

Culture in a Cage

Written by Mike Reid for FEE.org.

Recently, three children from a little-known forest tribe in India approached a nearby Indian village and asked to join their school. The teachers, however, were forbidden by law from admitting the kids.

This is because the Indian government prohibits regular folk from interacting with those children, or any members of the Jarawa tribe of the Andaman Islands. The state regards those people as a “unique pristine society” who are “not physically, socially, and culturally prepared” to deal with the modern world.

Therefore, Jarawa children who might like to learn writing or mathematics must be sent back into their designated area of the jungle—for their own good.

This Indian policy represents one side of a two-headed cultural catastrophe now facing all humanity.

The problem in both cases is the government attempt to control our cultures—our children, our educations, our minds.

Around 40,000 years ago, humans developed what we might call full-blown “culture”—a system of learned behaviors covering all aspects of life. They had art, religion, language, and rapid technological change. All over the world, our ancestors invented specialized artifacts for every environment: weapons, boats, needles, blades, hammers, awls, drills, and hooks.

For all the millennia since, human beings in every society have been in a constant state of cultural flux. We are perpetually tinkering with our own inherited tools and techniques, and we are forever trying out new ideas from our neighbors.

The vast body of human knowledge we have thus built up is not the creation of any all-powerful overseer. Indeed, Friedrich Hayek demonstrated that the most important of our social inventions, like language and money, cannot be the results of any “human design” at all. Instead, “cultural evolution” is “a process in which the individual plays a part that he can never fully understand.”

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