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A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CULTURE AND TRADE

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Abstract

Culture is often defined as the programming of the mind, a personal choice, a collective mindset or a collection of patterns for behaviour. Through this study we highlighted some of the contributions made by Montesquieu, Smith and Weber on two main aspects of culture: norms and morality, focusing on defining these terms in relation to trade and conflicts. Our approach embodies historical analysis as well as descriptive analysis of culture. The rationale for the selection of our studies is that of looking at culture through some different lenses: starting from the understanding of norms, ethics and morality (last two deriving mainly from religious views), reporting it to trade which constitutes the main source of development for many societies, and conflicts representing the main source of regress for many societies.

Keywords: culture, international trade, collective mindset, individualism

Introduction

The most appealing idea outlined on the concept of national culture comes from philosophy, as an arc in time, and defines culture as *a connection of the old world to the new world*, that is,

what remains in the collective memory of a society that has preserved traditions, norms and old habits - passing them on, as far as possible, to subsequent generations. During this paper, we will briefly relate to the material part of national culture, and we will insist on identifying the norms, values, traditions, customs and attitudes manifested by different societies according to the works of Adam Smith, Montesquieu and Max Weber.

In analyzing the culture of a particular group or organization, it is desirable to distinguish between three fundamental levels at which culture manifests itself: (a) artifacts, objects that are observable, (b) values, and (c) behavioral norms. In analyzing the causes for which members of a group or society behave in the way they do, explanations are often sought based on the values that govern their behavior. In order to truly understand a culture and to establish as accurately as possible the group's values and behaviors, it is imperative to deepen the behavioral norms that underlie that culture [6], which are usually unconscious but which actually determines how the group members perceive, think and feel. Such norms appear as learned answers that also originate in adopted values. Hofstede points out a very important aspect, namely that, although certain aspects of culture are physically visible, their meaning is invisible: “their cultural significance consists precisely and only in the way in which these practices are interpreted by members of a certain group” [1].

Throughout this paper, we will focus on the last two fundamental levels mentioned above, namely, values and behavioral norms studied by various authors even before the term culture began to be used. The influence of culture in the field of trade relations, in explaining the imports and exports of different companies, is mainly pointed out.

The article is structured on three parts, analyzing the views presented by Adam Smith, Montesquieu and Max Weber on the various components of culture: the origin of norms, values, customs, the influence of religion and the natural environment. Following, conclusions, main limitations and study directions are presented.

1. The vision of Adam Smith

Adam Smith was and remains one of the most remarkable figures on the international scene whose interest was to decipher human nature and the laws that govern it. *The theory of moral sentiments* [5], his first major work, presents the motivating factors of people in undertaking daily activities: the feeling of goodwill in relation to others and self-love.

In 1776, the first volume of the *Wealth of Nations* [4] was published, the success of which was due to both the accessibility of reading and the ideas expressed, these being easily understood by a fairly wide audience. Throughout the volume we discover the whole philosophy of the author: the belief in the power of social relations of solidarity, in the freedom of individuals to build a stable, peaceful and prosperous society; however, we also see that he admits that our own interest, and not our concern for others, is the basis for prosperity. He was strongly influenced by the ideas expressed by Bernard Mandeville in *The Fable of the Bees*, among which “private vices lead to public benefits”. Thus, the following lines remained deeply imprinted: “We do not expect to receive the dishes for dinner by the goodwill of the butcher, the brewer or the baker, but due to the fact that they pursue their own interests. We do not address their humanity, but their self-love - and we never tell them about our needs, but about their benefits” [4]. We are led by the "invisible hand" on all paths and in all the decisions we make.

In the author's opinion, the wealth of a nation follows a natural path, starting from the development of agriculture, to manufacturing, and finally, to foreign trade. Although it condemns England's leadership for wasting national resources in the expansion process that has often proved unsuccessful, it notes the benefits of expanding the national market that would lead to increased technological innovation and, at the same time, increased national wealth.

Book IV of the *Wealth of Nations* [4] distinguishes the ideas expressed on the role of government and how it can be exercised, being considered since ancient times, "unnatural". According to Smith, freedom, justice and prosperity could best be served when the government did not interfere. In his view, governance should be limited to three main areas: protecting citizens from violence and invasion, protecting citizens from the injustices of any other member of society and establishing a judicial system, and conducting public works or services that could not be undertaken by individuals and that could benefit the whole society. Adam Smith is one of the first and greatest authors to show that economics can only be understood in terms of human needs, desires and motivations to improve the condition and social position.

In an attempt to identify the causes of the wealth of nations, Smith appeals to *national characteristics* and notes that a number of virtues are promoted through trade, including work, honesty, punctuality, trust, and prosperity. Capitalism, from the beginning, has been based on trust, both from customers and business partners. Reputation has been and remains the main

reason for prosperity. Through the ideas expressed, Smith encourages savings by restraint, noting that “restraint, not diligence, is the immediate cause of capital growth” [4]. In his view, the principles underlying enrichment are the same for people and for nations: “As for progress toward wealth, things are the same for hardworking nations and for working people” [4].

Trade, conducted naturally, without any coercive force, is always beneficial to all parties involved, even if not to the same extent. It is found that

“Every nation has become accustomed to look with envy on the prosperity of all the other nations with which it trades, and to see their gains as its loss. Trade, which should naturally be a close bond of friendship for nations as well as for individuals, has become the most fertile source of discord and animosity” [4].

Trade, in general, leads to an increase in the amount of productive work in a society.

“... the owners of the big capitals involved in trade are necessarily the leaders of labor in any country, and their example has a greater influence on the manners of those who work than the example of any other class of people. If the person who hired him shows consideration and temperance, it is likely that the worker will be the same; but, if the employer is wasteful and disorderly, the worker, who will carry out his work according to the patterns prescribed by his master, will also carry out his life according to the example which he gives him” [4].

This is an example provided by Smith on how a country's capital can grow. Comparing the trade habits of Cadiz and Lisbon with those of Amsterdam, he notes the different way in which the conduct and character of profit-making traders are affected; while the merchants of Amsterdam are considered to be restrained and careful, those of Lisbon, even those of London, are more wasteful.

Regarding the role of foreign trade, we can notice the striking difference between today's China and China described by Adam Smith in the *Wealth of Nations*. While European countries directed their surplus production to the colonies, China, with a huge territory and a fairly large population, we could even say the size of Europe, relied for a long time on the domestic market, which was able to effectively absorb production. If more than two centuries ago, China did not have the slightest inclination to export, today it is the largest exporter in the world, annually exporting goods worth over \$ 2.440 billion. It would seem that China's wealth followed a natural path, as stated by Adam Smith; it started from the development of agriculture, to the investment of the capital accumulated in manufactures, and then to foreign trade.

Trade and manufacturing can rarely flourish in a state that does not enjoy regular administration of justice, where people do not have a sense of security about property, where trust in contracts is not supported by law, and where state authority it is not used regularly to impose the payment of debts on all those able to pay. In short, trade and manufactures can seldom flourish in any state in which there is no degree of confidence in the system of justice of that government [4]. It is stated that “Promoting the petty interests of a small class of people in one country is detrimental to the interests of all classes of people in that country, but also of the people of all other countries” [4]. Smith opposes the mercantilist view that trade necessarily meant making a profit for the other country. He notes the benefits that the exchange brings to all partners involved in a transaction, from financial gains to new ideas and methods to make trade more efficient.

2. The theory of nature or geography

In *On the Spirit of the Laws* [2], the work that consecrated Montesquieu, we see how the author uses the simplification of the concept of law in order to adapt it to the social phenomena of the time; laws are presented as necessary relations that resort to the nature of things. Perhaps its greatest merit is to impose a new perspective on the fundamental laws of social development seen as “laws of nature, capable of changing people and even the whole of history, just as the laws of physics had the power to do it” [2].

In an attempt to identify the causes of the connection between peoples characteristics and the specifics of their society, Montesquieu makes reference to the natural factor. Thus, in his eyes, climatic conditions are a basic element in the development of individuals. It tells us that southern peoples would be more apathetic, and thus less enterprising and conflicting than peoples further north in a colder climate. This so-called *climate theory* has even older origins, among its predecessors being Jean Bodin, Chardin, Fontenelle or Fenelon. In the *Essay on the causes that can affect the mind and character in humans*, [2] the author develops the thesis of the influence of the environment on man, proving a sense of methodology too rarely encountered until him in this field of human science, the environment being understood by him as a moral factor, it has its origin in education or in the practice of social (and professional) life but also as an element in connection with the conditions of the physical geography of the place, soil and climate, especially the latter.

Montesquieu develops the idea of the influence of the environment on the character of people, the environment being seen as a moral factor having its origin in education and in the way of practicing social life, along with specific conditions of local geography, soil and climate. It can be seen that Marxist philosophy itself recognizes the influence of the climate factor in the development of society. However, changes in society take place much faster than changes in the geographical environment and changes in the way goods are produced are in fact decisive. Through this theory, Montesquieu knowingly opposes his times, tries to explain the development of societies starting from natural causes and resorts to explaining the characteristics of a people by appealing to a series of objective factors, likely to undermine the role of the church and even the monarchy.

Anticipating the objections of the classics of Marxism, Montesquieu states:

“That warrior spirit that the climate gave in antiquity to the people of Rome, has its edges today due to some moral causes, in the pleasure it feels seeing the fights that take place in theaters; and that climate which once made the people of Athens so turbulent has no other purpose than to portray us as perhaps less stupid slaves. Nature is always in action; but wear and tear overwhelms her” [2].

Geographical causes are limited by moral causes, customs and usages. Thus, the theory of climate or the theory of geography as it is also called, is complemented by the existence of new elements, considered to be also of a natural order, and which are manifested by natural dispositions of a psychic nature. The latter elements are closest to the meaning of the culture we set out to address. In another passage it is shown that “People are governed by several things: climate, religion, laws, maxims of government, parables of the past, morals, manners: as a result of all this a general spirit is formed” [2]. This "general spirit" is in fact national culture in our view. It is also shown that the extent to which one of these causes acts on a people leads to a weakening of the influence of the other causes; “primitive peoples are dominated by physical causes, namely soil and climate; manners guide the Chinese; the laws tyrannize the Japanese; and the maxims of government and old morals were predominant in Rome” [2]. Morals differ from manners in that the former refer to inner behavior, and the latter to external behavior.

Montesquieu was no less concerned with the different characters of the people, characters that he also attributes to climatic conditions. He states that people have more vigor in cold lands, more courage, a better knowledge of their superiority, more confidence and sincerity, and less suspicion and cunning [2]. Also, a delimitation is made according to the degree of sensitivity

of people, those located in cold countries, having a low sensitivity to pleasures. We find, therefore, that in the Nordic countries the peoples have few vices, and abound in virtue and sincerity; the southern countries are dominated by “transient passions”, totally opposite to the predominant values in the northern countries; and in temperate countries, the behavior is that of “unstable” peoples, both in vices and in virtue. In *The cause of the immutability of religion, morals, customs, and laws in East countries* is showed:

“If you combine this tenderness of the organs — which makes the peoples of the East have the strongest impressions in the world — naturally that of the body), which makes this mind incapable of any activity, of any effort, of any strain, you will understand that the soul which has once tried certain impressions can no longer change them. This is the reason why laws, morals, and customs, even those that seem indifferent, such as the way they dress, are in the East today as they were a thousand years ago” [2].

In some contradiction with this last idea is the fact that the sterility of the lands would make people hardworking, brave and resistant to work because they have to find other sources of food.

Montesquieu identifies features specific of the peoples he studies; notes the existence of proud peoples, and others led by vanity. The latter is seen as a positive feature:

“To realize this it is enough to think, on the one hand, of the innumerable good things that flow from vanity: they are due to luxury, diligence, crafts, fashion, politeness, taste; and, on the other hand, to the endless evils that arise from the pride of certain peoples: laziness, poverty, indifference to everything, the destruction of the peoples whom chance has caused to fall into their hands, and even their own destruction. Laziness is the effect of pride; the effort is a consequence of vanity: the Spanish's pride will urge him not to work; the Frenchman's vanity will encourage him to learn to work better than others” [2].

Virtue, in Montesquieu's view, is the driving force behind democratic society, a fact attested throughout history, even by Greek political thinkers. Regarding the change of times and the way society perceives it in its times, he states that:

“... when this virtue disappears, ambition is incubated in the hearts that can try it, and greed takes over all hearts. The object of desires changes; what was loved is no longer loved; before men were free to obey the laws, now they want to be free against the laws, every citizen is like a slave running away from his master's house; what was the norm is now called harsh; what was the order is now called coercion; what was noticeable is now called fear.

Temperance, not the thirst for wealth, passes as avarice. Once upon a time, the wealth of individuals made up the public treasury; but now the public treasury becomes the patrimony of individuals. The republic is a prey, and its strength consists only in the power of a few citizens and in the deception of all” [2].

We see, therefore, that a common characteristic is distinguished, both in Montesquieu's thinking and in that of Adam Smith's, *temperance*, or *moderation*. Also, we cannot overlook the character traits referred to in Montesquieu's work, traits that, as shown, are transferred from the leaders of a state to the citizens: “Ambition combined with laziness, baseness associated with pride, desire to jobless enrichment, the force of truth, flattery, betrayal, perfidy, disregard for all covenants, contempt for civic duties, fear of the prince's virtue, hope in his weaknesses, and, above all, the continual ridicule of virtue” [2]. On the same page it is also shown that, within the same system, honour can take the place of virtue; in the belief that everyone follows their own interest, the action tends towards the common good because it is stated that “we must put in virtue a certain nobility; in morals, a certain frankness; and in manners, a certain politeness” [2].

Referring to foreign trade, Montesquieu considers it to be the strongest factor in establishing interdependencies between peoples and in establishing the means of communication between them. It goes even further in considering trade a means of “twinning people around ideas of well-being and peaceful coexistence” [2]. A distinction is made between economic trade and luxury trade, emphasizing that “laws have a very close connection with the way different peoples procure their livelihoods” [2]. Laws must find a correspondent in the nature and principles of the state, and at the same time be appropriate to the physical conditions (climate, soil quality, positioning, extent) and lifestyle (distinguishing between ploughmen, hunters and shepherds); it must correspond to the religion, inclinations and morals of the population. Referring to Plato's Republic, it is shown that the Greeks imposed the separation of foreigners in order to preserve good morals by entrusting trade to the state, and the ancient peoples, finding that their morals were damaged by contact with barbarians, appointed a governor to deal with commercial operations.

In eighteenth-century China, the number of people was growing so fast that the crops of the land were barely enough to feed the people. In this context, values such as *diligence* and *economy* are promoted; people were urged to trade in the production of necessary things. From ancient times the idea was emphasized that “if there were a man who would not plow or a woman who would not plow, then in the empire someone would suffer from cold or hunger”

[2]. It is also said that an emperor who was brought precious stones discovered in a mine, would have ordered it to be closed, considering that such work could neither feed nor clothe the people. In the successions of all dynasties in Chinese history we see how virtue, prudence, and vigilance make it possible to maintain the dynasty, and how the corruption, luxury, and laziness that gradually take over lead to their downfall. It is said of the character of the Chinese that, owing to the nature of the climate and the soil, they would have such a great thirst for profit that no people in Europe who trade with them can trust them; the laws did not seek to curb this greed, moreover, only acts of violence were forbidden, even encouraging cunning. Instead, manners are unshakable, they are taught in schools and rooted in moral principles. Another characteristic of China is the fusion of religion, laws, morals and manners, thus creating the morality of the society that would be the basis of the rituals that the common man spent all his youth teaching, and all his life practicing them [2].

In the second volume of *On the Spirit of the Laws*, Montesquieu dedicates two books to the analysis and study of trade seen from the nature's point of view, but also of the relations that are established between law and trade from a historical perspective. At the same time, the contributions to the theoretical substantiation of the capitalist production model are noted, and being considered one of the pillars of the quantitative theory of money. Therefore, books XX, XXI and XXII constitute the economic part of *On the Spirit of the Laws*, which make the author such an influential character.

Ever since the introduction of the essay *On Trade*, emphasis has been placed on the two-way relationship between morals and trade: "... it is almost a general rule that wherever there are gentle morals, there is trade; and that wherever there is trade, there are gentle manners" [3]. These morals are influenced through trade by those of other peoples and depending on their features, will be positively influenced or not. As we have shown, in Plato's Republic trade was despised because it altered "clean" morals by infiltrating corruption into the strata of society as a result of interaction with barbarian peoples. The spirit of trade is based on the relationship of dependence that is created between two states when they are able to meet each other's needs. We also imagine that these needs will never be of the same nature and of the same measure, which is why the balance will necessarily tilt in favor of one or the other. Just as the natural effect of trade is to call for peace, so too can it call for conflict, and history gives us examples of both.

Regarding England's attitude towards trade, the author of the treatise *On the Spirit of the Laws* expresses the envy for the trade made by other countries in her own court, showing that

England was too little bound by treaties depending only on its own laws. England's success would be due to a special ingenuity in which it used religion, trade and freedom. Reference is made to the protectionist policy of England which prohibited the export of its wool, it required that coal be transported to the capital by sea and it did not allowed the export of horses if they were not sterilized. Freedom of trade was restricted by formalities, by what we call bureaucracy, an issue that the British solved very easily by managing customs.

Trade is based on the need to satisfy a need that arises in the absence of endowing a nation with its own means of satisfying that need. Summarizing the example of Europe, we see that Montesquieu insists on the differences of climate between north and south from which he deduces differences of psychic structure with consequences of a political nature: freedom or slavery; it refers to the balance that is achieved between the nature of the soil and the psychic nature.

3. The spirit of capitalism and the impact of religious reforms on the intensification of production

On more than 100 years since his death, Max Weber is still present on the stage of ideas precisely through the topicality of the analyzes that were his main object of study, but also from the tireless reconsideration of the methodological and epistemological load that his entire work benefits from. Perhaps resounding is the position he adopted, one in total contradiction with the theory and ideology of Karl Marx.

Controversies over his masterpiece, *The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism* [7], have not ceased to this day, trying new and new approaches to the relationship between religion and economic development through capitalism as a way of economic organization seen as the only rational solution to modern development. The topicality of the analysis outlined by Weber finds its manifestation in the option of development models, of which capitalism is seen if not as the only one, at least as one of the safest models.

We also know that economic development, in tandem with social development, is a consequence of the development of productive forces (technical innovation, specialization of labor, and therefore production) which has contributed to streamlining production while developing institutions; but, in Weber's view, there must be something else to explain why in some societies this logical succession has led to progress in the true sense of the word, and not in others. The explanation he found is related to the correlation between economic behavior

and religious ethics, or in other words, the intrinsic ethical content of economic behavior [7]. Thus, for modern man, work is not only a source of personal satisfaction, but bears the sign of virtue, one springing from religious practice.

In the way of obtaining profit, two types of behaviors are identified: the traditional one, and the rational one. Thus, the traditional entrepreneur seeks to earn through less ethical activities such as usury and the movement of money, the financing of revolutions, colonial exploitation and monopolistic trade with the colonies, or the use of enslaved labor; in contrast to this behavior, the rational one, dominant in the capitalist model, is highlighted. Capitalism, as a new type of economic organization, supports on rationality, is based on enterprises whose investments seek continuity, is based on a stable legal framework and also on the division of labor and planning of the factors of production, being related to market requirements [7]. At the individual level, it is found that this model, capitalism, is not specific to a particular geographical area, and no invention attributed exclusively to the modern era. Entrepreneurs who systematically run their businesses, who had a modest consumption and who reinvested their savings also existed in pre-modern times, but, being isolated cases, they could not form a model worth following.

For a generalization of the capitalist model, Weber tells us, it was necessary to have something common to all, to be unequivocally accepted, a factor identified by him in the ethics of Protestantism [7]. Starting from the idea of incompatibility between the intensification of economic and commercial activities, on the one hand, and the intensification of religious activities as a result of the Reformation, on the other hand, which was the rule in the sixteenth century, it is found that societies in which Protestantism replaced the old religious order are an exception to this rule. To understand the causes, Weber analyzed the dominant theological doctrines, leading to the conclusion that there is a link between behavioral patterns, secular ethics, and the religious doctrines of Protestantism; of the existence in Protestant doctrines of some encouragements of economic behavior [7]. This economic behavior is based on an ascetic life, a command of Protestant ethics strengthened by the vision of the doctrine of predestination that encouraged active life and work, the latter being seen as the only defense against temptations and doubts about the idea of being chosen by God.

Closely related are the ideas about the usefulness of work, which differ according to the results obtained, good results representing signs of divine grace and profit and well-being, if result from fulfilling obligations, are appreciated and even seen as gifts of God; in this sense,

the acquisition of gains, insofar as an effort has been made for it, appears as an obligation and a duty for the entrepreneur. Work is gradually becoming the only means of ensuring certainty about God's grace, which is visibly reflected in the behavior of Protestant entrepreneurs, to which are added the other exhortations: simplicity, piety, and self-control [7]. As a consequence of this religious movement that has grown since the sixteenth century was the development of material culture, and most importantly, meaning to everyday life was attributed more and more to rationalism. However, in the paper we refer to, the author states that only certain aspects of modern culture can be considered to be determined by religious forces, and Protestant ethics is only one of the phenomena that led to the widespread use of rationalism in everyday life, between Protestantism and capitalism been created an incidental link and by no means an absolute causal dependence.

Broadly speaking, the theory developed by Weber retains its significance in the historical and geographical framework used and any attempt to generalize is doomed to failure precisely because only certain aspects of modern culture can be attributed to religious teachings and practices. As for the relationship between Protestantism and capitalism, by the simple fact that no other religious system has succeeded in influencing the economic side close to the way discussed, it can be noted that it has contributed to some extent to the economic progress of the societies where it first developed.

However, as shown in the introduction to Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism,

“Entrepreneurship, the desire to earn, to earn money, to earn as much money as possible have nothing to do with capitalism. This desire has existed and exists in waiters, doctors, bartenders, artists, cocote, sales officials, soldiers, robbers, crusaders, roulette players, beggars. We could say that it is present in "all sorts and conditions of men", in all epochs, in all countries of the world, everywhere where for this desire there was and there is, in one way or another, the objective possibility” [7].

To strengthen this argument, Weber goes on to explain to the reader precisely what modern capitalism does not represent. Capitalism can be, it is true, identical with the restraint or at least with a rational tempering of this irrational drive. “Capitalism is indeed identical with the aspiration for profit, through a continuous, rational capitalist activity, for an ever-renewed gain: for profitability” [7], and a “capitalist” economic act must first be one which is based on the expectation of a gain by using the chances of exchange.

Weber's thesis is based on the moral discipline and work ethic (intense motivation to work hard) promoted by Protestantism, which, he remarks, by the end of the nineteenth century come to detach from the motivating factors related to beliefs in entities with supernatural powers, such as salvation and damnation. To these are added technological and economic progress, as a result of the industrial revolution, which lead to a decline in faith and religious manifestation.

Conclusions

The history of trade relations after the Second World War was one marked by internal, external, civil, social, economic, financial conflicts, of all kinds. This attitude has persisted for a long time and will persist precisely because of the conflicting human nature in accordance with the evolutionary theory. The end of World War II meant for humanity the beginning of a new line of thinking, a change of attitude on the needs of states, needs that seemed to be able to be met in some other ways too. In this context, we set out to exemplify through national culture, as a distorting factor of international relations, and specifically of trade relations.

Often, culture or religion are concepts considered to be abstract and as a result are omitted from the study of international relations. The theory of international relations ignores religion even more profoundly than political science and sociology. This is due to the fact that, unlike these two disciplines, international relations have no theory to explain why religion is not important, it is simply taken for granted that it is not.

As a major component of culture, religion is also challenged or replaced in other areas of life. Science offers an understanding of the physical universe. The media and the entertainment industry influence people's moral attitudes and emotional lives. Psychology largely defines how emotional health can be measured and achieved. In a way, it also provides an answer to the question of why evil exists, by redefining evil as a result of psychological pathologies that can be understood and controlled through therapy, medical treatments and, if necessary, incarceration. However, some existential problems, such as the question of what happens to us after we die, still remain in the realm of religion or another irrational set of beliefs, at least for those who are unwilling to accept that life ends with death.

The theory of nature developed by Montesquieu can hardly be supported today, but Smith's theory is as valid today as it was more than 200 years ago. Regarding Weber's thesis, no other

sociologist has been able to match his contribution on the understanding of the influences of religion on economic development.

Among the limitations of this paper we can note the limited number of papers studied or the insufficient exemplification of the theories presented. Other studies could focus on more specific aspects of the influence of culture on international trade or even on case studies on subcultures.

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