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Introduction

London, October 2006

Muhamad Sadr-Azam's cell phone beeped: he had a new text message. Muhamad glanced at it as he pulled the Toyota over to the parking lot of his daughter's school. "Order your lamb for a joyful Eid now!" the message read. "If they have to pester everyone with this niche marketing, they should at least know their customers," Muhamad muttered. "Persians don't have a big Eid celebration the way Arabs do."

As his daughter got out of the car, Muhamad saw her greet a friend wearing a school uniform headscarf. At school Melissa was classified as a Muslim: this label was necessary so she would not be served pork at the lunchroom. It also meant that when her class took part in sport events or went on school trips, teachers always approached Melissa to ask whether she was going to participate. This annoyed Muhamad: *Why wouldn't she go like all the others?* But what really worried him was that since the summer holidays, his daughter had taken to hanging out with a bunch of headscarf-wearing Pakistani girls. His wife had once caught her trying one on in front of the mirror. And teachers at the school seemed to take this as a given: Muslim girls wore headscarves, after all.

Jack Straw, leader of the House of Commons, had been right to ask women visiting his office to remove the veil from their faces, Muhamad reflected. It did, as Straw had said, make communication difficult. But on this morning's radio news, there had been a big debate on his comments, with the head of the Racial Equality Commission warning of possible riots over these remarks. Next

on the news had been a report about Liverpool's preparation for being the European Capital of Culture in 2008. The writer Kiran Desai had just received the esteemed Man Booker Prize for her novel about immigrants living between cultures, and twenty-five people had died in Iraq during one day's clashes between Sunnis and Shiites.

"The news used to be very different twenty-six years ago," Muhamad had said to his wife that morning as she pushed a bowl of Weetabix over the breakfast table toward him. In 1980, when he had arrived in London from Tehran after the Shah was deposed by Islamic revolutionaries, the world was also undergoing violent upheavals. But the way people talked about them was different. They said the Brixton riots were the result of social exclusion and economic deprivation. The formation of Solidarity in Poland was a struggle against Communist oppression, and the violent clashes during the British miners' strike were a class issue. Now, wherever one turned, people talked about culture as being at the root of things.

As Muhamad passed Brick Lane, his thoughts came back to Muslims in Britain. Some of them, perhaps from this neighborhood, were now planting bombs in the Tube, but others didn't think twice of putting Ganeshas in their restaurant windows to attract the tourists who came for "Indian food." Stepping out of the car in front of his Hampstead dental practice, Muhamad was greeted by the owner of the fish-and-chips shop next door. Mr. Xiang was pouring a bucket of fishy water into the gutter. *Why do the Chinese have to do this? Can't they behave like us?*, he thought, turning his head to avoid the pungent smell. A look at the full waiting room slightly improved his mood. Muhamad had been getting paranoid lately, with all the suspicious looks people gave him nowadays, especially on public transportation and when boarding a plane. When some of his old patients hadn't shown up for their regular checkups, it had been easy to imagine that they were afraid of handing themselves over to a Muslim dentist.

In his small back office Muhamad quickly checked the Web site of the local council. It was Black History Month: Hampstead was "celebrating the achievements and history of Black African and

Caribbean communities who live and work in the Borough.” He went through the program and ordered two tickets for a poetry reading the coming Friday. Then he buzzed in his first patient.

Tarabuco, May 2007

It is market day in the Bolivian town of Tarabuco. Pilar Fernandez sits in front of her stall watching a group of tourists walk down the aisle. They could be Italians, by the way of their looks. Or Spaniards? No, their quilt-like coats clearly identify them as Italian. They have come here to the Altiplano to see “the famous handicrafts market, one of the most authentic on the continent. The inhabitants still wear traditional dress, and their lifestyle has not changed since the arrival of the conquistadores.” Pilar has read this on a travel Web site in the local Internet café.

When the tourists pass her stall, Pilar draws their attention to a beautiful *manta*, a cape-like blanket. “These are a very important part of our traditional culture,” she explains. “If you go to the textile museum in Sucre, you can see them displayed there too.” Although this is a sales pitch Pilar often uses, it still fills her with immense pride to think about textiles like her own artfully displayed in the museum. It was good that Doña Cristina Bubba Zamora had fought for the museum and that she relentlessly tried to recover ancient Bolivian textiles that had been stolen by Spanish colonists and American art dealers. Doña Cristina was also the one to get Pilar and a group of other women weavers small credits for looms and workshops to revive their textile culture. Thinking of this, Pilar reminds herself of the appointment later this afternoon with the Fulbright researcher who has come to town to complete a cultural impact analysis of the microfinance project.

When the Italian tourists move on after having bought a colorful handwoven coca-leaf pouch, Pilar tells her neighbor in the market to look after the stall while she picks up little Juanita from school. Earlier this year, the school announced that it would switch from Spanish-language instruction to a bilingual program in Spanish and the local Quechua. Also, the Catholic religious lessons were to be replaced by instructions in Cosmovisión, the traditional religion.

Evo, the new president of Bolivia, had really delivered on some of the promises he had made in the campaign. And that wasn't the end of it. Hasn't she just heard that the justice minister, a former maid, wanted to strengthen the traditional justice system and have offenders brought before the *ayllu*, the indigenous kinship organization, which was already responsible for the water distribution?

As Pilar makes her way down the main street toward the primary school, the intense light of the midday sun reflected by the white-washed walls causes her to squint. In a week's time her husband, Juan, would come back from Europe. As a member of Evo's *Movimiento al Socialismo* and leader of the local union of coca cultivators, he had received an invitation to the *Enlazando Alternativas II*, the second Alternative Development Summit in Vienna. The trip had been paid for by a German NGO, and Juan was to speak on the legalization of coca for medicinal and cosmetic purposes. Coca is their livelihood, and Juan had sent Pilar a newspaper clipping of himself and other Andean activists in front of a castle holding a banner announcing "Coca Is Part of Our Culture."

Waiting at the school gate, Pilar gets out the local paper, *Diario El Potosí*. On the front page is a report about five silver objects that have been stolen from the famous pre-Incan site of Tiwanaku. A spokesperson from the Directorate-General of Cultural Heritage is offering a reward for information leading to the recovery of the objects. In another article a representative of UNESCO—whose World Cultural Heritage list includes Tiwanaku—has asked whether the country has taken enough security precautions to safeguard its heritage. In the "Cultura" section of the paper Pilar reads about a Turkish writer, Orhan Pamuk, who has won the Nobel Prize. The prize committee praised him especially for "discovering new symbols for the clash and interlacing of cultures." Then the bell rings and hundreds of schoolchildren in uniforms burst out of their classrooms.

Shanghai, October 2008

Jason Carter was on his way out of the office. Tomorrow he would confront Mr. Li directly about the results. He was fed up with

waiting, being put off day after day, week after week. This was simply costing too much money. The shampoos should already be in the third test phase by now, and he was still waiting for the results of the first round. Nobody in Cincinnati would give a damn about the reasons for the delay. The CEO couldn't care less if in Chinese culture people didn't talk straight. All the CEO wanted was a share of the booming Chinese cosmetics market.

The people at the TouchFeelCulture Lab—the company's recently created ethnographic research department—had done a good job. Chinese hair culture, they had found, was very different from its American counterpart. Not only did Chinese women wash their hair in summer much more often than in winter, depending on the season, they used different products too. And many used a water bowl instead of running water, which often was interrupted or not available. So when Jason had arrived in Shanghai six months ago, his first task had been to come up with a formula for easy-to-rinse shampoos. He had handed various options over to Mr. Li, the head of the local company laboratory, and has been waiting for the results ever since.

Leaving the building through the sliding brass doors and disappearing into the gray smog that covered the high-rises across the street, Jason felt drained. Where had he gone wrong? Why couldn't he communicate as efficiently as at home? The company had paid for a predeparture training to prepare him for this job. During those three days he had thought he learned a lot about Chinese culture. How the Chinese were collectivistic, and how he, an American, was individualistic. An important part of Chinese culture, the trainer had stressed, was acceptance of authority. Accordingly, Jason had tried to establish strong leadership over his department, even though this went against the egalitarian company culture. Yet what were the results? Maybe none of his formulas had worked and Li didn't want to make him, the boss, lose face by saying so? Or maybe Li was having problems getting them made and was afraid of losing face himself? This face business seemed to be an important part of the culture. Went all the way back to Confucius, or something like that. He would look it up in this book that had been lying on his bedside table for the

last few months, *Doing Business with the Chinese*. Problem was, he always fell asleep after the first page.

In the back of his chauffeur-driven Mercedes, Jason began to relax. At least Mrs. Zhou had presented him with the list of ingredients used for hair treatment in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). That was good: now he could push ahead with new products based on local raw materials. With the TCM fad in the West, this could prove to be a global marketing success. As the car inched forward toward the tunnel linking Pudong with the Bund in the usual evening queue, Jason turned his attention to the TV screen in front of him. Lovely-looking women were performing some kind of a courtship dance. Yes, despite all the skyscrapers around him, China was still full of exotic cultures. During the spring break he would take his family to Yunnan or some of these other places where the minorities lived. Before it was too late. His wife was right when she said that China was quickly losing its culture with all these Western shopping malls, McDonald's restaurants, and Starbucks at every corner. The government seemed to feel the same way. Hadn't this guy at the American Chamber of Commerce meeting last week spoken about a new Cultural Heritage Day, designed to boost the preservation and popularity of China's old folk customs and festivals?

Finally Jason arrived at his compound. Upon entering the flat on the eighth floor, he quickly changed into jeans and a T-shirt before joining his wife for the eight o'clock news in the living room. A study published in the medical journal *The Lancet* had come up with an estimate of 654,956 casualties since the start of the U.S.-led invasion in Iraq. President George W. Bush rejected the estimate, saying that he didn't consider the report credible. The Darfur crisis was next on the news. Minority Rights Group International blamed the world community for ignoring early warning signs of ethnic tension for the ensuing genocide in Sudan, which so far has killed more than two hundred thousand people and displaced a third of the population. "Can't they talk about anything else but killings?" Jason moaned, getting up to fetch a beer from the fridge. "Chris has a math test tomorrow," his wife shouted after him. "You better do some exercises with him. His

scores are still way below the class average! It's really scary how good all the Asian kids are in math."

Culture Consciousness

For many in the West today's world is one shaped by clashing cultures. The work of Samuel Huntington, who predicted a "clash of civilizations" back in the early 1990s, enjoys unprecedented influence: for an academic book to have a sales rank around 2,000 on Amazon.com is indeed exceptional. News headlines use Huntington's terminology to make sense of American-Chinese relations, of "honor killings" of Muslim women in Germany, and of problems with the Daimler-Chrysler merger. A group convened by the secretary-general of the United Nations in 2006 to propose ways to bridge the gap between Western and Muslim societies called itself the Alliance of Civilizations, and in its report the group explicitly stated its aim to rebut the "clash of civilizations" theory. Wanting to emphasize the uniqueness of his nation, Toomas Hendrik Ilves, the president of Estonia, has called his country "a Huntingtonian subcivilization different from both its southern and eastern neighbors."¹ There is even a computer game called "The Clash of Civilizations."²

As Ilves's comment shows, however, the fear of clashing cultures is only one facet of the culturalist phase the world has gradually entered in the 2000s. Better put, today's world is a world shaped by a consciousness of culture that penetrates everyday life as well as matters of state in an unprecedented way. Culture—or rather, cultural difference—is now held to be the main explanation for the way the human world functions. Its allure is in the promise to explain a broader scope of phenomena than the previous grand narratives have. If the ideological alternatives posed by capitalism and communism worked to explain international dynamics, they said little about what was happening inside a society. For much of the second half of the twentieth century, people would invoke ideas of social class, colonial history, and scientific and technological development to make sense of their current situation and to imagine their futures. These ideas would be different in dif-

ferent places—Sheffield, Novosibirsk, or Dakar. By contrast, the logic of culture consciousness is deceptively universal, and thanks to today's media, the spread of standard models of economic and social policy and so on—a bundle of phenomena often called globalization—it is affecting people worldwide.

Muhamad Sadr-Azam, Pilar Fernandez, and Jason Carter are on the receiving end of ideas and stories produced by such institutions as governments, advertising companies, schools, and of course the media. The specter of culture is haunting public institutions and the private sector the world over. University degrees in “intercultural communication” and “intercultural management” are experiencing record enrollments. Doctors and police officers are sent to trainings in “cultural competence.” Ministers of religion, eager to expand their markets to migrant and non-Western populations, take degrees in anthropology. Policy reports analyze the “cultural factors” and “cultural impact” of armed conflicts (in which the forms of warfare are also said to be cultural), international negotiations, and development projects. In an apparent shift of emphasis from searching for the causes of human behavior in the individual psyche to group cultural traits, banks, advertising agencies, defense lawyers, municipal administrations, and international organizations hire “culture experts.” Makers of cultural policy, funders of art, and planners of cities want to be told about the impact of their decisions on cultural traditions and diversity. Minority groups worldwide—from the Ainu in Japan to the Yanomami in Brazil—enlist the help of NGOs and the global media in their fight for cultural survival. Debates on the cultural destiny of Russia fill bookshelves and airwaves. The Chinese government promotes the construction of “advanced culture” as a matter of national policy.

Why the Culturalist Phase?

It would be easy to tie the rise of culture as the paramount explanation to the end of the Cold War, when the ideological opposition between the two “worldviews” (and the political one between the two superpowers) came to an end, creating a vacuum of par-

adigms for global change. Yet in fact, the ascent of culturalism is the outcome of a number of social, political, and intellectual trends that have shaped the world since the 1960s, and by the turn of the millennium had acquired a force that suddenly swept “culture” into every living room. Only some of these changes have been related to tangible events—such as the collapse of the Soviet Union or the transformation of capitalist corporations—while others are rooted in the internal dynamics of the institutions and cultural elites that shape public opinion.

From cold war to ethnic conflict. Changes in global politics brought about by the end of the Cold War certainly formed the backdrop to much of the story this book tells. The Soviet bloc and the capitalist West both operated under versions of a rationalist, universalist development ideology, where economic growth necessarily led to a particular kind of more advanced society—liberal democracy or Communism—regardless of ethnicity or cultural context. The reach of these ideologies becomes obvious in places like today’s Afghanistan, where the only voices rejecting ethno-tribal or religious politics—which have formed the basis of government since the U.S. intervention—in favor of a liberal modernization tend to be the voices of elites who studied in the Soviet Union in the 1980s. The collapse of the Soviet Union brought to the surface ethnic conflicts, many of which had been created by the state—for example, by the deportation of a range of peoples, including the Chechens, from the Caucasus to Central Asia—but had previously been contained by it.

In the absence of political explanations—all of the new states seemed, after all, to be marching toward market democracy—these conflicts were explained in terms of long-standing cultural and religious differences that had persisted despite having been swept under the carpet by the totalitarian regime. The same explanation was then applied to the bloody dismemberment of Yugoslavia and to the rest of the world. Indeed, cross-cultural handbooks on ethnic conflict for diplomats promised to “sort out ethnic identities and calculat[e] their strength.”³ While this explanation has often been false—sometimes tragically so—the withdrawal of the

great powers from their respective backyards made room for the emergence of sundry political forces, some of which have pinned local or indigenous cultural purity on their banners. In other words the end of the bipolar world boosted the currency of both ethnic identities and ethnic explanations.

A more mobile world. The reach of nationalistic movements was greatly enhanced by the political, economic, and technological changes that revolutionized communications and facilitated human mobility in the decade following the changes of 1989 through 1991. Freedom of travel, previously restricted as a measure of both political control and currency protection (for example, South Korean citizens were not fully free to travel abroad until the 1990s, many years after the democratic transition!), was suddenly a reality. In the early 1990s in particular, with the memory of the Iron Curtain still fresh, both Western and Eastern European countries opened their borders. Although they began closing them again a few years later, this window initiated new flows of migrants and refugees, including those fleeing faraway conflicts, that turned out to be impossible to stop despite later attempts to do so.

According to the United Nations, 190 million people lived outside their countries of birth in 2005—compared with 76 million in 1960. Especially in societies that were used to homogeneity—or have forgotten their multiethnic histories, as did the successor states of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires—the appearance of more foreign-born individuals unable or unwilling to conform to traditional expectations of assimilation led to renewed discussions about the nature of national cultures. Even in societies that have always portrayed themselves as constituted by immigrants—such as the United States and Australia—more migration from non-European countries has triggered similar debates. This new movement of people was helped by dropping costs of travel (for example, a plane ticket from Lagos to London costs a tenth of what it did in 1960) and spurred by images of riches transmitted through satellite television to newly liberalized media markets. Indian villagers in 1985, if they were lucky enough to have access to a TV, saw educational dramas produced by the

national broadcaster, Doordarshan. Ten years later, soap operas, celebrity shows, and advertising on eleven new satellite channels in India projected the glamour of global lifestyles to villages that were yet to build a latrine.⁴

Media liberalization. Television, videos, and the new medium, the Internet, far from imposing on the world the uniformity of Americanization as feared by early critics, also facilitated the creation and maintenance of what the anthropologist Benedict Anderson has called “imagined communities” within and across borders. According to him, the commodification of printed text in Europe in the seventeenth century and after made possible the wide circulation of narratives of the nation, thus creating the sense of a common belonging with people beyond one’s immediate reach.⁵ The spread of “visual capitalism” in the 1990s has created a fresh, powerful tool to strengthen that sense. In China the state’s continuing hold on the media throughout the 1990s, when television ownership became nearly universal, created a national canon of cultural imagery—from the Great Wall to imperial-era costume dramas—that has informed a new generation’s sense of being Chinese.

The same technologies have made it possible for migrants to maintain, enhance, or even create nationalist movements despite geographic dispersal and prolonged absence from their countries of origin. Soap operas and dance videos shot in Laos and China have helped Hmong Americans resettled in rural California in the 1970s codify a cultural identity that links them to the land they left but also to their close ethnic relatives, the Miao of Southern China. For the Miao the international ties witnessed by the same videos have reinforced a sense of cultural pride and strengthened their hand in negotiations with the Chinese government.⁶

Corporate globalization. The worldwide embrace of the free market has played an important role in stimulating both migration and the globalization of media. It has also had far-reaching consequences for companies and work environments. Corporations now want to sell the same product to people around the

world, but often, both the products themselves and the marketing strategies need to be localized, as consumers have different needs and respond to different messages. The need to “know your consumer” has generated jobs in “global consumer research” and forced advertising agencies to develop locally sensitive campaigns. In Sri Lanka, for example, advertisements for beer and soft drinks developed in the United States and featuring close physical encounters between men and women are not well received, and embarrassment at the purchase of condoms and sanitary pads can be overcome by reframing them as medicines.⁷

The rationality of the free market brought people of diverse origins together on factory floors, in corporate boardrooms, and on housing estates. This diversification is driven by both corporations and localities competing for investment in a theoretically global market. The most basic form of that competition is lowering production costs. This “race to the bottom” between localities has favored the employment of migrant populations—either internal, as rural women working in China’s clothing factories, or foreign, as Filipina maids in the Gulf or Romanian strawberry pickers in Spain—deprived of the economic and social rights enjoyed by locals. For their part, corporations are compelled to join this race to the bottom by moving production to China and outsourcing technical services to India or Eastern Europe. Moving production and services abroad has necessitated the hiring of local managerial, human resources, and public relations personnel, resulting in a fundamental change of their ethnic makeup and operating environment.

A culturally diverse workforce is seen to complicate communication processes within the company, as different work-related habits and values come into contact with one another—hence the avalanche of intercultural communication trainings and cross-cultural management workshops. But “successfully managed” diversity has come to be seen as an asset, not only mirroring and therefore anticipating the needs of the diverse customer base of companies but also enlarging the pool of ideas and releasing creativity in general. According to the new ideal championed by such hip business magazines as *Red Herring* and *Fast Company*, suc-

cessful companies in the global market are those that not only embrace diversity but actively encourage “cultural hybridity.” A feature in *Fast Company* enthused in 2000:

Diversity defines the health and wealth of nations—as well as of companies and the people inside them. . . . Mixing . . . spawns creativity, nourishes the human spirit, spurs economic growth, empowers nations. . . . And those who wish to profit from changing economic conditions must view hybridity as their first and best option. . . .

The best corporations set the pace in diversity. . . . Employers don’t want hollow harmony. They want a cosmopolitan corporation. Hybrid teams are the new corporate ideal. . . . An unprecedented number of foreign-born CEOs run major companies in the United States, Britain, and several other countries, according to a study by Denis Lyons, an executive recruiter in New York City. . . . At the best companies, building diverse teams has become a routine part of business and a central piece of strategy. McKinsey & Co., the global consultancy, illustrates this trend. In the 1970s, most of its consultants were American, and its foreign contingent came from about 20 countries. . . . By 1999, McKinsey’s chief partner was a foreign national (he hails from India); only 40% of its 4,800 consultants were American; and its foreign-born consultants came from more than 40 countries.⁸

Culture as capital. Contrary to *Fast Company*’s admonition, however, no nation-state has yet wholeheartedly embraced diversity. But “global cities,” the ones whose growth strategies are based on the provision of services to the global market, have indeed recognized diversity as capital. This is because, although low cost is decisive in attracting production, banks and consultancies tend to set up their headquarters where they see the presence of a “creative environment.” Since the financial crisis of the late 1990s, the government of Singapore, for example, has made great efforts to market Singapore as the global “Renaissance City” of the twenty-first century⁹ and has forced its major regional competitor, Hong Kong, to follow suit. The Hong Kong chief executive, Tung Chee-hwa, said in his 2001 policy address: “An important

competitive edge in the knowledge-based economy is the possession of creative ideas, and the speed at which these ideas can be transformed into products or services. World economic development is changing from a quest for resources to a quest for human talents.”¹⁰

Fostering the “creative industries”—from fine art to fashion—as a vehicle of economic growth is a strategy that is now spreading from Singapore and Hong Kong to Shanghai and Beijing. But the origin of this approach is in the United States, where since the early 2000s an increasing number of city planners have followed the advice of urban guru Richard Florida that “cultural diversity”—including a mix of ethnicities and a gay scene—is necessary for creating the right environment. Emphasizing diversity is now *de rigueur* for every city hoping to compete in the global market, from Austin, Texas, to Singapore, where the in-flight menu cards of the national airline feature work by expatriate artists. Consequently, states are selectively liberalizing their immigration regimes to allow in a flow of highly skilled foreigners, even as they restrict the entry of other migrants and refugees.

The race for “creative cities” is one sign that economic planners of the 2000s treat culture as a form of capital, just as French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu suggested in 1986.¹¹ He defined it as the set of knowledge, attitudes, and skills that give a person higher status in society. As desires and opportunities of social advancement, employment, capital accumulation, and consumption diversify and expand beyond national borders—and as the goal of education shifts from abstract knowledge to universally marketable packages of habits and skills—cultural capital gains in importance. As a toolkit for global living, cultural capital is no longer understood merely as a largely inherited set of class-related *savoir vivre*, as in Bourdieu’s work. The explicit or implicit assumption behind both the Australian backpacker ethos of “discovering different cultures” and the Chinese government’s exhortations to improve peasants’ “cultural quality” is that doing so increases the individual’s value in the “market of talent.”¹² Increasingly, the goal of education—especially higher education—is seen as acquiring globally marketable skills rather than universally applicable

knowledge. Part of this is a basic familiarity with “other cultures,” whose spokespeople do their best to emphasize their distinctiveness as a way to draw tourists, whether to a remote country or to an urban neighborhood.

Becoming cosmopolitan globetrotters is no longer the Kantian promise of aesthetic pleasure in appreciating the foreign; parents and children now see “cross-cultural experiences” as linked to a good future life as a manager or consultant. So universities compete in providing programs with names like “Semester at Sea” or “Global Leadership Program.” According to the Institute of International Education, almost two hundred thousand Americans were studying abroad in 2003 and 2004, up from seventy-six thousand ten years earlier. In particular, the number of those studying in China grew by 90 percent.¹³ Yet the number of American students abroad is far below that of their Chinese peers. In the same academic year, fifty thousand new students from China went to Australia alone.¹⁴ If twenty years earlier, Chinese students in the West had tended to be doing PhDs in science and engineering, now many of them were going abroad while in high school—and the quality of the school is often considered less important than the “intercultural experience.” Proficiency in English is of course very important, but so is the ability to navigate among “whities.”

The rush for Chinese nannies for the children of New York executives is about mastering interaction with the future’s superpower—not just linguistically but also “culturally.” Riding on the wave of this mutual obsession, such international schools as Yew Chung—which has campuses in four mainland Chinese cities as well as in Hong Kong and the Silicon Valley—advertises itself with the slogan “Educating the Global Child” and promises to deliver an “education that leads our students to an inner transformation whereby they are both Eastern and Western.”¹⁵

The rise of “symbol analysts” and the cultural turn. The ascent of the economy of culture is part of a broader process: the rise of the group that the former U.S. secretary of labor Robert Reich has called “symbol analysts”: people engaged in the manipulation—the creation, explanation, and distribution—of data, words, and

visual representations.¹⁶ These people, the ones “creative cities” compete for—consultants, lawyers, artists, software engineers, investment bankers, advertising executives, political analysts—produce goods and services that account for an increasing share of global consumption and wealth. They also wield tremendous influence in the interpretation of the world and in political and economic decision making as institutions of power devolve an increasing amount of responsibility for their decisions to such “experts.” Situations range from court rulings involving expertise on cultural norms of a defendant’s ethnic group to congressional hearings on foreign affairs to reviews of proposals by research funding bodies to reports prepared for the European Union. Thus the market increasingly encroaches on domains of policy that used to be limited to political elites or corporate boards as well as domains of knowledge production that used to be the sanctuary of scientists. This is related to an erosion of the authority of science as such and of natural science in particular, and to the democratization of the relation between scientists and the lay public.

Traditionally, policy makers—and the broader public—have seen science as a representation of objective reality, free from value components and expressed in a particular kind of formalized, structured language. Decision makers wishing to grasp social processes would likely turn to the kinds of work in social science that corresponded to these norms—modeled on the natural sciences—and that showed society as operating within a framework of structured mechanisms that one could understand and even predict, if only one put sufficient good research into it. But the growing anti-elitism of liberal democracies, the general distrust of state authority that intensified throughout the 1960s, the perceived complicity of the natural sciences in the arms race, and the growing influence of environmentalist movements all contributed to challenging the privileging of science over other forms of knowledge. Demand for democratic oversight over this class of experts was seconded by growing number of social researchers who called into question the value-free nature of scientific advice by claiming that scientific knowledge is itself powerfully shaped by cultural forces.

The declining influence of the sciences as ultimate arbiter of

human dilemmas was inseparable from the rise of such cultural critique, resulting by the 1990s in a shift away from privileging “hard,” quantitative, economic explanations and toward foregrounding “soft,” cultural ones. This “cultural turn” was visible in public debate but had an even more powerful effect within such academic disciplines as history, sociology, and geography as well as economics, medicine, and even business studies. In 2006 and 2007, for example, the University of Leipzig in Germany offered a course called “The Cultural Turn and Its Consequences for Physical Education” to its physical education students.

In a review of the “cultural turn” in the humanities, historian Peter N. Stearns has pointed to how the inclusion of culture in research assumptions has enriched our understanding of the sense of smell, the history of emotions, the nature of illness, and gender roles in society among other benefits.¹⁷ As before, cultural explanations have to contend with biological ones; in fact, they have to do so in more areas than before, as advances in genetics, claiming to have discovered genes responsible for obesity or human cooperation, continue to reshape the boundary between biological determination and cultural learning.¹⁸ Nonetheless, it is safe to say that in the general public, cultural explanations are now much more readily invoked to challenge the authority of “hard” science than twenty years ago, while, surprising as it is, “culture experts” are less likely to be challenged, say, on the customs of Iraq than physicists on the safety of nuclear reactors. “The punditocracy,” as anthropologist Bill Maurer has written, “are our modern day mythmakers.”¹⁹

Civil rights. The “cultural turn,” and indeed many of the processes we have outlined, would not have occurred without the emergence of the civil rights movement. From its inception in the United States during the 1950s and early 1960s, this movement developed from a struggle for “racial” equality based on ideals of universal rights and responsibilities into an ideology of asserting and celebrating cultural distinctiveness in the 1980s and 1990s, when the “politics of recognition” caused school curricula to be rewritten and museums established to showcase “Black history” as well

as its Chicano, Asian American, and Native American equivalents. The rigid bounding of ethnoracial categories, a unique heritage of nineteenth- and twentieth-century America institutionalized in the U.S. Census, was now further solidified by turning it into a “heritage” to be cherished. This resulted in greater identification with what previously were stigmatized ethnic labels. Thus between 1970 and 1980, the population of American Indians in the United States grew from eight hundred thousand in 1970 to 2.5 million in 2000, a rate that can only be explained by more people identifying themselves as Indians. The anthropologist Marshall Sahlins has pointed to the civil rights movement as being at the root of “the formation of . . . a culture of cultures,” as more and more groups, from American Indian “First Nations” to sexual subcultures, developed a new level of self-consciousness about their own way of life, discovering (and reinforcing and inventing) their own specificity relative to other groups in society.²⁰

Although what public policy professor Dvora Yanow has called the “lumpy hyphen”—the creation of large, bounded ethnic categories like “Latino-American”—is unique to the United States, the effects of the politics of ethnic representation have been felt very widely.²¹ First Canada and Australia, and then some European states, adopted ideologies of “multiculturalism,” which stressed the right to cultural difference alongside the right to equal citizenship. In the international arena organizations fighting against racism, for minority rights, and for the recognition of indigenous peoples have adopted the language of cultural distinctiveness in advancing their causes. Support for such groups—whether Gypsies in Romania or Dayaks in Borneo—often comes from North America, Western Europe, or from activists of the “global South,” and to be heard, their grievances must be articulated in the stylized language of cultural rights. Thus the Ainu, the indigenous people of officially ethnically homogenous Japan, have successfully managed to revitalize their cultural identity since the 1970s by establishing tourist villages, in which Ainu food and crafts are produced and sold, and children are taught the Ainu language and traditions. In 1997 a Japanese court for the first time officially accorded the Ainu minority status, potentially opening the way for

land claims and representation in central or local government.²²

How important a role culture plays for minority movements can also be seen from the story of a folklorist who was recently abducted by Khasi separatist rebels in the Indian state of Meghalaya and taken to a clandestine camp. According to an article in *Indian Folklife*, “They asked him to stay there for two weeks to talk about folklore of the Khasis in order to inspire some sort of unity among the cadres.”²³

Desecularization. The last great trend contributing to the culturalist phase is the desecularization of the world. Since the burning of novelist Salman Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses* in 1989, religion has been steadily reclaiming the place in public and political spaces that it had lost during the rationalist era of the Cold War on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Evangelical Christianity and Islam in particular, but also other old and new religions, have been spreading rapidly and waging political claims in new arenas—from anti-abortion politics in Africa to Hindu mobilization in the diaspora and the Falungong’s global war against the Chinese government. Although the relationship of religion to cultural representation is a complicated one—many religious movements want to transcend cultural divisions, while others, like the Christian Right in the United States, argue against them for political reasons—in a number of cases religious authority has reasserted itself as cultural authority. In Europe, states dissatisfied with the politics of liberal multiculturalism are seeking religious figures able to speak for and exert power over “Muslim” constituencies. In Iraq, based on a similar logic, religious divisions are taken for a synonym of ethnic groups, and religious leaders are endowed with a self-fulfilling clout of influence.

The Meanings of Culture

The fact that “culture” is increasingly frequently invoked does not mean that all people mean the same thing by it. Until the 1980s the term “culture” in everyday parlance referred mainly to the arts. Since the “cultural turn,” however, people have started

Table 1. “Culture” as a group attribute

<i>Cultural level</i>	<i>Scope</i>	<i>Number of groups</i>
1	Languages, ethnolinguistic groups	Thousands
2	Ethnic groups with a declared cultural identity	Thousands
3	States	Hundreds
4	“Civilizations”	Eight, according to Samuel Huntington

Source: Schönhuth 2005, 45.

talking about “gay culture,” “company culture,” or “culture of poverty.” Western businessmen have written bestsellers about “Confucian culture” in China, while Chinese newspapers have berated the “clique culture” of officials as they write about “residential culture” in articles promoting upmarket apartments. In other words, although the word “culture” is still in use in its first sense as art (and science), it is now increasingly used to encompass all human behavior that is not biologically determined. Although in principle such usage could refer to all of humankind, in practice it mostly constructs “culture as difference,” as a set of attributes that distinguishes one group of people from another. As the political philosopher Seyla Benhabib has written: “Much contemporary cultural politics . . . is an odd mixture of the anthropological view of the democratic equality of all cultural forms of expression and the Romantic, Herderian emphasis on each form’s irreducible uniqueness.”²⁴

Even when used in this most common sense, “culture” refers to different entities for different people. Michael Schönhuth, following the work of Christoph Antweiler, identifies four different levels at which “culture” is applied to human groups, which vary highly in terms of scope and range (see table 1).²⁵ At all of these levels, culture is roughly linked to ethnicity—although based on highly conflicting and contested claims.

The Purpose of This Book

Cultural differences are often an important factor in what happens in the world. For many in the West and beyond, however, this simple truth takes a distorted form: the view of a world shaped by clashing cultures. The story of clashing cultures is compelling because it is based on easily comprehensible categories, but it is wrong and even dangerous. To write a story that is equally compelling is difficult when you—as anthropologists tend to—believe that simple categories never capture reality. As the anthropologist Thomas Eriksen has written: “Our job partly consists in . . . making easy answers to complex questions slightly more difficult to defend.”²⁶ Here we attempt to understand the world as a rapidly changing product of global trends shaping our perception, rather than as a sum of historically continuous civilizations. We are interested in the mechanisms that make us see the world in terms of “cultures.”

We offer more than a criticism of a pervasive view we consider dangerous. We believe that a systematic examination of the rise of “culture” as an explanatory paradigm in human institutions can in itself be a compelling explanation of why we are where we are today: in the middle of a devastating war in Iraq; stuck between Islamophobia and anti-Americanism; and at a crossroads where liberal politics are retreating in the face of a seeming failure to maintain their traditional commitment to both individual freedoms and cultural openness, whether in Palestine after the democratic election of an Islamist group to power, or in Europe, where public debates on Islamic head covering recall the times of Peter the Great (who had men cut off their beards) and Mustafa Kemal (who forced his people into European clothes).

In today’s institutions, from foreign ministries to advertising agencies, “culture” is the talk of the day. Yet it is more often than not a black box. Many people talk about culture, yet most are not able to describe and define it, let alone point to its actual impact and importance in their institutions and areas of work. The clash-of-civilizations view of the world is seemingly good for breaking complicated issues down into simple cultural categories,

each of which has its practical list of dos and don'ts. But apart from the flawed assumptions on which this view is based, it inevitably creates a practical problem: claims about culture, coming from different spokespeople, are bound to contradict each other, leaving the decision maker with the task to adjudicate. A process-centered view that provides information not about "cultures" but about the forces that stand behind cultural claims is not only better for understanding the world, it is also practically useful. In some situations cultural claims do have explanatory power and must be taken into account; in others, however, they mislead. In a world where "culture matters," decision makers, from public hospitals to antiterrorism operations, must be knowledgeable about and sensitive to cultural differences; but rather than an atlas of folk customs, they need tools to critically evaluate the claims they encounter.

This book first looks at the uses of culture at the state-to-state level, then proceeds to examine how individual states deal with cultural diversity, and finally zooms in on the consequences of the "culture fever" for the functioning of institutions and for the lives of individuals. In exploring these diverse realms, we draw on a large body of existing scholarship as well as documents produced by political and business consultancies, mainstream media, and our own ethnographies. Chapter 1 describes a world trying to rationalize and contain the international "threats" to its "security" by a conceptual apparatus in which universalist paradigms increasingly serve as a mere fig leaf for deeply held assumptions of cultural difference. This is a trend occurring across the political spectrum—defense strategists planning the occupation of Iraq and antiglobalist demonstrators protesting it take cultural differences between "West" and "East" or "South" for granted.

While the so-called clash of civilizations has never been as close to being a self-fulfilling prophesy as in the United States' "war on terror," the logic of cultural relativism has also reshaped post-Cold War relations between the great powers of America, Russia, and China. We discuss a range of instances where it has led to a reworking of international dialogue and public discourse on subjects like human rights and democracy, such as the rise of the

“Asian values” discourse in the 1990s. In Europe, initial enthusiasm about the expansion of the European Union based on the principles of liberal democracy has been succeeded by overt statements about Europe’s cultural limits, which seem to block Turkey’s accession. In each of these cases we trace the mechanisms whereby essentialist assumptions and the “container view” of culture have risen to dominance through both misunderstandings and strategic instrumentalization of culture by particular interests—from politicians wishing to preserve their power to business consultants and the media.

If international security is about containment, then international development and aid is about engagement. Chapter 2 maps the rise of culture in development institutions and discourse. After some forty years of development strategies based on universal economic and technological indicators, which did not deliver the promised results, institutions like the World Bank have adopted an approach that focuses on local participation and cultural specificity. Those at one extreme of the debate see particular kinds of cultures as the main obstacle to development, while those at the other discard the notion of development as an instrument of continued Western hegemony. In the middle, however, there are approaches inspired by the well-known work of Amartya Sen, which maintain the possibility of useful intervention premised on recognizing culturally diverse views of the “good life.” This chapter documents cases in which an infusion of local knowledge has led to positive results, but also those instances in which misrepresented or conflicting cultural claims—by local elites or global intermediaries—have resulted in waste, inaction, and even disaster. In addition to the problems of an essentialized view of cultures highlighted in chapter 1, these cases reveal the necessity of asking who has the right to speak for a group or community.

Chapter 3 moves from the international to the national level. Samuel Huntington’s framework of clashing civilizations, while deployed mainly at the level of international conflicts, has also strongly influenced international interpretations of and interventions into local—interpreted as ethnocultural—conflicts, such as the wars in Bosnia (by the West) and in Chechnya (by Russia).

In other cases international discourse naturalized local conflicts into inevitable conflicts of historic ethnocultural difference, such as between the Tutsi and Hutu in Rwanda or the Shi'a and Sunni Arabs in Iraq. Exploring how these interpretations came to dominate over equally plausible ones based, for example, on conflicts between elites over economic resources and political power, sheds light on the limited explanatory power of culturalist explanations, the global conditions that make a conflict in Africa immediately perceived in ethnic terms, and the potentially disastrous consequences of interventions based on unexamined cultural assumptions.

In the nation-states that came to dominate the West in the early twentieth century, the view of ethnic diversity was not very different from that which prevails today in discussions of remote conflicts: it was a potentially dangerous thing that was either to melt into a national culture by itself (as in the United States) or had to be coerced into it by means of education or even violence. After World War II, and increasingly since the 1960s, cultural diversity began to be acknowledged and even celebrated in a number of Western societies. In the 2000s, however, concerns about the proper management of cultural diversity—particularly with regard to immigrant populations—have again begun to prevail over its affirmation. Chapter 4 reviews the range of public realms in which nation-states are engaged in culture management, from regulating immigration to urban planning, from education to the courts. We summarize some of the hallmark debates that continue to rage across Western (formerly?) liberal democracies, such as those on the Islamic headscarf, female circumcision, and citizenship tests. These cases, while foregrounding tensions between the cultural rights of groups and individual freedoms and pushing discussions of culture into both legislation and courts of law, have at the same time reignited public debates about national culture and its limits. Can a true Dutchwoman refuse to swim? Is street violence by Algerian youth in Paris culturally conditioned? Is a schoolteacher's insistence on having her face covered a cultural right, an offense against culture, or both? These debates are bringing a new guard of cultural (and religious) spokespeople to

prominence, but, as this book shows, the difficulty is in establishing where cultural explanations are useful and where they are misplaced and self-serving.

Chapter 5 is an excursion into the world of cultural—and culturally justified—property. In a growing number of cases, “indigenous” groups have contested modern-era land titles granted by colonial powers or nation-states, asserted their right to control, or benefit from, cultural or intellectual property (such as the medical uses of particular plants) being commercially exploited by individuals or businesses, and challenged international environmental conventions. The cases reviewed—from contesting rights to the ownership of American Indian dances to Aboriginal land titles in Australia and the special permission to hunt whales granted the Makah Indians of Canada—illustrate conflicts arising from differences in the cultural construction of property. Recently, “indigenous” groups or mediators acting (or claiming to act) on their behalf have challenged medical patent rights and copyrights pertaining to texts and images. While a growing number of legal scholars argues that customary law should be recognized in legal proceedings, others advocate the lifting of existing cultural property rights in the name of free access. By analyzing existing conflicts and developing hypothetical scenarios for regulating the protection of cultural property, we point both to the usual problems with group representation (the problematic nature of the authority to identify group boundaries and to determine the content of cultural tradition) and to the importance of a case-by-case approach in attributing rights and revenues to develop a natural or cultural resource.

The last two chapters deal with the consequences of the “rise of culture” for institutions and individuals. Chapter 6 describes the “intercultural communication” (IC) industry that has developed on the fringes of business and government since the late 1980s, originating in the United States but by now spread globally. Corporate employees and government officials are trained in “intercultural competence” before they are posted abroad in order to sensitize them to working with a culturally diverse population. Unlike in the realms discussed in previous chapters, (inter-)cultural

expertise here constitutes a fully formalized, practice-oriented field with its own conferences and journals, which claims to be indispensable to the effective operation of any institution.

We offer a critical look at the evolution of IC and its origins—mainly in social psychology and 1950s anthropology—as well as its dominant paradigms as exemplified in the highly influential but deeply flawed works of management gurus Geert Hofstede, Charles Hampden-Turner, and Fons Trompenaars. We then describe the way IC has been applied in various corporate and public fields, showing its effects on management training, health care, and education. IC classifies nations along a finite number of cultural variables and provides practical instructions depending on which two “cultures” are meeting in the situation at hand (for example, two-day trainings for German managers on “how to do business with Chinese”). Yet, while practical information on the Chinese etiquette can be useful, real-life experience calls the bluff of IC’s claim that culture is “a language to be learned.” The actual behavior of one’s business partners, the preferences of one’s students or patients, cannot be reduced to cultural characteristics putatively derived from the national tradition. We provide examples of more useful approaches to IC, ones that take into account not only group culture but social, economic, and individual variation as well as the context of the situation.

For businesses, however, the “culture fever” has meant more than diversity management and IC trainings. Businesses have also become increasingly attentive to local consumer needs and preferences. Although the basis of “ethnic marketing” has had the usual effect of accentuating differences across predefined groups, this time with the purpose of selling kosher food and hair-care products for black hair, the shift from traditional surveys to qualitative studies has had a rather different result. “Ethnography” became a corporate buzzword. In the 2000s anthropologists have begun working in consumer research positions at companies ranging from Intel to Procter & Gamble, as well as founding hip design and architecture consultancies. Their job is to identify consumer needs by spending weeks in a Brazilian slum, an Osaka bakery, or in an online chat group. In a number of examples, chapter 7

demonstrates that, while the words “culture,” “values,” and “community” are remarkably rare in corporate ethnographers’ reports, they provide snapshots of constantly shifting practices and meanings—what do a pair of faded jeans mean to an inner-city black youth in Detroit, or a particular ringtone to a Jamaican schoolchild?—that go a long way in understanding cultural influences on individual behavior. If this works for Microsoft, couldn’t it work for the Pentagon?

The conclusion returns to the picture of a world not so much “Riding the Waves of Culture”—the title of a best-selling intercultural management manual—as adrift on the waves of culturalism. The dilemma this book raises is how to retain sensitivity to the cultural impacts on and of policies and corporate decisions without falling into the trap of determinism, essentialization, and misrepresentation—a trap that, as we are currently witnessing, can have the dangerous consequences of a self-fulfilling prophesy. We suggest that it is more important to understand the motives of processes in which cultural claims arise than to study the supposed essence of a finite number of “cultures,” and that this need not be a fantasy of the ivory tower. Corporate ethnographers, and some development practitioners who have begun applying similar approaches, have shown just that. We conclude by offering readers a series of questions designed to help anyone who needs to evaluate the impact of decisions potentially involving cultural difference to decide whether, in a particular case, culture matters.