic. Scotland was for centuries known for its illiteracy, poverty, and lack of elementary cleanliness. Yet, from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century, most of the leading intellectual pioneers of Britain were Scots, and Scots also become prominent in business, banking, medicine, and engineering--not only in Britain but around the world.

These and other dramatic and heartening rises of whole peoples came from doing things that were often directly the opposite of what is being urged upon less fortunate groups in the United States today. Far from painting themselves into their own little cultural corner and celebrating

their "identity," these peoples sought the knowledge and insights of other peoples more advanced than themselves in particular skills, technologies, or organizational experience. It took centuries for the English to absorb the cultural advances brought by such conquerors as the Romans and the Normans and by such immigrants as the Huguenots, Germans, Jews, and others who played a major role in developing the British economy. Their early dependence on outsiders was painfully demonstrated when the Romans pulled out of Britain in the fifth century, in order to go defend their threatened empire on the continent, and the British economy and political structure both collapsed. Yet ultimately--more than a thousand years later--the British rose to lead the world into the industrial revolution and controlled an empire containing one-fourth of the land area of the earth and one-fourth of the human race.

Japan's economic rise began from a stage of technological backwardness that was demonstrated when Commodore Perry presented them with a gift of a train. Here was their reaction:

At first the Japanese watched the train fearfully from a safe distance, and when the engine began to move they uttered cries of astonishment and drew in their breath. Before long they were inspecting it closely, stroking it, and riding on it, and they kept this up throughout the day.

A century later, the Japanese "bullet train" would be one of the technological wonders of the world, surpassing anything available in the United States. But, before this happened, a major cultural transformation had to take place among the Japanese people. A painful awareness of their own backwardness spread through Japan. Western nations in general and the United States in particular were held up as models to their children. Japanese textbooks urged imitation of Abraham Lincoln and Benjamin Franklin, even more so than Japanese heroes. Many laments about their own shortcomings by the Japanese of that era would today be called "self-hate." But there were no cultural relativists then to tell them that what they had achieved was just as good, in its own way, as what others had. Instead, the Japanese overcame their backwardness, through generations of dedicated work and study, rather than redefining it out of existence.

Both the British and the Japanese became renowned for their ability to absorb the ideas and the technology of others and to carry them forward to higher levels. So did the Scots. At one time, it was common for Scots to blindly imitate the English, even using an English plow that proved to be unsuitable for the soil of Scotland. Yet, once they had absorbed what the English had to offer, the Scots then surpassed the English in some fields, notably medicine and engineering.

History does not offer blueprints for the present but it does offer examples and insights. If nothing else, it can warn us against becoming mesmerized by the heady visions and soaring rhetoric of the moment.

*Race and Culture: A World View* (1994), *Migrations and Culture: A World View* (1996), and *Conquests and Cultures: An International History* (1998).

Thomas Sowell, *Migrations and Cultures*, p. 265.

Jean Roche, *La Colonisation Allemande et le Rio Grande do Sul* (Paris: Institut des Études de L'Amérique Latine, 1959), pp. 388-389.

Numerous, documented examples can be found in just two recent books of mine: *Conquests and Cultures* (Basic Books, 1998), pp. 43, 124, 125, 168, 221-222; *Migrations and Cultures* (Basic Books, 1996), pp. 4, 17, 30, 31, 567, 118, 121, 122-123, 126, 130, 135, 152, 154, 157, 158, 162, 164, 167, 176, 177, 179, 182, 193, 196, 201, 211, 212, 213, 215, 224, 226, 251, 258, 264, 265, 275, 277, 278, 289, 290, 297, 298, 300, 305, 306, 310, 313, 314, 318, 320, 323-324, 337, 342, 345, 353-354, 354-355, 355, 356, 358, 363, 366, 372-373. Extending the search for intergroup statistical disparities to the writings of others would of course increase the number of examples exponentially, even when leaving out those cases where discrimination might be a plausible cause of the disparities.

Otto Klineberg, *Negro Intelligence and Selective Migration* (Westport, CT.: Greenwood Press, 1974), p. 2.

Henry S. Robinson, "The M Street School," *Records of the Columbia Historical Society of Washington, D.C.*, Vol.LI (1984), p. 122; Constance Green, *The Secret City: A History of Race Relations in the Nation's Capital* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), p. 137.

Constance Green said that the M Street School had "a higher proportion of highly trained talent than the white high schools could claim" (ibid), presumably because of limited career opportunities for well-educated blacks at that time. The identity of the respective high schools was established from *Report of the Board of Trustees of Public Schools of the District of Columbia to the Commissioners of the District of Columbia: 1898-1899* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1900), pp. 7, 11.

Thomas Sowell, "Black Excellence: The Case of Dunbar High School," *The Public Interest*, Spring 1974, p. 8. See also Mary Gibson Hundley, *The Dunbar Story: 1870-1955* (New York: Vantage Press, 1965, p. 25.

. Irokawa Daikichi, *The Culture of the Meiji Period* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 7.

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