

The Changes in Culture

I don't believe in the power of culture as much as most people. I tend to rank it: economics, technology, and then culture in a distant third. I believe the vast majority of the changes in culture are a response to economics and technology.

While I believe that culture is highly responsive to economics and technology, I believe it isn't nearly as responsive to "movements," and this makes it so I don't believe it is very changeable. I think we recognize "renegades" because they are the ones who often seem to trigger the changes in society. However, I think this is only the visible representation of something deeper.

It took a radical change in the economy and radical economic growth to make women a more equivalent economic resource (within the market.) This shift happened gradually from the mid 19th century to today. This shift in economic power naturally meant that social and political customs would accommodate change. We can point to renegades, "movements," political actions that changed things to a degree, but this is usually just a surface analysis that misses the big picture.

We see the same thing with almost every shift in mankind. Something shifts in technology or in human incentives (economy) to radically shift the balances that previously existed. Then some people, or institutions tilt the scale more towards a new balance and we credit those people and institutions more than the incentives that are really due the credit. In fact, most of these movements were inevitable.

Of course, I could take this analysis way too far. Political changes and individual people have had radical effects over the economic, and migratory effects over a region and this has radically shifted the incentives and culture. I just tend to think people tend to overweigh this phenomenon.

In conclusion ... I like a lot of Thaddeus Russell's analysis. I believe he is right that people who run against tradition trigger many of the changes that occur. However, in the US, entrepreneurship and invention advanced the world in many realms. It has always been visionaries and people who ran against trends that did this. It would be problematic to say that the people in the US are just special, or the root of it was American's being innovators at their core. The better answer is that the incentives of 19th century US harvested something incredibly unique throughout human history and this has made it so individuals could trigger amazing and interesting things. So, he is right, but I just think people often overvalue individual contributions without acknowledging the underlying trends and forces.