

# Review of: "How WEIRD is the US and why does this matter for the rest of the world?"

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The starting point of the analysis of Brent van Pinxteren are some ideas expressed in the Heinrich's, Heine's, and Norenzayan's article in which it is stated that the US society is "The Weirdest People in the World" (2010). As it is explained in other texts this is the clue to understand why the West became particularly prosperous (Heinrich, 2003; 2017; 2020). Van Pinxteren stresses that the Heinrich's thesis is highly essentialist and individualist. Based on the latest WVS and Hofstede data sets, he argues that by these sets of scores the US cannot be seen as representative of the West. He ends up in suggesting the general conclusion that culture is not an impediment to economic progress but the lack of self-determination, yes- it is. Let us see Van Pinxteren argumentation in two steps.

The first step the author takes is the critical one. It consists in the rebuking of the Heinrich's approach on the logical, ethical, and political grounds. The second step rests on the positive use of some methodological procedure (Hofstede data sets) which purports to advocate the more positive thesis, mainly, that the relative success of Western societies must be found (as has been showed in anticolonial literature) not in culture but in such values as self-determination and autonomy, both in the economic and cultural sense. The non-Western countries shall not adopt the Western model for this model has reached the limits of its sustainability.

The criticism Van Pinxteren offers against Heinrich's thesis refers to his culturalist approach. Heinrich, Heine, and Norenzayan argue in 2010 that the acronym 'W.E.I.R.D' stands for Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic societies which differ culturally from the rest of the world. The individuals and the societies they live in are weird in the sense that they can be seen as outliers in cultural terms. While the West is weird, the weirdest country which represents it is US society. The other non-western societies shall emulate the weirdest country on the world if they want to reach the economic progress.

Van Pinxteren rightly observes that Heinrich speaks indiscriminately about 'Western' and 'non-Western cultures', 'cultural meaning systems', 'cultural worldviews which brings to memory the article by Kroeber and Kluckhohn from 1952. According to these authors, the definition of culture turns out to be ambiguous and obscure. In the same line, it should be noted, that the authors of that article identify 164 definitions of culture (Kuckhohn and Kroeber, 1952). Heinrich, however, hangs on the traditional culturalist view. In a 2003 article, Heinrich and McElreath write: "We use 'culture' to refer to the information acquired by individuals via social learning." As Van Pinxteren rightly points out, this definition has a "caveat". It limits to "individuals" not to groups or collectives and it restricts itself to 'acquired information'.

It must be noted that it has not one caveat but several caveats. By the classical standards it is not a correct definition

(*definitio fit per genus proximum et differentiam specificam*). Its genus is too wide: Culture is more than “information”. Even though cultures are not genetically transmitted, they use genetic traits as symbols and markers. Its *diferentia specifica* is also too wide: some superior animals do learn their behavior socially. It is also ambiguous. Such concepts as “social” and “learning” are vague terms, and they cry for elucidation.

Last but not least, Van Pinxteren could also mention that to ascribe economic success to culture, (or *aweird* culture as Heinrich says), is not an original idea. It turns back to Weber and his famous “The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism” in which the German sociologist argued that the protestant and Calvinist culture permeated by the ideas of ascetism and predestination and the virtues of thrift and continence, contributed to the expansion of capitalism. Weber was a cautious thinker. What he observed limited to that: a culture can strengthen a social and economic structure. Heinrich seems to be more radical: he treats cultures, societies and even countries synonymously. As Ernest Gellner observed once “Cultures are socially transmitted, but the converse argument — societies are perpetuated by cultures — should not be accepted lightly” (Gellner, 1989: 14). This idea is contentious and deeply problematic.

As Van Pixteren suggests, Heinrich tries to amend these caveats by offering another version of the definition of culture. In his book from 2020 we read: “Beliefs, practices, technologies, and social norms—culture—can shape our brains, biology, and psychology, including our motivations, mental abilities, and decision-making biases. You can’t separate “culture” from “psychology” or “psychology” from ‘biology’ because culture physically rewires our brains and thereby shapes how we think”. This new version conception of “culture” can be seen as another flaw. Instead of being too wide like the first one, it seems now to be too narrow. It describes culture in biological terms such as “brains” or metaphysical ones such as “mental abilities”. ¡Out of the frying pan and into the fire!

Van Pinxteren offers some additional reasons which in his view, knocks down Heinrich’s claims at its score:

1. The first is methodological one. Heinrich sees ‘culture’ as an attribute that belongs to individuals not to society as a whole. This assumption makes it difficult to talk about such societal phenomena as “western cultures” or “non-Western cultures” what Heinrich does in all his key-texts. The individualist definition, in Van Pinxteren view, evaporates cultures on behalf of the individuals and their brains. This is what, in turn, makes it impossible to compare societies or cultures.
2. The other reason has an ethical character. The Henrich’s book from 2020 has a telling subtitle: “How the West became psychologically peculiar and particularly prosperous”. Van Pinxteren interprets the subtitle of the ‘How the West became psychologically peculiar and particularly prosperous’ as an expression of the cultural superiority and “racist undertones” latent in Heinrich’s approach. Heinrich’s view invites the reader to think that the US and related societies are superior while others, especially non-western societies, are inferior: “That gives a clear message: the US is not only weird – it is also the best”.

3. The third reason combines ethics with politics and ecology. According to Heinrich there is only one path to development, namely, to emulate the US. This is even more problematic “because the path chosen by the US is heavily dependent on destructive CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and other ways of exceeding planetary limits. Thus, it might be wise not to idealize the US path to development and success (...).” According to Van Pinxteren: “a counter-narrative is thinkable, which in essence says that the US is prosperous not because it is so good, but because it is so evil”.

In the line of this criticism, it seems that the social analysts, should abandon the concept of culture altogether and substitute it, perchance, for other alternative terms like social system, social structure, hegemony, and so on.

Van Pinxteren, however, does not take this path. Instead, he takes a second step which has more positive character. In the first place, he proposes an alternative way of looking at culture. If we want to talk about “worldviews” or “cultures”, we must go beyond information and individuals with their mental processes and look at values. They are not individuals but values that seem to have capacity for “rewiring” the brains. As for the individuals being born in a certain culture Van Pinxteren takes an anti-determinist stand: they have *knowledge* of their country’s prevailing value system, without necessarily being *bound* to such a system at the individual level.

If we see culture as a value system that serves as a common point of reference to a people we can compare different peoples and societies according to some measure criteria known as The World Values Survey (WVS) which is currently operated by a consortium known as the World Values Survey Association. The WVS examines national cultures along two dimensions: one dimension: traditional values versus rational/secular values and the survival values versus self-expression values. According to WVS on both these dimensions, the US is not in any way extreme losing their privileged position of being a WEIRD country. The other astonishing result is that WVS values show both considerable differences within ‘the West’ and an overlap between the West and the rest of the world. According to Van Pinxteren that means that “the statements that try to explain the US success on the basis of the ‘weirdness’ of its culture deserve to be questioned”. In the period from 1981-2015 there seems to be a tendency for the world’s cultures to evolve towards secular/rational and towards more self-expression values. The country leading the way in this regard is Sweden. From a decolonial perspective, this, debunks the idea that the U.S., though WEIRD, deserves to be emulated. Van Pinxteren quotes another survey-based database of national cultural values, namely that of Hofstede that originally developed four cultural dimensions (as opposed to the two dimensions of the WVS). Later, two other dimensions were added to the original four. One of the important dimensions used in this approach was individualism-collectivism scale. According to this dimension at the beginning of this century the U.S. was listed as the most individualist country in the world but in 2017 it was substituted for the Netherlands. The US occupies the 20<sup>th</sup> position, behind a few other Western countries and Japan. In such a way Van Pinxteren demystifies the special position of the US as a weird country. Is the proposal of Van Pinxteren convincing?

Despite the criticism Van Pinxteren offers to Heinrich, he follows some of his assumptions. In his more positive argumentation, he uses such concepts as: “West” or “Western countries” and so on. He does not free himself either from the culturalist trend: “Thus, economic development is possible for culturally very different countries, such as the U.S., Japan or China. However, there is a key culture-determined ingredient that is needed for any type of appropriate

economic development to occur: this is that there should be a form of cultural autonomy, or, in other words, a people should have self-determination". US Japan and China result countries with different cultural background. Heinrich explained the economic growth in some Asian countries by suggesting that these countries adapted the new institutions acquired from WEIRD societies. Van Pinxteren rejects this suggestion. ¿How does he explain the same facts?

He sustains that the other view is possible and argues that economic development is possible for peoples with all kinds of cultural backgrounds. It is possible not only in such countries as the U.S., Japan or China but in other countries all over the world given that there should be a form of cultural autonomy, it means that "people should have self-determination". Van Pinxteren quotes Jan Vansina who explains the relative difficulties in African development because of the destruction of Africa's cultural traditions during the colonial period. Such a tradition "determines its own future and continues to do so for as long as the societies which carry it retain their self-determination". The economic development of the African societies should neither be built on copying Western models, nor on rejection of such models", but rather on "building in an autonomous way on the cultural capital that societies possess".

Let us mention some plagues in the sack of Van Pinxteren argumentation.

Firstly, there is an ethical difficulty in Van Pinxteren solution. He overlooks that this solution does not guarantee neither freedom nor democracy nor any kind of social justice. Economic growth without social justice is blind, the social justice without economic growth is empty. The self-determination and cultural autonomy might count as indispensable conditions of the economic growth but cannot be considered sufficient conditions. The economic growth without a just political system can and usually do strengthen a local ruling cliques or military *juntas*. As the recent history of the African countries show, the self-determination has been carried out by autocratic leaders like the Ugandan dictators Idi Amin, Milton Obote, and Tito Okello or Heile Selassie of Ethiopia among others (Kapuscinski, 2001).

Secondly, the counterexample given by Van Pinxteren, mainly, that one that appoints to the destructive CO2 emissions looks, nevertheless, like a cheap shot. An ecological destruction of the planet Earth seems rather an object of choice than a part of a fatalist doom. The industrial western model is based on the cognition which of course have direct repercussions on technology. It is the western part of the world which contributed to the devastation of nature, and these are the western countries which must face the consequences of their own depredation. And to quote Gellner again: "Modern society, on the other hand, has tremendous power over the environment, (...) Our new technology has freed us from impotence. The new knowledge on which the technology is based has also made plain that the nature of things does not dictate any decisions to us" (Gellner, 1989: 269). In other words, Gellner, in contraposition to Van Pinxteren, believes that if the ecological disaster was due to the development of the early capitalism, it will be its modern variant with his new technology and politics which shall be able to put an end to it. The future is open either to further depredation of the environment or to the reforms aimed to alleviate the crisis.

Thirdly, there are methodological problem related to surveys. As for the using of data survey approach, we shall ask: Is it a sufficient methodological instrument of studying values and cultures? Is quantitative research sufficient or shall it be complemented by qualitative research? How can we grasp an emic aspect of culture? Van Pinxteren invites us to see

cultures as value systems. But, how do we get a knowledge on the value system? Shall we abstain from studying people involved in the concrete situations and instead start studying *peoples* through the application of surveys? But how to study peoples without studying individuals (persons) or even smaller social groups like families, lineages, clubs, etc.) There is another methodological problem related to it: the concept of “national culture” which might be seen as an essentialist recurrent motive in the Van Pinxteren’s approach. If Heinrich’s view on the weird societies is essentialist, the Van Pinxteren’s assumptions on the existence of national cultures is also essentialistically laden. This approach also limits the values research to national countries, leaving aside tribes, nations without countries or inter-national cultural areas.

Fourthly, the author cannot escape the dilemma: cultural determinism or individual agency. He suggests that individuals are not necessarily determined by the culture in which they are born: “they have *knowledge* of their country’s prevailing value system, without necessarily being *bound* to such a system at the individual level”. This makes this argument worse: “they have knowledge” but they need not to be “bound to such a system at the individual level”. The author retains what he criticized, namely a concept of “individual” (in such an expression like “They (the individuals) have knowledge” or “individual level” and, second of all, he suggests that to be bounded to values is a matter of knowledge. But if we have knowledge of something, we can forget it. Can we forget about “our country’s prevailing system” of values? [See a classical article by G. Ryle: “On Forgetting the Difference Between Right and Wrong” - (Ryle, 2009)]

In short, Van Pinxteren’s articles viewed as a critical effort to challenge Heinrich’s ideas seem to be a worthwhile and defiant enterprise. But as a more positive view on why and how the world is divided into the rich and the poor, into the democratic and the non/democratic societies, it seems to be opaque and feeble.

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