

How WEIRD is the US and why does this matter for the rest of the world?

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Abstract

This article examines Henrich's 2020 book, which tries to show how the relative success of the West can be explained through its peculiar cultural background. The article uses a decolonial approach to critique Henrich's approach to culture for being imprecise, essentialist and individualist. Instead, it advocates an approach to culture that focuses on societies rather than individuals and has value systems at its core. Using the latest WVS and Hofstede data sets, it demonstrates that by these sets of scores, the US cannot be seen as representative of the West as a whole and that US culture is not particularly extreme on key cultural dimensions. The article concludes that culture is not an impediment to economic progress but that a lack of economic and cultural self-determination is.

Keywords: WEIRD, culture, self-determination, cultural dimensions, US, World, decolonial critique.

Is WEIRDness a good idea?

This story starts with the influential 2010 article by Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan.^[1] In this article, they criticize common assumptions on what humans are like that are entirely based on research done in Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic societies. This is the article in which they coined the term 'W.E.I.R.D' for such individuals and the societies they live in. They show how much psychological research is based on subjects from the U.S., and U.S. college and university students in particular. They argue that members of WEIRD societies (or, more specifically, from the US) can not be taken to be representative of the rest of humanity. Rather, they argue, the opposite is true: according to Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan, US subjects are often outliers in cultural terms when compared to the rest of humanity. Based on that, they propose a more inclusive form of social science research, that would include more people from other societies.

It is commendable that Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan have managed to show a blind spot in psychological research and for this, their work deserves to be commended. They have opened the eyes of psychologists the world over: the original article has by now been cited more than 11,000 times according to google scholar (as searched on 21 October

2022). But there is a caveat. Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan carefully avoid saying that the differences between WEIRD people and others are specifically cultural in nature – instead, on page 2, they merely say that ‘many of the differences are probably cultural in nature in that they were socially transmitted’. In the rest of the article though, it is the cultural they concentrate on, speaking about ‘Western’ and ‘non-Western cultures’, ‘cultural meaning systems’, ‘cultural worldviews’, and so on. In part, this intrigues, because nowhere in the article do the authors explain what they mean by ‘culture’ and why the examples they give are culturally relevant. This is all the more relevant because as far back as 1952 Kroeber and Kluckhohn already pointed to the many and widely different definitions of the concept existing at the time.^[2] In order to get an idea of what they mean by ‘culture’, one can go back to earlier work of Henrich. In a 2003 article, Henrich and McElreath^[3] do give a definition of sorts: “We use ‘culture’ to refer to the information acquired by individuals via social learning.” This definition seems logical in light of the purpose of that article, which deals with trying to explain ‘cultural evolution’ in early human groups, as a complement to genetic evolution. The definition is very wide – but also a problematic one, for two main reasons: it is a definition at the level of individuals – and it restricts itself to ‘acquired information’. I will return to that further down.

Spurred on by the success of the original article, Henrich went on to publish two further books. In 2017, he published ‘The Secret of Our Success’.^[4] In this book, he sets out to explain what he calls ‘cultural evolution’; it aims to show how humans evolved to become the most dominant species on Earth. Then in 2020, he took his reasoning one step further, by focusing on one particular group of people: WEIRD people.^[5] That is where, however, Henrich started to get carried away by his own ideas and drifted into territory where, from a decolonial perspective, he should not have gone. Why do I say this?

Is WEIRDness the best?

Even though the US and related societies may be ‘weird’ outliers when compared to the rest of humanity – there is no doubt that they are also rich, relatively well-organized, democratic, and in general, successful. Therefore, Henrich’s discourse can lead to a perception that the rest of the world should aspire to become just like the US in cultural terms if it wants to reach the same level of success. Such a line of reasoning would be highly problematic, for a number of reasons. One reason is that it would somehow lead to a perception of the US and related societies as superior and others as inferior, possibly even leading to racist undertones. In addition, it would suggest that there is only one path to development, namely to emulate the US. This is all the more problematic because the path chosen by the US is heavily dependent on destructive CO₂ emissions and other ways of exceeding planetary limits. Thus, it might be wise not to idealize the US path to development and success. A similar critique has been developed by Adams and Estrada-Villalta.^[6]

Yet this line of reasoning is precisely the line followed by Henrich in his 2020 book. It has a telling subtitle: ‘How the West became psychologically peculiar and particularly prosperous’. That gives a clear message: the US is not only weird – it is also the best. Henrich himself does not say this in so many words, but a reviewer such as Hargreaves (2021) has no trouble pointing out that conclusion. Hargreaves even cites Deidre McCloskey: ‘Liberty made us rich and made us pretty good, too.’^[7] One obvious question one may ask is how this way of thinking explains the relative success of countries like China or Japan, who are after all culturally quite different from the West. Yet Henrich finds an easy way out: these

countries had

preexisting cultural adaptations that happened to dovetail nicely with the new institutions acquired from WEIRD societies. Second, their more powerful top-down orientations permitted these societies to rapidly adopt and implement key kin-based institutions copied from WEIRD societies.^[8]

In other words, China and Japan owe their success to their quick (if perhaps authoritarian) decision to adopt key Western social and cultural norms and institutions. So within that line of reasoning, countries like China and Japan owe their success to the west and the rest would be well-off to follow their example.

But if this is a thesis, then it is not difficult to imagine an antithesis, as indeed done by Adams and Villalta. 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. A classical and still very worthy example of this type of argument was developed by Rodney.^[9] However, there is a problem with both these narratives: they are deterministic and severely limit possibilities for agency for ‘the rest’. This is because essentially, both lines of reasoning take the WEIRD countries as their point of reference. The options for ‘the rest’ then seem to be limited either to a ‘modernizing’ discourse that would make the rest of the world evolve to become just as weird – or to a revolutionary path aimed at rejecting all that is ‘Western’ – a path that is sure to attract many, but that at the end of the day still takes the West as its point of reference.

A different view

Would another line of reasoning be possible? In this article, I will work on the assumption that culture does not necessarily either hinder or speed up economic development. In other words: economic development is possible for peoples with all kinds of cultural backgrounds. 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. A strong argument for this line of reasoning in fact comes from an area that is perhaps surprising for some: the area of African Studies, and in particular from the Belgian/US theorist and researcher, Jan Vansina. Vansina explains the relative difficulties in African development as a resultant of the destruction of Africa’s cultural traditions during the colonial period. According to him, people in Africa were able to steer their development and deal with changes coming their way because they held a commonly-understood vision of the world, which gave them agency: ‘a tradition determines its own future, and continues to do so for as long as the societies which carry it retain their self-determination’.^[10] However, uniquely for Africa, this cultural autonomy was destroyed in the colonial period and its recovery (in part through the increased use of African languages) is seen by Vansina as key to its recovery. This line of

reasoning holds that building economic prosperity and appropriate development should not be built on copying Western models, nor on an outright rejection of such models, but rather on building in an autonomous way on the cultural capital that societies possess.

Now that the theoretical background has been sketched, it is time to look more in detail at the narrative of Henrich and to see if we can develop a counter-argument. In order to do this, I will try to re-examine the truth or otherwise of it, looking first of all at the assumptions on which it is built. I will then propose an alternative way of looking at culture, one that demystifies the special position of the US and related societies and recalibrates its alleged weirdness when compared to other societies.

An inherent difficulty with Henrich's approach is that it sees 'culture' as an attribute that belongs to individuals. This in itself makes it difficult to talk about such societal phenomena as 'non-Western cultures', even though Henrich has no problem in doing this. Yet, if we want to compare societies, rather than individuals, we need a definition of culture that sees it as a phenomenon that is important at the level of societies and that can distinguish between the individual and the societal levels.

The element of 'acquired information' refers to techniques or perceptions or by extension perhaps to behavioural patterns. However, there is no reference in this definition to underlying value orientations that might guide different ways of valuing and processing information in different societies. In other words, if we want to talk about 'worldviews', we have to go beyond information and look at values – as pointed out already by Talcott Parsons in 1935 (see Camic).^[11]

What this means is that in order to demonstrate that research on WEIRD populations is not necessarily representative of humanity as a whole, the definition-free approach to culture as used by Henrich, Heine and Norenzayan in 2010 may be sufficient. However, for further claims, as in Henrich's 2020 book, it is not. Yet, his statement on culture as given in the book does not stray very far from the 2013 definition; he claims:

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.^[12]

This clearly ties culture to individual psychology, rather than to society, and even includes an essentialist element: apparently, the culture an individual is born into has 'rewired' his or her brain and inescapably shapes his or her perspective on the world. Individuals seem to have no or limited capacity for intercultural learning or for 'rewiring' their brains. On the one hand, it is clear to see how with such a definition all kinds of perceptions and behaviour patterns can be compared under the umbrella term of 'culture'. On the other hand, the relationship between the individual and the societal

level (the level where generalizations are made about 'Western' and 'non-Western' cultures) remains unclear with such a definition. This is therefore a type of thinking that enables an ideologically-based discourse, rather than a rigorous examination of what may or may not actually be going on in the world.

Is an alternative approach possible? Yes, it is. Van Pinxteren has proposed to see culture as **a value system that serves as a common point of reference to a people**.^[13] This approach places 'culture' at the societal level and therefore in principle, allows for a comparison between different peoples and societies. It looks beyond behavioural patterns or information acquisition, instead focusing on underlying value systems. It stays away from the idea that individuals are 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 approach, which is taken from the field of cross-cultural psychology, allows in principle for a more narrow and more precise comparison of cultures. However, it does depend on the availability of comparable data on value systems. Such data are difficult to come by on any significant scale – but they do exist. Two data sets deserve special mention in this context: the data of the World Values Survey and those of Hofstede.

Data sets on the world's cultures

The World Values Survey (WVS) is currently operated by a consortium known as the World Values Survey Association,^[14] with bases in different European countries. Since its founding in 1981 by Ronald Inglehart, it has grown into the world's largest representative values survey, currently in its seventh wave, covering 80 countries from all continents (of which only 10 are on the African continent). The WVS groups national cultures along two dimensions: one dimension that runs from countries with traditional values to countries where rational/secular values are dominant, and a second dimension that goes from the dominance of survival values to countries where self-expression values are dominant. What might seem remarkable to those that have followed the WEIRD discourse is that on both these dimensions, the US is not in any way extreme. The WVS traditional to rational/secular scale has a value range from -2.5 to + 2.0. On this scale, the US scores 0.2, so a little more towards the secular side than to the traditional side. On the extreme secular end of this scale are countries like Japan and South Korea, with scores of 1.5 or above. The survival to self-expression scale ranges from -2.5 to +3.5. On this scale, the U.S. scores just under 1.5. This is more towards the self-expression side than towards the survival side, but nowhere near the countries that are on the extreme self-expression end of the scale – all Scandinavian countries, scoring 3 or above.^[15] What is more, the WVS values show considerable differences within 'the West' and also show an overlap between the West and the rest of the world: an EU country like Cyprus scores -0.5 on traditional versus secular values - it is more on the traditional side than a country like Thailand, with a score of 0.25, which makes Thailand more secular than the U.S. On the survival vs self-expression scale, Uruguay scores 0.75, thus scoring more towards the self-expression side than an EU country like Lithuania, with a score of -0.1.

Therefore, if we use a more precise approach to 'culture', more oriented towards value systems, and take the WVS as a yardstick, then the U.S. is no longer WEIRD. That doesn't mean that research based exclusively on US subjects can easily be generalized to the rest of the world – that basic point made by Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan stays valid and

valuable. However, it does mean that statements that try to explain the US success on the basis of the ‘weirdness’ of its culture deserve to be questioned.

However, there is a problem with the WVS – even though it shows that the US is not particularly WEIRD, it does provide an argument for saying that another group of countries would fit the bill: those of North-western Europe. The WVS has plotted the evolution of the world’s cultures over time, spanning the period from 1981-2015.^[16] What this shows is that there seems to be a tendency for the world’s cultures to evolve towards more and more secular/rational and towards more self-expression values. The country leading the way in this regard is not the US, but another wealthy democracy: Sweden. This argument is further developed in Inglehart and Welzel.^[17]

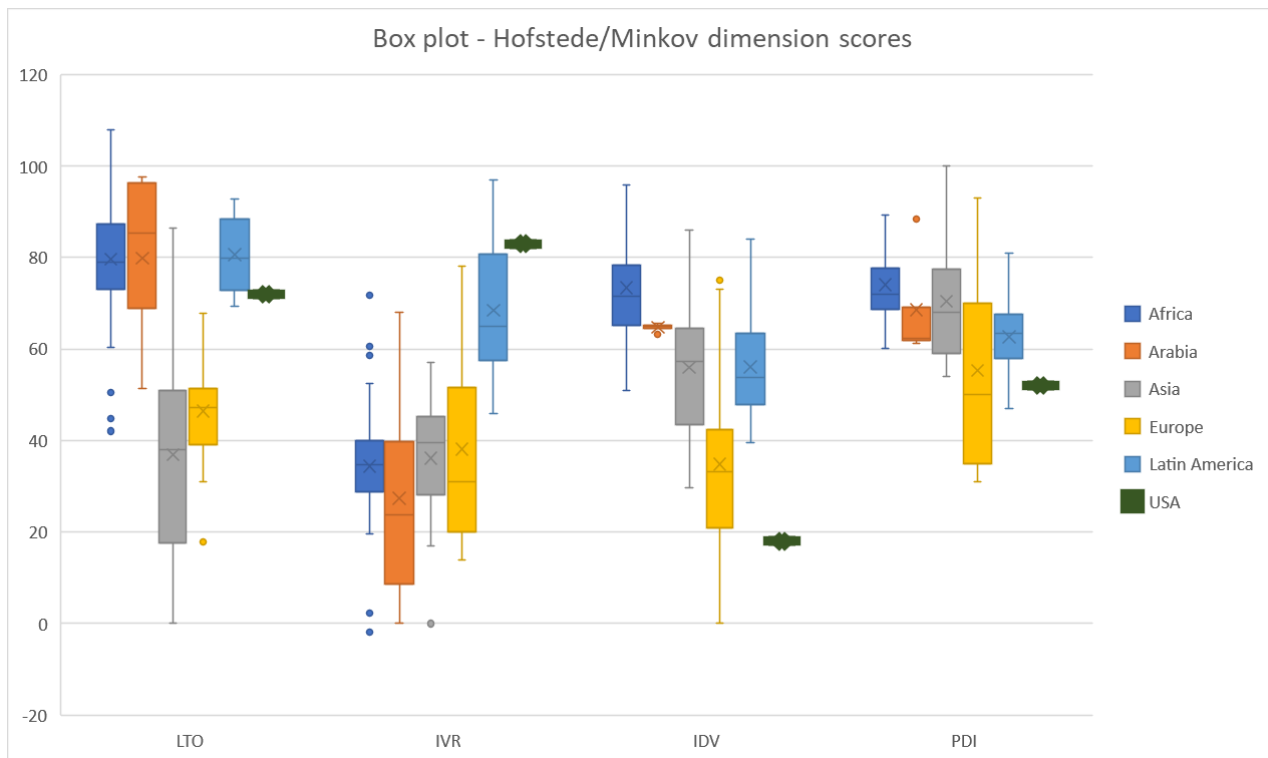
From a decolonial perspective, this, therefore, debunks the idea that the U.S., though WEIRD, deserves to be emulated, but replaces it by positing the cultural superiority of another country, Sweden – both still part of the ‘West’. What could we learn by looking at another survey-based database of national cultural values, namely that of Hofstede?

Hofstede was in fact the pioneer of the survey-based approach.^[18] His initial research was developed a decade before the start of the WVS, based on work done in the 1970s among IBM employees from different countries. He originally suggested four cultural dimensions (as opposed to the two dimensions of the WVS). His work has come under similar criticism as the WVS for being too centred on the West – see for example Fougère and Moulettes.^[19] However, Hofstede and his collaborators have tried to deal with this criticism in several ways. One is that they have actively tried to include elements from other cultures; another is that they have been explicit about their own cultural biases, and a third is that their approach is essentially open and that they see it as a heuristic way of approximating cultural differences and similarities that exist within and between countries. One of the results of the ongoing research was the addition of two new dimensions to the original four.^[20] The discussion on the nature and number of dimensions did not stop there, but a full discussion would be outside the scope of this article. See, for example, Beugelsdijk and Welzel for an attempt at integrating the Hofstede and WVS approaches into three dimensions.^[21] In conclusion, then, the Hofstede approach, although not perfect either, lacks the ideological agenda that Inglehart and Welzel seem to be promoting. It might therefore offer a better chance of putting things in perspective.

Hofstede is in fact cited by Henrich, especially on his well-known ‘individualism versus collectivism’ cultural dimension. In his landmark 2001 publication, Hofstede lists the U.S. as the most individualist country in the world, with a score of 91 on a 100-point scale.^[22] However, cultures evolve, and research has evolved as well. In 2017, Minkov et al published a study based on work done in 56 countries which led to new scores on the individualism-collectivism dimension. Minkov et al use factor scores, with a range between the most individualist country in the world (The Netherlands, scoring 182) and the most collectivist country in the world (Nigeria, scoring -291).^[23] In this list, the US is no longer the most individualist country – it is no longer ‘WEIRD’! Instead, it occupies the 20th position, behind a number of other Western countries, but also behind Japan.

If that is the case, it becomes interesting to see where the U.S. stands on the other five Hofstede dimensions. This is difficult to find out, but we do have recourse to the work of Van Pinxteren,^[24] who has used updated Minkov et al data for two dimensions.^[25] He has furthermore been able to demonstrate how certain answers to Afrobarometer

survey^[26] questions correlate with four out of the six Hofstede/Minkov dimensions. In so doing, he has been able to extend the dataset to include 36 African countries. The result can be summarized in graph 1 below (adapted from Van Pinxteren 2022: 123).^[27]



Graph 1. Hofstede/Minkov dimension scores per continent

In this box-and-whisker plot, the boxes represent the central 2nd and 3rd quartile scores per continent. The x-marks within each box mark the continental average. The 'whiskers' on either side of the boxes represent the 1st and 4th quartiles. The dots represent outliers. One of the first things that become evident from this graph is that the US is not at the extreme end of any of these four dimensions of culture. Yes, the US is individualist (the IDV dimension). It is more individualist than the average European country, but, as seen above, not the most individualist country in the world anymore. The US is on the indulgent side (the IVR dimension), much more indulgent than European countries, but not the most indulgent country in the dataset – that is Mexico. On the IVR dimension, the US is more like Colombia or Mexico, culturally speaking, than most other countries. Another thing to be noted from the graph is both the large spread per continent as well as the large overlap between continents.

Conclusion

What does this all mean? Henrich et al have made a valid point about the difficulty of generalizing from limited (WEIRD) samples. However, the conclusions Henrich draws from his research in his 2020 book deserve to be critically interrogated

from a decolonial perspective. He uses an approach to culture that is not precise and has essentialist elements ('how your brain is wired'). On the basis of this, he implicitly holds that Western (WEIRD) culture is superior. Other countries can only hope to achieve success if they adopt elements of Western culture, as China and Japan have done (in his vision). If on the other hand, we use a more precise and non-essentialist approach to culture, one that looks at the societal level and focuses on value systems, we get a completely different picture.

Based on this more precise and non-essentialist view of culture, there is no basis for believing that Western or US culture is somehow superior. The explanations for the relative success of these societies have to be found elsewhere (as has been done abundantly in anticolonial literature). There is no need for non-Western countries to adopt the Western model – in fact, it may be better if they do not, for that model has reached the limits of its sustainability. Instead, there is a need to reinforce self-determination and autonomy, both in the economic and cultural sense.

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27. [^] Adapted from Van Pinxteren (2022), p 123. This graph uses data for Africa based on Van Pinxteren (2021). Non-African data on the LTO and IDV dimensions are taken from Minkov et al (2017, 2018), and recalculated to a scale from zero to 100. The scores for the IVR and PDI dimensions are taken from the Geert Hofstede website at <https://geerthofstede.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/6-dimensions-for-website-2015-12-08-0-100.xls>. The scores for IDV and LTO have been reversed in order to obtain better score alignment. Descriptions of these dimensions can be found at <https://geerthofstede.com/culture-geert-hofstede-gert-jan-hofstede/6d-model-of-national-culture/>