

LATIN AMERICA

Do you have prosperity in your genes?

Opinion
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Here's an idea that's bound to raise hackles. It was launched by professor Gregory Clark of the University of California at Davis, a notable economics historian, in a book titled *A Farewell to Alms*.

The theory is bold. The values that enable development and prosperity are not only transmitted culturally but may also have a genetic component. That's what Clark deduces from his study of English testaments written between the 12th and 18th centuries.

The most prosperous families in the Middle Ages -- those that worked hardest, saved, invested and built a patrimony -- had more children than the families of poor people and were able to take better care of them. Those children survived in greater numbers, so the English in the 18th century came from those frugal and laborious ancestors and carried in their genetic code some sort of successful behavior that eventually led to the launching of the Industrial Revolution in England.

The news coincides with another report, very interesting and somewhat contradictory. The Fletcher School at Tufts University, one of the finest U.S. institutions, has just inaugurated the Cultural Change Institute, a think tank devoted to promoting the values of prosperity and development in societies that are totally or partially backward.

The project, launched by the indefatigable essayist and thinker Larry Harrison (later joined by Samuel Huntington), first broached the topic with a major debate at Harvard, resumed it two years later at Tufts and came up with a couple of books that compile the lectures and speeches of the participants: *Culture Matters* and *The Central Liberal Truth*.

The record of those two events contains the seed of the recently created institute.

I know well the nature of this effort, because I participated and collaborated in both events. The theory, as proposed by German sociologist Max Weber in 1905, is that a growing prosperity and political stability are the consequence of the values held by a society.

Weber attributed the development of northern Europe to the prevailing Protestantism; later, other notable thinkers, almost all of them in the United States, refined his theory.

Gary Becker developed the idea of a "human capital," based essentially on education, as a source of collective success. Robert Putnam, following the footsteps of Edward Banfield,

coined the expression "social capital" to describe the mutual confidence and respect for the law that enrich collective coexistence.

Douglass North demonstrated the role of institutional design and the value of property rights in successful nations. Milton Friedman devoted much of his life to demonstrating that market forces must be allowed to operate freely in order for the people to prosper.

Everyone said something different, but they all agreed on one point: Development and wealth, or underdevelopment and poverty, are "a state of mind," as the title of a book by Harrison expresses. Fundamentally, it is the people's beliefs, values and attitudes that determine if a country will be as wealthy as Switzerland, as poor as Honduras or as chaotic as Hugo Chávez's Venezuela.

Some of the academics associated with the Cultural Change Institute are putting these theories to the test right now. Some Arab emirates have hired them to try to modify Islamic values, which are an obstacle to progress and modernity.

In Costa Rica, Harvard psychologist Jerome Kagan and psychiatrist Luis Diego Herrera have created a method to train women to teach their children in the right direction and forge successful personalities.

Fernando Reimers, a brilliant Venezuelan educator, also associated with Harvard, has been hired by Mexico to develop a pilot method of education that will foster democratic values in a country afflicted by an authoritarian mentality and a paternalistic tradition.

In the end, the theory was that governments and private institutions can educate people to modify their social mentality and assume the behavior of the world's leading nations. But just as we were celebrating the good news, along comes professor Clark and tells us that wealth is somehow interwoven in the genetic code of human beings.

That, of course, is related to the social Darwinism propounded by Herbert Spencer in the late 19th century. I don't believe in that, but we must examine everything. The debate is getting interesting.