

# Americanization for Collectivists

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*Steve Iman , MHR, College of Business, Cal Poly  
Pomona*

In a world of staggeringly diverse human beliefs and experiences, conflict is a fundamental social fact.<sup>1</sup> So it has always been in all cultures. Groundrules for dealing with differences in all cultures likely began with some common approaches to all of the possibilities of conflict within family units. First of all, there's the "Daddy Knows Best" strategy, which when written large in the social system amounts to authoritarian models. Figuring out the 'biggest daddy' of all within a large cultural unit was long a matter of brute strength and force of arms, though social ranking and status systems involving bloodlines and the like produced somewhat more civilized ways of negotiating or at least allocating power.

A second source of social or interpersonal power — quite different from 'force' we've referred to above, may also have roots in family and tribal levels of existence. Various named by authors at different stages of history, we're referring to the roots of voluntary integration which can arise within cultural and political units when people 'take social responsibility'. While Kenneth Boulding talks of this source of power as "love", others might see it as having arisen from a concept of loyalty as quite distinct from conformity. The Tofflers describe the integrative force as "information" and the non-zero sum-games of knowledge work. A generation ago there was talk of "consciousness" which some might see as a kin to Luke Skywalker's "force". In any case, identification with and commitment to non-economic ideas of a quasi-spiritual sort can certainly channel much human energy and commitment.

These positive and negative sources of power have long co-existed in various forms of balance. Alexander served history well in evidencing the power a leader can have when he reduces psychological distance between himself and troops, and allows a modicum of autonomy to conquered territories. Fifteenth century Japanese revolutionaries who overthrew the dynasty of the times opened offices at the front edge of town halls and may have been among the first national leaders to re-invent "open door" policies on a large scale. While these approaches seeks some balance against overly sharp uses of power, other cultural options have been found. Some authors suggest that many Asian cultures built systems at the social and political level which excel at avoiding or suppressing conflict altogether. Jonathan Rauch, for instance, has observed that "Japan relies more heavily on conflict-avoidance than any society I have ever seen."

This cultural proclivity may have evolved from 'communal characteristics' in the face of force-power dynamics. In the old days of the shogunate, an advisor of failed policy was expected to disembowel themselves — this might understandably lead to a reluctance to take responsibility! Even today, many describe Japanese organizational patterns as putting the onus of responsibility on middle managers, while key executives are chosen for being unobjectionable and for singing good 'karaoke' (singing praises and saying nice things). Many observers characterize the 'consensual' characteristics of Japanese management as a 'system of irresponsibility' — collective responsibility may be viewed as systematic buck-passing<sup>2</sup>.

A culture which puts the premium on avoiding conflict professes likeness of people, dismissing differences as incidental far past what is realistic and easily observable. Though the saying "the nail that sticks up gets hammered down" engenders a great deal of conformity, non-conformity in conflict-avoiding cultures is generally tolerated and ignored, considered amusing quirk, rather than punished in authoritarian ways. Here

difference are ignored and pasted over, authorities evolve from finely calibrated hierarchy, and the best interests of society at large are sought through harmony and affiliation with personal factions. Here a just society is to be sought through individuals knowing and adhering to their 'station' rather than to any 'rights'. This is the feudal idea crystallized in Confucianism, but known in all parts of the world — of pledging loyalty to the one above and looking after the one below.

Collectivist cultures are often far from autocratic — they do proscribe a role for individual influence, though within tight confines. You must avoid conflict, and where you cannot, you must keep it personal rather than sharing disagreements with others outside the tight 'in-group' — you keep differences tucked away in a drawer rather than airing them in public. Where there is an aversion to error, and where avoiding mistakes is the socially responsible thing to do, learning and knowledge development are truncated except where conditions are just so — education becomes 'training', credentials come in the absence of curiosity, "creativity" is really imitative, assertions are flatly untestable, and ideas aren't checked. What in some cultures would be seen as attacking theories or ideas is taken personally enough to shut down the possibilities of dialog in families, public arenas, and science. Concepts of 'loyal opposition' don't grow where people take things personally.

Where confrontations are steered around and repressed, harmony may be maintained with amazing endurance and at great cost to individuals. In striving to suppress confrontation, the people are mutually coercive and, more importantly, self-coercive. Participants are expected to be accommodating even when they know themselves to have been wronged. A deeply depressing sense of living without options to leave situations or duties is the meaning of a com-

munal way of living. People in such situations do not believe in a broader public arena in which they might find hope and opportunity. Tied to assumptions that all is personal, the nexus of conflict resolution is seen as existing in mutual relationships rather than public processes.

Where everything is personal, it's hard for cultures or sub-cultures to work for the benefit of either individuals or the group as a whole, for agendas can't be set either in the broader community, or in the interfaces where people from sub-cultures try to interact with one another to create fair new rules. Where there is little willingness to admit to the failure of old approaches, little new can be decided — action can only be forced by outsiders. People who won't deal with conflict, and yet won't abide stagnation and lack of progress are trapped in painful dilemmas.

A new and very different approach to dealing with social conflict emerged in the Western tradition. The death of feudalism as a key pattern within Western cultures came with the notion that one's first loyalty belongs not to a man, but to a set of rules. From autocratic traditions, status, especially toward the late middle ages, became increasingly allocated along different lines as new classes emerged with foci on new economic activities. Bargaining became a new and unique source of power as economies moved out of barter stages and were monetarized. Slowly there emerged philosophies quite different from the Platonic ideal of philosopher kings. ("My law," said Plato, "will be made with a general view to the best interests of society at large... as I rightly hold the single person and his affairs of minor importance.")

Following the Renaissance focus on the individual, and with the emergence of Protestant religions, but especially the philosophies of Locke, Kant, and Adam Smith emerged powerful and radically different ways of thinking about conflict, political differences, social and economic distributions of power. The emerging and revolutionary concepts (aimed at the overthrow of unwanted governments) sought to depersonalize power through the development of principles and fair games which anyone might play. From a system where loyalty was expected toward men, cultures emerged where people would contemplate dying for personal rights or abstract ideas. The core idea was to establish a set of public processes and rules designed expressly to prohibit special privilege and special treatment of persons. Instead of retaining personalized power, the core idea of liberal social systems involved establishing an open-ended competitive process for resolving conflicts in the areas of social power as well as those of knowledge development.

The 'voting game' (democracy) was developed to decide who gets to use violence and when. The principles of market capitalism were developed for the 'property-trading game' to set rules for those aiming to corner limited resources. The public rules for 'criticizing ideas' allowed for an informed populace and open competition in the development of knowledge — whether public or scientific. In the liberal scheme of things, no matter who you are your vote is just a vote, your dollar is just a dollar, and your experiment had better work when anyone else tries it. Under these rules, conflict is seen as the opposite of something to be avoided — through allowing and exploiting difference, conflict is kept local, manageable, and is fostered as the engine of constructive change. If John Locke's political ideas are the core of our political system, and if Adam Smith formulated the sort of capitalism we favored, it's from Emmanuel Kant that we take our liberal sense of justice. By this creed, your actions are right only if anyone else can imitate you without ruining things for everybody; behavior that is self-defeating

when available to anyone (without privilege) is wrong. In other words, right is right no matter who you happen to be — no special-conduct passes for the privileged, nor hierarchies fixed by moral presumptions. "The sum of all we drive at," says Locke, "is that every man enjoy the same rights that are granted to others."

Democratic ideals are hard to live up to. All levels of social systems everywhere, from the family and affiliates to communities and large social systems are alive with contradictions in transitioning from what is 'natural' to the principles set out by philosophers and forefathers of Western republics. The ideal draws attention from people all around the world, but the execution is difficult for our lack of awareness of implications to our everyday life. Any sub-culture calling for submission and unquestioning loyalty — from small towns and the quasi-military structures of many popular sports — to the winning-is-everything mindset of many corporate environments — adhere more to the illiberal old morals than they do to democratic ideals.

Wherever there is fear of change and a failure of systems to open to collaborative forms of control, one might say that the vestiges of undemocratic culture reside. Strength through suffering, strength through hierarchy, strength through individual submersion in the group — are all quite different than strength through diversity. Strength through community, for all that one may say about its confining qualities, seems to produce 'coziness' — a sense of protection, clubbiness, and support. Cultures of individualism forsake cozy deals and coziness as a national aspiration — along this line are discipline and responsibility to ideas and a wholly different ethics.

Capitalist have generally been allowed to run corporations as more or less feudal enterprises. This is particularly true in the United States where social responsibilities of large firms are minimized in comparison with alternative forms of capitalism which have evolved in European nations. Big companies and bureaucracies often can and do act as spiritual emptiers — turning liberally educated people infected with democratic ideals into company men. Challenges to corporate policy, even by owners, much less employees, are quite circumscribed. The skills required for success in American enterprises likely owe much more to feudal than democratic traditions. To get things done you must build relationships, trade favors, earn loyalty, develop trust, and pay your dues. You must, in other words, get 'inside' where such privileges are supposed not to exist in 'rational' enterprises. We call the differences between our faith in how things 'should work' and our knowledge of how they 'do work' "organizational politics", and think of it as involving shady, even dirty, smoke-filled rooms. We put up with strongly centralized "city hall" systems so long as our fundamental guess is that they will deliver more than we expect from the current politics in which we feel helpless, and about which we are increasingly cynical. In 1990, a recession year, U.S. corporate profits fell seven percent, though American CEOs paid themselves seven percent more, leading some to question the seriousness of American executives at staying in business for the long run.

Democratic ideas for organizing our lives, from the level of family and team to social systems, are matters of principle rather than natural tradition. The values were derived through the mind and require faith. The faith to support the rational optimism is hard to find where the involved populace is uninformed or influenced by counter-traditions within the larger social system. The energy of the ideals is impacted in many other ways — perhaps especially through problems of trust in the larger social arena, and complexities of generating a clear agenda for coping with external

requirements for adaptation of the culture — increasingly economic. The profoundest malaise is that of the person who "does not know what to do"; this is the point where the person is most lost and dangerous.

In the larger scale of things, democracy is yet a new and experimental approach for framing the efforts of large societies. We live in a time of great irony where autonomous movements around the world seek to move away from old traditions, and yet there are fundamental questions about the efficacy of political and social systems as they have evolved in the U.S. Few would deny a sense of national crisis, and commentators are increasingly suggesting that the U.S. is along a path of potentially irreversible collapse. While concern is addressed to lost markets for American industry, of even more concern is the apparent disintegration of social life. Homicide, perhaps the most easily measured indicator of lawfulness has doubled in the past twenty years — arrest rates for young Americans is 8-9 times what they were in 1950.

Americans rape each other 4 times as often as Germans and 27 times as often as Japanese (U.S. rates of reported rape are up 350% since 1959). Drug arrests have risen 10,000% since 1960 alone. We rob each other at 157 times the rate of the Japanese — to the tune of an estimated \$600 billion a year. Every day in the U.S., nearly 2% of the stock of commercial enterprises goes out the door in the form of some kind of shoplifting. Middle class stereotypes that problems of violence reside in the "underclass" ignore the fact that since the 1960's, rates have risen faster among white males than they have for any other social category. The stereotypes in place create secondary effects of law-

lessness — middle class fear and hostility, and inspire middle class feelings of superiority. As Mickey Kaus suggested (End of Equality), Americans have trouble these days “looking people in the eye and treating them as equals based on dignity and mutual respect.”

Problems of lawlessness are widely attributed to lack of economic opportunity, though this is not likely the whole story. During the 60's violent crime escalated while unemployment fell sharply and wages rose quickly. Some attribute social disintegration to the status of the family. The divorce rate has doubled since 1960, and five times as many children are born out of wedlock. Such rates have and are rising faster among whites than blacks. Half of all children born in the seventies and eighties will spend part of their childhood in one-parent homes. Homelessness abounds.

Though education and the “skilling” of the work force are seen as solutions, manpower projections for possible careers are hard to find, Scholastic Aptitude Test scores are stuck more than 10% below where they were 25 years ago, high school seniors perform below 8th grade levels on math, and 25% don't graduate. The average 8th grader in the U.S. spends one hour a day on homework and 3 on TV, while many of their cousins in other countries do as much homework in a day as Americans do in a week. Some have estimated that twenty years ago, well aimed government programs could have improved social conditions by as much as 40% — today, some policy analysts without political grudges to bear now estimate that perhaps only 5% of a difference could be made with massive investment in government programs.

<sup>1</sup> This has been a hard paper to give a title to... and it's work in process. One version I labeled “Americanization for Collectivists”. The paper requires illustration and elaboration to suit digestive capabilities in many directions... there may be several papers wrapped up in it. I'd treasure your critical observations.

<sup>2</sup> This is not to suggest that the phenomena of ‘buck-passing’ is not widely known in other cultures such as our own where politicians relate to world-class financial collapses through frantic scrambles to place blame elsewhere, where presidents find assessing blame easier than accepting responsibility — blame Congress, blame lazy workers, blame liberals, blame Japan, blame 1960 ideas. Smile and smile, blame and blame — we know a great deal about our own version of karaoke.