

ty' in the very idea of poverty. If so, what is that core? Sen, characteristically, has not volunteered an answer directly, but Alkire has extracted a list of capabilities from his work. According to Alkire, in Sen's view, absolute poverty is the inability:

- to meet nutritional requirements
- to escape avoidable disease
- to be educated
- to be clothed
- to be able to travel
- and sometimes
- to live without shame
- to participate in the activities of the community
- to have self-respect (to be happy).

Whether that list is evidence of the usefulness of the capabilities approach for poverty analysis, or of its ability to add to our practical understanding of basic needs, is perhaps not entirely obvious.

In Part II, Alkire moves to three case studies of small-scale development projects in Pakistan and explores how the capabilities approach can be used to assess their impact. Her method is to start from economic cost-benefit analysis and then ask what the CA may have to add in very practical assessments on the ground. These case studies are detailed and beautifully laid out, so it is impossible to do them justice in a brief review. Her conclusion is that the CA adds decisively to the conventional economic approach. In projects where no economic benefit is identified there may still be significant benefits in freedom, capabilities and empowerment.

However, there is no way to learn directly from the CA how to actually make that assessment. The approach offers only the typical sociological advice of considering more than straight economic factors and listening to people and their own experiences (participatory processes again), and then leave it more or less up to common sense to decide how actually to go about this.

How operational, then, is the capabilities approach? The answer must be, not very.

But also that this does not matter. The approach has great power to inspire a way of thinking about well-being and human progress. That inspiration flows easily into practical application. For previous evidence see the now influential annual *Human Development Reports* of the United Nations Development Programme, inspired by the CA but not in any direct way extracted from it. Alkire's experience in project assessment is the same. The CA suggests a direction of analysis, but can tell no one just how to do it.

Stein Ringen

Jan-Erik Lane, Svante Ersson: *Culture and Politics. A Comparative Approach*
Aldershot 2002: Ashgate, 353 pp.

The idea that part of what can be observed and sometimes measured in society is the effect of culture and that this cannot be reduced to any other factor easier to operationalise, such as institutions or structures, has gained large support in the social sciences in past decades. Few of the studies belonging to the 'culturalist' tradition in recent social science research have attempted such an ambitious undertaking as that of Jan-Erik Lane and Svante Ersson in their book *Culture and Politics*. In less than 400 pages, the authors formulate and test hypotheses about the cultural conditioning of social and political phenomena, or what they call 'outcomes', in a fairly broad range of diverse areas. Their main thesis is that cultures, or the variations among them, explain part of the variation in the political, social and economic outcomes that are observed and measured across countries, while the other, and sometimes even major, part of it is explained by external contextual factors. The authors modify this 'cultural thesis' into the formula 'Cultural Item X matters for Outcome Y', which calls for a clear specification of which cultural items might matter for which social outcomes.

Starting with cultural items, the authors distinguish four components of culture: ethnicity, religion, legacies and universal values. Following Douglas North in his analysis of the differences in economic performance between former English and Spanish colonies, by legacies they mean colonial heritages, but, relying on the work of Emmanuel Todd, they also mean family structures. Universal values are taken to be those central elements of culture that have been introduced into the culturalist literature by authors with different – and one might say at times incompatible – approaches to the problem of cultural determination. Among the universal values the book ranks Putnam's and Fukuyama's trust, Inglehart's post-materialism, and the four cultural categories of Wildavsky et al. that make up the so-called grid-group scheme.

In the area of the potential outcomes of the operation of culture, the study makes the distinction between the macro-, meso- and micro-level, on which different kinds of outcomes are brought into relationship with cultural factors. The macro-level is described by aggregate indicators of political development, affluence or poverty, social equality, gender equality and perceived corruption. Here the authors employ some of the most common and generally available indicators, such as Freedom House's country scores on democracy for political development and GDP per capita, or the Human Development Index for affluence, the Gender Empowerment Index for gender equality, and Transparency International's Perceived Corruption Index for corruption. On the meso-level, attention is focused on the cross-regional differences in electoral outcomes in a number of countries that can be considered culturally divided: Belgium, India, Russia, Spain, Switzerland and the United States. The micro-level approach concentrates on data drawn from cross-national value surveys which track the distributions of four types of individual value orientations across societies: interest in politics, involvement in politics, left-right placement and life satisfaction.

The context in which it is possible to observe the potential impact of culture on social outcomes is represented by two more variables, one measuring the geographical position of the countries under scrutiny (absolute distance from the equator), and the other used to characterise the historical path of each individual country (years since the introduction of modern political leadership). However crude and, at least in the second case, sometimes disputed these measures might be, according to the authors, they serve well as controls for the influence of space and time when it is necessary to fully focus attention on purely cultural factors.

The authors sum up the results produced by the quantitative analysis of a large set of data (larger than presented in the parts of the book preceding the concluding chapter, perhaps for reasons of space) in the following way: First, no "general and diffuse cultural determination of behavior or outcomes" exists (p. 300). Second, some specific cultural effects were disclosed, but variations in culture sometimes fail to bring about changes in outcomes. Regarding the macro-level outcomes, the authors conclude that religion matters quite a lot, and both religion and ethnic fragmentation have a negative impact on these outcomes. Conversely, universal values have less impact on the variation in outcomes than could be expected from the recent cross-national research into value orientations. Continuing on the macro-level, the authors note that although culture is important, so is context, as represented by time, social structure and institutions (but neither structure nor institutions are treated as control variables in the preceding sections of the book). Similarly ambiguous are the findings for the meso-level, where the impact of culture on regional political behaviour, as measured by electoral results, was found to vary considerably among countries. Culture proved to be a relatively weak predictor for micro-level value orientations, since of the four micro-level outcomes investigated, three – life satisfaction, left-right ori-

entations and political activity – are more strongly influenced by other factors than culture. Among cultural factors, post-materialism and individualism are the ones with the most impact on micro-level outcomes.

I have several comments to make on the book that should be taken as recommendations for further analysis of the role of culture in society. First of all, the authors are perhaps too quick in their attempt to clarify, one more time, the conceptual mess surrounding the much used and abused term of culture. The somewhat eclectic way in which different contributions to the investigation of culture are dealt with makes the precise sense of culture unclear. Sometimes, it seems to be limited to attitudes or psychological orientations, as in the *Civic Culture* tradition, while at other times, however, as with the grid-group theory, culture is employed as a name for ways of life, including both psychological orientations and behaviour.

Second, the study does address itself exclusively to the task of finding a statistical dependence between the elements of culture and the 'outcomes'. It does not attempt to explain what mediating mechanisms exist between the various aspects of culture and the outcomes on various levels, nor does it shed much light on the way in which the effects of culture combine with the effects of contextual variables. It is perhaps for this reason that the conclusions of the study are formulated so carefully as to create no space for undue generalisations.

Third, the book employs a rather disparate set of indicators, especially with respect to the macro-level outcomes, which are taken at their face value, with the result that one cannot rely more on the study's overall findings than one does on these indicators. It seems as if they were selected because they are easily available. But the subsequent effort to find statistical relationships between cultural factors and variations in these indicators creates the impression of a trial-and-error, experimental game, with few theoretical grounds for expecting any robust results.

The use that the authors make of disparate data and indicators bears a certain resemblance to the collage of different Prague tourist sights on the book's cover. The individual pieces of this collage, each of which could represent the object of an exhaustive treatment in its own right, are put together to form an artificial world in which all have an impact on the viewer's imagination, but they cannot be given the kind of focused attention they deserve.

Fourth, the question can be raised of what it means to trace the relationships between culture, defined as universal values, and individual value orientations, described by the authors as micro-level outcomes. For in my view, one would be fully justified in taking all values, including such values as left-right orientations or life satisfaction, as forming part of a culture, in which case the link under investigation would be between two elements of a culture, not between culture and extra-cultural outcomes.

In spite of these critical remarks, Lane and Ersson's book provides very valuable and interesting insight into the difficult subject matter of the cultural conditioning of social phenomena. Their book can be read as one of the steps that must be taken in contemporary sociology and political science in order to establish a solid and reliable understanding of the effects of culture on society.

Marek Skovajsa

Ian Shapiro: *The State of Democratic Theory*

Princeton 2003: Princeton University Press
183 pp.

The central concept in Ian Shapiro's treatise on democracy is 'domination'. As he sees it, in all societies there are some who are in a position to dominate and others who are in danger of being dominated. Those in danger of being dominated are always in need of