

## Have WEIRD societies entered a cul-de-sac?

A review article based on 'The Weirdest people in the world' by Joseph Henrich

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Two recent books, 'Plagues and People's' by William McNeill and 'The WEIRDest people in the world' by Joseph Henrich, provide very good clues on the evolution of the world in terms of economic development and material prosperity.

The two books have to be read together to understand how and why Asian and other civilisational areas (West Asia) fell behind in the second millennium of the Common Era. They help us understand why several economies – in developing South Asia and in Africa – have not achieved economies of scale with their industry.

In 'Can India grow?' Gulzar Natarajan and this author wrote about the fragmentation of many industries in India. Scale is conspicuous by its absence. Even now, the number of companies in India with a share capital of over 100 crores, or a sales turnover of Rs. 1,000 crores and above, stands at a few thousand.

The underlying drivers of this issue have been explored by this author before<sup>1</sup>. They are described in these pieces as 'arms-length capitalism' and 'arms-around capitalism'. The first refers to non-relationship-based economic interaction; the second is relationship-based. Frequently and historically, the latter runs the high risk of degenerating into cronyism, especially if it leads to a relationship between the regulators and the regulated – to the detriment of the overall industry, the economy, and consumers.

In recent years, in the West, arms-length capitalism has begun to degenerate into 'arms-around' capitalism, partly due to the revolving door between government roles and employment in the industry. Rajan and Zingales (2005) have written that societies marked by relationship-based capitalism will soon have to migrate or graduate to 'arms-length' capitalism if they are to develop economically.

They were right with their prescription; at that time, however, they did not know how it would happen. That is, the cultural pathways to creating a society that was comfortable dealing with strangers based on trust, contracts, and other social arrangements were not well understood. The role that the religion of Christianity played, thanks to the part played by the Roman Catholic Church was not known either. Henrich's book, about what he calls Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) societies, fills that void.

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Edit (22 September 2022): In an earlier version, the R in WEIRD was erroneously expanded to Religious instead of Rich. This has been corrected.

## The Roots of WEIRD Societies

A review of the book published in ‘The Atlantic’ (Shulevitz, 2020), and a three-line summary of that review article from this author capture the one key message of the book:

“...the ability of the West to interact, do commerce with, and trust strangers – thus creating scale economies and the institutions that sustained and supported them – can be traced to the strictures that the Catholic church placed on ‘kinship’ marriages.” (Nageswaran, 2020)

As mentioned earlier, religion and the Church have played very big parts in the development of WEIRD societies. The preface documents how literacy advanced in several European societies well before the advent of state-funded schools. This development is traced to Martin Luther and the Protestant reformation, which posited a personal relationship between God and his devotees. To establish such a one-to-one relationship, people had to learn the Bible. Thus began the investment in reading and literacy. Since the original Bible was in Latin, it had to be translated into multiple languages. The rise of Protestantism and literacy went hand in hand.

As per the footnote attached to this story, it was not the discovery of the printing press that led to the spread of literacy, but the other way around. In many other parts of the world, where some form of printing had existed before, there was no such comparable spread of literacy.

It is worth taking note of this: *Centuries later, as the Industrial Revolution rumbled into Germany and surrounding regions, the reservoir of literate farmers and local schools created by Protestantism furnished an educated and ready workforce that propelled rapid economic development and helped fuel the second Industrial Revolution.* (Henrich, 2020, p. 13).

## Characterising WEIRD and non-WEIRD Societies Today

In brief, WEIRD people are highly individualistic, self-obsessed, control-oriented, nonconformist, and analytical. The WEIRD person focuses on themselves—their attributes, accomplishments, and aspirations—over their relationships and social roles. (Henrich, 2020, p.21).

By contrast, behaviour in non-WEIRD societies involves (1) conforming to fellow in-group members, (2) deferring to authorities like elders or sages, (3) policing the behaviour of those close to you (but not strangers), (4) sharply distinguishing your in-group from everyone else, and (5) promoting your network’s collective success whenever possible. (Henrich, 2020, p. 28).

In WEIRD societies, one is expected to behave ‘consistently’ with all others. Whereas in non-WEIRD societies, it is normal to change one’s behaviour according to context. One can be very humorous with friends and extremely deferential to those in authority. That would be hypocritical to members of the WEIRD societies but entirely normal in others.

The inability to behave differently according to contexts and seeing it as hypocritical leads WEIRD members to lean towards moral universalism. In other words, Henrich writes, moral truths exist in the way mathematical laws exist. It also leads to overconfidence. Combine the two, and we now have a good handle on how and why western policymakers responded to the global financial crisis of 2008, as also many of the choices made during the COVID-19 pandemic.

It also explains why the typical WEIRD economics textbook is written as though it were universally applicable. There is no room for path-dependency in these economic theories. There is only one right way to do policy: free trade, balanced budgets, flexible labour markets, globalisation and deregulation. Now, as the context is changing, those steeped in such thinking are struggling to adapt. Universalism and overconfidence helped WEIRD members colonise the world and spread their word. Now, they may prove to be their undoing.

### **Exploring the Limits of WEIRD Psychology**

Henrich does not delve into the downside of WEIRD psychological attributes. Interestingly, the concept of Cumulative Cultural Evolution (CCE) – which he describes (p. 65) – is a concept that may not be easily understood by people with WEIRD psychology. This does not accord well with the WEIRD tendency for neat, rational explanations, with clear identifiable cause-and-effect relationships.

To illustrate this point: in response to the article ‘This is how civilisations collapse’ (Roussinos, 2021), a reader wrote the following comment:

Perhaps the funniest thing about this comments section is that a considered, researched piece of deep analysis like this, which is really talking about civilisational cycles over centuries, is immediately greeted with a chorus of ‘so what’s the solution, pessimist?’

This kind of solutionism – the notion that every ‘problem’ can be ‘solved’ by us, now, today – seems to be very much a part of the creaking modern edifice. How do you ‘solve’ a civilisational cycle? What would make you imagine that you can sort everything out to your liking? What if we just have to live through it? What if trying to ‘solve’ the world is part of what is knocking it sideways?

The reader who posted this comment is thinking in a non-WEIRD manner. That brings us to one of the deficiencies or gaps of the book: Henrich probably did not set out to extoll WEIRD cultural traits and psychological attributes, seeking rather to explain how WEIRD societies evolved and how their evolution might have made them economically successful in the past; nonetheless, he ends up giving the impression that WEIRD psychology is flawless.

If that were the case, arguably, WEIRD societies would not collapse. They are, right in front of our eyes. Part of the reason, of course, is that they are not recognising that being WEIRD is what made them successful. They are un-WEIRD-ing themselves.

### **From kinship societies to pre-modern states**

In Chapter 3, Henrich traces somewhat painstakingly the processes by which clans grow bigger: competition, assimilation, and migration. Simply put, the rise of agriculture (about 20,000 years ago), as the earth warmed up, helped clans scale up. To farm, one needed land; clans that could hold on to and secure their land began to prosper. One of the ways in which clans succeed in inter-group competition is through wars and conflicts. Then, the norms of the vanquished or defeated clans are assimilated into the existing norms, and the band of followers of these new practices now expands.

Clans adopt certain approaches to assimilate other clans and practices. However, one needs a centralised authority to augment dwindling resources, respond to natural disasters, and successfully make war upon and conquer other societies. How does one bring that about? Henrich is less sure of how this happened – the emergence of a central authority. He traces it to public debates wherein ownership of rituals is challenged, and the gaining of control of another clan's rituals. The followers of these enlarged set of rituals – once a clan emerges victorious – can be moulded into an army (for an army is founded on an elaborate set of rituals and beliefs). Once all this is done, then how does one go from a pre-modern state to a modern state?

Enter religion and the Church.

### **Competition is always and everywhere desirable**

Before we move on to the role of religion, we have to record here an excellent set of observations that Henrich makes. They resonate very well today and explain much of what is happening in America, as also in other so-called WEIRD societies:

Once intergroup competition wanes, which often happens when states or empires manage to eliminate their competition, things slowly fall apart. Without the looming threats posed by competing societies, the competition among ruling families within a society will intensify and gradually tear the state-level institutions apart. Cracks, gaps, and loopholes appear even in the best institutions, allowing narrow elite interests to flood in, as lineages, clans, and sometimes entire ethnic communities devise ways to exploit state institutions for their own ends.

Complex societies always collapse as the higher-level institutions that integrate and unify them eventually deteriorate and crumble. As institutions fail and centralized political organizations collapse, inequality rises and larger societies break down into their sturdiest constitutive parts, which are usually tribes, clans, or residential communities.

Even when kin-based institutions have been suppressed by state institutions, their fundamental grounding in our evolved psychology enables them to readily reassemble themselves—in the advent of a state collapse—to resume the functions previously usurped by the state. (p.120)

The elimination of competition is not good. The collapse of the Soviet Union, in that sense, is the worst thing that could have happened for America. Within thirty years of that, America faces existential questions. America, a successful WEIRD society, is now in the process of un-WEIRDing itself, breaking down into its component clans and tribes: immigrants, blacks, under-educated white factory workers, coastal elites, progressives, woke, liberals, conservatives, far-right, extreme-left, etc. To be sure, there is much overlap here and that the above categories are not clans or tribes as evolutionary psychology may define. But, one gets the idea of what is happening.

The unravelling of WEIRD societies creates both possibilities and uncertainties. The chief uncertainty is what comes next? Still, before one worries about the future of the WEIRD societies, let us first examine, through Henrich, how they succeeded in the first place – and whether we in India can emulate some or

all of it, particularly as India tries to emerge as a middle-income country by the end of the decade, if not sooner.

## **The role of religion in building trust and the WEIRD family**

Religion has played a very big role, in general, in forging large communities and in facilitating transactions between strangers:

Religions have fostered trade by increasing trust, legitimized political authority, and expanded people's conceptions of their communities by shifting their focus from their own clans or tribes to larger imagined communities like "all Muslims." This background will set the stage for understanding how the Western Christian Church of the Middle Ages shaped European families, cultural psychology, and communities in ways that opened a pathway to the political, economic, and social institutions of the modern world. (p. 128)

But, in the presence of so many Gods and beliefs, how to forge a common belief in one God and one religion, that all can identify with, so that there is trust and exchange between people who believe in multiple Gods?

One of the important and interesting things that Henrich mentions is that societies that believed in supernatural punishments scaled up faster. Of the three principles that seemed to underlie all religions – contingent after-life, free-will, and moral universalism – contingent after-life, particularly the belief in hell (more than heaven), was found to be associated with greater productivity, economic growth and less crime. The logic works like this:

The psychological impacts of beliefs about godly desires, divine punishment, free will, and the afterlife combine with repetitive ritual practices to suppress people's tendencies toward impulsivity and cheating while increasing their pro-sociality toward unfamiliar co-religionists. (p.151)

Add to this mix the Church, and how it shaped the WEIRD family by drastically altering the institution of marriage. In Chapter 5, Henrich offers an important clarification: WEIRD families are not the product of the Industrial Revolution, economic prosperity, urbanisation, etc. The causality runs the other way.

The Church succeeded in altering the shape of the typical European family with its extreme package of prohibitions, prescriptions, and preferences surrounding marriage and the family. Before the Church arrived, the pre-WEIRD Roman family arrangement would sound familiar to many of us. It was patrilineal; men had fewer sexual constraints, although marriages were monogamous by default.

How did the Church gain so much legitimacy as to influence centuries-old practices and uproot kinship-based societies and practices? Henrich does not provide clear answers, except to note that imposing these policies took centuries and that, by about 1000 CE, through its relentless efforts, the Church had succeeded in reshaping Anglo-Saxon (English) kinship.

Henrich notes: "...there was no single coherent program here, at least in the beginning. Things look scattershot and idiosyncratic for centuries; but slowly, the successful bits and pieces coalesced into the Church's Marriage and Family program – the MFP..... In pre-Christian Europe, as in much of the world

*until recently, marriage customs had evolved culturally to empower and expand large kin-based organisations or networks.*" (The Church's MFP started as early as in the fourth century CE.)

Two key elements of the Marriage and Family Program (MFP) were to ban cousin-marriages up to sixth cousins, which happened in the twelfth century CE, and to prohibit marrying in-laws after the spouses died (such marriages were labelled incestuous). So, the widow, for example, was free to look outside for another partner. Importantly, any wealth she had went back with her; it did not enrich the dead husband's kin-group. Therefore, the Church also stood a chance to inherit such properties.

Indeed, the Church' constraints on adoption, polygamy, and remarriage meant that many families found themselves without heirs, and their wealth flowed into the coffers of the Church, making the Church the largest landowner in Europe. By 900 CE, the Church owned about a third of the cultivated lands in Western Europe.

It must be noted that no other group-living primate species have the noncultural equivalent of monogamous pair-bonding that the Church foisted on Europe, and that the rest of the world has copied. Henrich writes in detail (Chapter 8) that polygynous marriages were advantageous both for men and women. However, polygyny left many men with few prospects for marriage or even sex, rendering them prone to violence and crime. Polygyny makes men expend more efforts towards finding additional mates, whereas monogamy reduces their testosterone levels and makes them concentrate on caring for their infants. Thus, initially, natural selection might have favoured polygyny; however, cultural evolution under the influence of the Church brought about monogamy. From Europe, it spread to the rest of the world, as other societies copied the formal institutions, laws and practices of successful Europeans – ranging from democratic institutions to wearing neckties!

When Europeans began to form towns, guilds and religious institutions in the 10th and 11th centuries CE, it is natural that their experiences of living in monogamous societies shaped the kind of organisations that evolved and the laws that were framed.

'Why?' and 'How?' are the two important questions. Why did the Church announce these taboos? The motivations for the Church' edicts stemmed from the belief that the plagues were a punishment by God for incestuous marriages; part of the motivation was already available from the idea of 'Original Sin' itself. Henrich writes that the Church cashed in on our innate aversion to inbreeding; compared to other religious groups, it got lucky. There was "*no long-term instrumental vision for how they would create a new kind of world.*"

How it succeeded in imposing these norms is not clearly explained in the book, though one should remember the Church was also relentless. As Henrich writes, when proselytising preachers failed or got killed, they were soon replaced by fresh recruits. They never stopped and never gave up.

### **The economic consequences of WEIRD and non-WEIRD family structures**

To an extent, we have to agree with Henrich: what matters to us today are the consequences of the successful MFP of the Church. It established a pan-tribal social identity (Christian). It compelled individuals to look far and wide to find unrelated Christian spouses, and provided a new set of marriage and inheritance norms through which diverse tribal communities could now interact, marry, coordinate, and enlarge.

Scaling up of societies, evolution of urban agglomerations, and arms-length capitalism were thus offshoots of the unimaginably successful MFP of the Church. As Henrich writes, "*Relational freedom spurred residential mobility.*" Although Islam too is an Abrahamic faith, it could not emulate the success

of Christianity in preparing the society as a fertile ground for scale and technology-based industrial revolution and capitalism because it is very much based on kinships and clans. It remained and remains highly patriarchal, whereas the Church weakened patriarchy considerably.

In the next chapter, Henrich discusses the Kinship Intensity index (KII). Countries that score high on KII distrust strangers, new people, and adherents of other religions more. Interestingly, while India scores high on KII, its impersonal trust score is also relatively high. As with many things, India does not fit into neat boxes.

That said, India still features many elements of kinship-based societies. Indeed, India's relatively high levels of industrial fragmentation can be traced to the fact that kinship matters for economic and other interactions and relationships in India. Families mostly appoint their own members to important managerial positions in businesses. Marriages are only within the same community and clan. Parenthetically and somewhat tangentially, it raises the question of the appropriateness of one currency for the whole of Europe.

Viewed from the angle of creating a large mass of people who thought of themselves more as Indians and less as members of clans and groups, did the British influence help India? Did they, to some extent, introduce WEIRD practices and norms into a predominantly kinship-based society and, in doing so, did they make Indian society a little better prepared to industrialise than it would otherwise have been? Alternatively, did their mere presence galvanise Indians into sinking their inter-group differences in favour of a common identity?

On the negative side, as the next section discusses, imposing WEIRD cultural practices and norms on kinship and clan-based societies can also be linked to several adverse consequences. To a large extent, India continues to reap the whirlwind of this.

## **Institutions and cultural psychology**

Interestingly, in chapter 6, Henrich describes a Public Goods Game in which the participants from WEIRD and non-WEIRD societies behaved very differently. Participants from WEIRD societies did not hesitate to punish low performers and they did not retaliate if punished. Whereas participants from non-WEIRD societies did not like to punish low performers from their own groups; those who were punished later sought to take revenge – because such things are *not done*. Group cohesion and loyalties matter more than performance or productivity.

Henrich draws a seemingly obvious lesson from this: “policy prescriptions and formal institutions need to fit the cultural psychology of the population in question.” But, how often is this kept in mind? Public policy institutions and institutions of governance copied from or imported from the West may not function well in kinship-based societies, and may even cause harm. For example, in communities with a centrality of relational ties and where social and family connections matter, building law and government around individual rights isn't common sense, as Henrich notes towards the end of the book.

The most important point that Henrich makes is this: superimposing the impersonal institutions of politics, economics, and society – forms that developed in Europe – on kinship-based societies means that the web of social relationships that bound and protected people gave way to urbanisation, social safety nets, and individualistic notions of success. People in such societies faced a loss of meaning they derived from being a part of a broad network of relationships.

The possibility Henrich describes is in evidence in many societies, including India, that tried to copy western models because their elites became enamoured of the European WEIRD society and the primacy

of the individual over the group that it entailed. This poses a dilemma for non-WEIRD societies: their economic arrangements and sizes necessitate emulating and copying the WEIRD model of impersonal trust, fairness, equality before law, and the institutions of governance that they entail. At the same time, these are alien to their social models, that date far further back in time.

Indeed, even the inhabitants of the WEIRD societies are not exempt from the loss of meaning that WEIRD values and social arrangement eventually generate. Has the WEIRD psychology, therefore, driven all of humanity into an existential cul-de-sac?

### **Marriage and Family Program prepared the West for technology-led capitalism**

The Great Plague destroyed lives and raised the relative price of labour. Hence, technology and scale-based economic arrangements became necessary (Temin, 2014). Large-scale production requires that organisations transcend relationships and bank on large-group trust. The Church's MFP had already prepared the ground for large-group formations.

Some contend that the rise of the West and the relative decline of the East was not due to these elements; rather, it was – for instance – that the British destroyed the entrepreneurial class in India. As a friend once expressed to this author: it was the British who brought the concept of the public sector into India, in that the East India Company was backed up by the armed powers of the British empire, making it a public sector enterprise that destroyed India's entrepreneurial class.

While there is something to this counterargument, one does not have to deal in binaries. In other words, the validity of this explanation need not preclude the relevance of other arguments, including the success of the MFP in setting the stage for scale-based industrialisation and capitalism in the West. Further, the latter also explains the prosperity of non-colonising Western powers too (such as Nordic and Canadian).

India's lack of scale and persistent fragmentation in several sectors of the economy can, in this author's view, be traced to the fact that it was (and is still, to a large extent) a kinship-based society. How does one get over this constraint? It may not be easy. When we evaluate how and why India's evolution into a modern WEIRD state is taking longer, perhaps, than some of us would like, it can be traced to this:

*The fact that people couldn't simply wipe away their ancient kin-based institutions when building these new non-relational or impersonal institutions creates what researchers call a strong path-dependence.*

That said, the wheels of capitalism might have completed one large and long circle, and the gap may not be as large as it appeared to be even a decade or two ago. To be sure, India needs many of its micro and small enterprises to reach medium scale; on the other hand, very large enterprises may not be as much a desired priority, given the issues they give rise to, such as market concentration, usurpation of state power, and the adverse effects on the balance between capital and labour, etc. For individuals, the scale-based model of capitalism has robbed meaning in their lives as seen in the rise of 'bullshit' jobs (Graeber, 2018)

### **The twilight of WEIRD societies**

For nearly three centuries, it appeared that the Church's MFP had helped the West advance economically; however, it might have also paved the way for atomised societies and ills of individualism, on the one, hand and the concentration of too much power in the hands of businesses on the other. Nor



have their WEIRD values made these societies resilient to or exempt from the bane of corruption and capture, both by external and internal interests.

WEIRD societies, featuring impersonal trust and kindness to strangers and cooperative outcomes, did not lend themselves to the self-interest and competition-driven ‘rational’ behaviour described in economics textbooks. Yet, WEIRD societies embraced such an economic philosophy (dating back at least to the 1970s) resulting in the extreme political and social polarisation, market concentration, wealth inequality, and economies increasingly resembling Ponzi schemes. ‘Original’ Protestant values, such as delayed gratification, morality, and impersonal fairness, have waned and almost vanished in WEIRD societies.

Henrich offers a post-hoc explanation for the ability of WEIRD people to absorb ideas from other non-WEIRD societies – because they were more open to new ideas than societies that were hierarchical, respectful of elders and were inclined to conformity. Contrast this claim with the fact that other WEIRD qualities went missing towards non-WEIRD societies. For all the supposed impersonal kindness and fairness, WEIRD European societies did not hesitate to pursue wars and wreak destruction on non-WEIRD societies. Non-WEIRD societies were won over, perhaps, as much by war and deceit as by the demonstrated superiority of WEIRD norms, ideas, institutions, and economic prosperity.

Further, the absence of external competition has made the WEIRD society turn on itself and is causing fragmentation. So, the culturally homogeneous WEIRD society, united in a socio-religious identity, may be breaking up into clans and groups. So, before non-WEIRD societies could shed their identity-based politics, WEIRD societies have returned to their roots – identity-based clashes.

Reading the book leaves us with questions to ponder. What would happen to WEIRD societies? Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Democratic societies are chipping away, in varying degrees, at every single letter of the WEIRD. With some, the rot has gone far and with some pillars, the destruction has begun. What would that leave them with? What or who will take their place in the world?

In the end, there is no doubt that WEIRD societies featuring monogamy, religion and impersonal trust enabled scale-based capitalism. But, WEIRD societies could not stop the development of ‘winner take all’ attitudes in economics and commerce. Maybe, that is the inevitable last act of scale- and technology-based capitalism. The denouement could well be the end of the WEIRD societies as we know them.

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## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> See Nageswaran 2018 (Capitalism's triple whammy for the working class - <https://bit.ly/3x7mzlj>) and 2019 (Why socialism is gaining traction among millennials - <https://bit.ly/3kTeGRZ>)