

Gianfranco Poggi

Eric L. Jones, Cultures Merging: A Historical and Economic Critique of Culture. Princeton: University Press, 2006, xvii + 297 pp.

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Unlike the majority of the other volumes in the series *The Princeton Economic History of the Western World* where it appears, this volume does not have a more-or-less bounded geographical focus or a more-or-less distinctive story to narrate. Rather, it ranges over a great variety of locales and sequences of events, and mobilizes about these a diversity of information, chiefly derived from a large body of secondary sources. However, fairly often his argument is grounded also on inputs from *live* witnesses. Among these appear particularly significant contemporary students from China and other Asian countries whom the author – a senior economic historian from Australia – has been teaching in his country and in the United Kingdom.

The book confronts a broadly analytical, rather than narrative theme – the relationship between the cultural heritages of given populations at one end, and at the other various processes of economic modernization (demographic, technological, life-style, etc.). Such relationship is, in his interpretation, distinctively two-way. However, Jones criticizes more expressly and insistently the arguments for the causal influence going from culture toward economic phenomena (as in David Landes' famous pronouncement, "culture makes all the difference") than the opposite arguments, which over the decades, according to him, have become prevalent among economic historians.

Jones' own chief contributions to the debate are possibly the following. First, he differentiates the notion itself of culture from that of institution, attributing more causal significance (if any) to the latter than to the former. Second, as concerns culture itself (understood chiefly as complexes of value preferences and world-views and the related attitudes) he emphasizes its composite and changeable nature, thus the possibility and significance of cultural borrowing and hybridation. Third, he suggests the predictability and relative uniformity of the impact upon cultural legacies of the basic manifestations of economic growth (changes in occupational structures, increased longevity, variations in gender relations, increased disposable income, consumerism etc). Fourth, he sees (and, on the whole, he approves of) a dominant trend toward cultural homogenization across the globe. He sees the possibility of this phenomenon affecting also Islamic populations, and failing to manifest itself only in the more benighted African countries.

Jones writes in a vivid, attractive manner, expressing sometimes trenchant arguments on specific topics (in particular, the rent-seeking nature of diffuse attempts, in his own countries among others, to protect the local *culture producers* from the competition of the globalized media, and the costliness and hopelessness of attempts to preserve local languages). His book has a syncretic and eclectic feel, and conveys a sense of its author as someone who, having established his standing in his previous, more focused work, now revels in his ability to survey that of another generation or two of scholars, and to tell his readers which leads to follow and which to consider useless.

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