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# The future of indigenous values: cultural relativism in the face of economic development

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## Abstract

The outlook for the persistence of indigenous cultural values looks dim, based on historical trends, but recent revitalization efforts point to a more complicated future than a steady decline of diversity. The most powerful obstacle to the viability of indigenous values is the promotion of Western-style economic development initiatives that seldom acknowledge the legitimacy of values outside the materialist-rational paradigm. The evolution of more socially and environmentally oriented ‘progressive’ development policies renders Western values even more beguiling. A future in which indigenous values can survive and perhaps thrive will depend on pro-active efforts among indigenous groups to define their own development futures reflecting their own cultural values.

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## 1. Introduction: the value of indigenous values

Can indigenous cultural values survive into the future? It is popularly assumed that Western culture will eventually overwhelm all the primitive, traditional societies in the world, as well as all other major cultural competitors such as the Islamic, Hindu, and Confucian traditions. The Victorians considered the hegemony of Western thought to be a natural outcome of social evolution; our Western culture (science, philosophy, as well as values) is taking over the world because it is better [4]. Anthropological views, which of course derive from our Victorian ancestors, have been mixed. White [30] saw the growing dominance of the West not as a moral issue, but as an expression of the law of technical evolution with the demise of indigenous values following naturally from the diffusion of superior technology.

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Mead [17] saw this trend as unfortunate (because of the loss of cultural diversity) but also inevitable, with the anthropological responsibility one of smoothing the transition for the formerly isolated indigenous societies (her point of reference being Pacific Island societies). Many contemporary commentators, including a few anthropologists [9] overtly welcome the demise of traditional value systems which prevent individuals from living the full and fulfilling lives that, in their view, only our Western ethos makes possible.

My focus in this paper is less to *forecast* the future of indigenous values, than to suggest what responses we might take to influence that future—to create a world that has room for other ways of seeing, thinking, and ‘valuing’. Some anthropologists seek to salvage the knowledge and customs of primitive societies before they disappear, through a process of urgent ethnography, much as some biologists are urgently collecting the germ plasm of endangered plant species. This approach would preserve information *about* indigenous values, but not the values themselves. Values are expressed by individuals living within a social group having a shared culture (see subsequently for more on values) and depend on a cultural ‘habitat’—a social group—for their preservation. The preservation of values depends on the preservation of cultural identity within which indigenous values can be maintained. But why should we be concerned with maintaining cultural values that may even be at odds with our own (mostly Western) concepts? The answer to this depends on how seriously we believe in the desirability of multiculturalism. If we truly believe that our own Western cultural system is the only legitimate way of making sense of the world, then we have no reason to protect competing value systems; however, if we acknowledge an inherent validity in other ways of knowing (as anthropologists used to do under the banner of cultural relativity) then we have both a reason and an obligation to support the health and continuation of other value systems.

At first glance, the long-term outlook for native cultures is not promising. Current trends appear to preclude the viability of truly different cultural systems persisting in the face of our globalizing and increasingly economically oriented world. Historical trends are perhaps even more daunting. What has happened to the cultural diversity of, say, the 19th century, much less the 15th century? But straight-line projections are often misleading, and in considering the possibilities of a culturally diverse future, I believe such projections are likely to be wrong. The trend of economic and informatic globalization, for example, is unleashing a new interest in cultural distinctiveness and opening new opportunities for marginalized indigenous groups to establish direct marketing as well as political connections with the distant outside world. By jumping beyond the ‘near’ outside world of the locally dominant and culturally prejudiced mainstream society, indigenous groups are finding new sources of political, economic, and cultural support.

Indigenous cultures are experiencing two beneficial trends necessary, though not in themselves sufficient, for the survival of their values: (1) indigenous self-identity is, with many exceptions, being revitalized and empowered from within, and (2) the concept of cultural diversity is gaining new acceptance from mainstream societies. But even as the long-term future of indigenous *identity* appears more secure, the survival of the core cultural *values* underlying that identity is more problematic. Will

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