

# WHO PROSPERS? HOW CULTURAL VALUES SHAPE ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL SUCCESS

Lawrence E. Harrison

Basic Books / 280 pages / \$22

*reviewed by* DAVID FRUM

John Maynard Keynes once said of Bertrand Russell, "He thinks all of humanity's problems are caused by people being such silly chaps; and that the solution to those problems is for people to cease to be such silly chaps." That certainly is how Lawrence Harrison thinks. In *Who Prospers?*, as in his 1985 book, *Underdevelopment Is a State of Mind*, Harrison argues that values are the spark plugs of economic growth. They make economies go, and if they malfunction, all you need do is throw them out and get new ones.

Normally, people who believe that the economic success or failure of nations and ethnic groups is best explained culturally take a dour view of the prospects for social tinkering. If South Korea's economic success and Argentina's economic failure are dictated by Korea's 1,500-year old Confucian tradition and Argentina's grim 400-year-old inheritance from Counter-Reformation Spain, then it doesn't seem very likely that any set of social reforms will have a big impact on either country's prospects.

Harrison takes a sunnier view. *Who Prospers?* is not so much a work of history or economics or cultural analysis—although it serves up an ill-cooked portion of each—as it is an elaborate good news/bad news joke. The bad news is that culture is infinitely important; the good news is that it is equally malleable.

Thus, "the principal obstacle" to the advancement of the one-third of the population of black Americans whom Harrison considers to be outside the mid-

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dle class "is culture: a set of values and attitudes strongly influenced by the slavery experience, perpetuated by the isolation enforced, historically, by the Jim Crow laws and, today, by the ghetto." The crime, illegitimacy, and poverty that disfigure black America can be traced, Harrison argues, to the "static, dependent, present-oriented" culture of the ghetto.

Happily, while a solution to this problem may be "complicated, difficult and time-consuming," it is not beyond the reach of the federal government. All that is needed is a new bunch of social programs:

Head Start/supervised play/day-care activities as early as possible; busing to schools where the student body composition includes significant numbers from the cultural mainstream—white and black—along the lines of magnet school programs; summer work and summer camp programs, perhaps combining the two; the use of university students as tutors of ghetto children; courses that better prepare high school youngsters for effective child rearing.

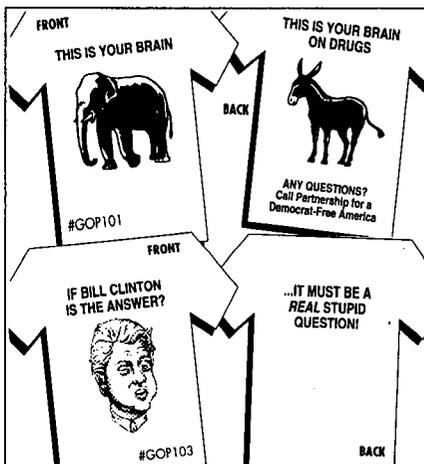
Above all, says Harrison, America must demonstrate to the ghetto poor that real opportunity is available to them. And the success of the black middle class is "eloquent testimony to the capacity of human beings to modify values and attitudes."

With that, of course, Harrison has just junked his entire theoretical structure. The whole point of cultural explanations of wealth and poverty is precisely to explain why people like the Argentines fail to seize

economic opportunities that appear to be readily within their grasp. If it is true that people can discard or modify their values and attitudes in order to seize opportunities presented to them, then culture cannot be the thing that is determining their behavior in the face of opportunity.

It is this sort of illogic that is the main problem with Harrison's book—besides, that is, the once-over-lightly character of its scholarship. Harrison's illogic, though, has a larger logic. While *Who Prospers?* purports to be a global overview of successful and unsuccessful economic cultures, the meat of the book is its second half, which reviews the performances of America's Oriental and Hispanic immigrants and compares them to that of its native-born black population. Harrison wants very badly to see in culture both an explanation for, and a relatively painless solution to, the enduring problem of black poverty and social disarray.

But the explanations and answers that the cultural hypothesis offers are much less comforting than Harrison—who nervously insists that "my ideas are, in many ways, parallel to those of many civil rights leaders"—would like them to



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be. He jumps altogether too swiftly from the observation that the majority of black Americans have left poverty in the past twenty-five years (in 1959, 55 percent of blacks were poor; only about one-quarter are poor today) to the more doubtful assertion that they have therefore culturally identified themselves with the mores of white America. A closer look at the black middle class would have revealed that, to a disquieting extent, it derives its income not from commerce and entrepreneurship, but from government employment. As the *Wall Street Journal* noted on June 16, while one of every fifteen white Americans (and one of every ten Korean-Americans) owns his own business, only one of every sixty-seven black Americans does, or about as many as work for the post office.

Harrison ends his book with a quick survey of the ills of American culture. Much of what he says—from the need for more respect for business to an attack on the evils of littering—is completely true. But much more of what he has to say reveals a striking faith in the power of social engineering (a legacy, perhaps, of his career as a foreign-aid dispenser) and an even more striking unwillingness to think hard about what culture is and where it comes from.

So, he complains, “religion has shifted its emphasis from personal morality, character and the living of a good life to the correction of social and political ills.” The solution? “More sermons that stress the personal life well and creatively lived as an effective way for the individual to contribute to the well-being of the society and the world.”

So, he complains again, parents maltreat their children. The solution? “Research on effective child rearing should have a high priority, but so should ways of communicating to prospective parents the lessons the experts have learned, for example, through courses in child rearing for high school students.” If culture were indeed so easily alterable as that, America could have moralized itself into paradise on earth long ago. Unfortunately, the fundamental apparatus of the human mind is rather more intractable than Harrison cares to recognize. And that makes this a very unserious book on a deadly serious subject. □

## THE DOUBLE LIFE OF STEPHEN CRANE

Christopher Benfey

Alfred A. Knopf / 294 pages / \$25

reviewed by MATTHEW SCULLY

The life of Stephen Crane, like the lives of Hemingway and other literary realists who came to a sad end, draws its power from the cliché of the suffering artist consumed alike by creativity and dissipation. In his 1951 biography, John Berryman described Crane admiringly as the thoroughly “illusionless” man, meaning the young author of *The Red Badge of Courage* had come to see life in all its false trappings, stared into the Void, refused to join in the “dance of death,” and so on. Hence the tragic, bitter, seen-it-all air we find throughout Crane’s life and writings—touching, but a little melodramatic in a man who never reached 30 years of age.

Of course being a tragic, illusionless figure can be a pretty vain illusion itself. Consider the fool’s proverb from Emerson that Crane jotted down in a notebook, evidently as some sort of defiant personal credo: “Congratulate your-

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selves if you have done something strange and extravagant and have broken the monotony of a decorous age.” Modern literature has a romance with the idea of artful self-destruction—breaking our monotony through reckless living, boozing, carnal abandon, fidelity only to one’s craft. And the quieter types who write literary biographies lap the stuff up like kittens at the saucer. Roughly half the biographies reviewed in the *New York Times* on any given Sunday fit this description—purring praise of strange, extravagant, and often thoroughly depraved lives.

One detects a bit of this antihero-worship in Christopher Benfey’s *The Double Life of Stephen Crane*, an inquiry that is otherwise sober and perceptive—particularly in its literary analysis. And to be fair to Crane, his mournful, fatalistic air was understandable: a long series of sicknesses prefigured the tuberculosis that eventually got him at 29. He died in 1900, having sensed his doom for at least a few years before.

