What colour ‘success’? Distorting value in studies of ethnic entrepreneurship

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Abstract

The study of ethnic entrepreneurship has tended to take as unproblematic what we mean by ‘success’ and ‘failure’. Hence, some groups are defined as success stories. Recently, for example, in Britain, South Asian immigrants were said to be a ‘success’: they had a ‘Jewish future’. The perennial debate both in Europe and in the United States is why Black people have been a ‘failure’ as entrepreneurs. This is even debated by Black people themselves. The present paper sets out to deconstruct notions of success and failure by probing the narrow economistic models of value on which they are based. It argues that only by understanding the organisation of mass cultural production, on the one hand, and relativeness of cultural value, on the other, can we arrive at a more subtle understanding of what motivates ethnic entrepreneurs. In the light of this, I argue, even posing the question of success and failure is false. It leads research and writing on ethnic entrepreneurs into blind alleys while creating damaging – and unfounded – invidious stereotypes of different ethnic groups.

Does culture make a difference?

The movement of migrants, traders, settlers and refugees across international and cultural frontiers (by no means a dislocation unique to the twentieth century) repeatedly raises the question of how such peoples ‘integrate’, ‘assimilate’ or ‘accommodate’ to a new social and cultural setting. The answer is often put in terms of the symbolic resources such itinerants bring to bear on their new environment, or whether ‘culture makes a difference’? Yet this apparently innocent, indeed pragmatic, question, unintentionally masks an implicit assumption that some cultures may be better,
more valuable, more successful than others in some profound moral sense.

A key aim of modern anthropology has been to reject this assumption by repeatedly demonstrating that cultural value is relative: that cultures can only be made sense of in their own terms, and that moral ideas and practices are embedded in culturally specific, historically determined relations of production and sociality. When cultures are juxtaposed, explanations about the success or failure of a particular culture risk essentialist assumptions about closure, and a universal, fetishized notion of ‘success’. Yet a stress on the fluidity, hybridity or openness of culture should not blind us to the fact that ideas about value, ‘success’ or ‘failure’ do exist in most cultures, and depend on localised notions of value (Werbner, 1997: 6).

A more limited interpretation of whether culture makes a difference is to ask whether cultures may be more or less successful in adapting to modernity. This is the familiar Weberian question. According to Weber, the Protestant ethic determined the entrepreneurial success of the Puritans who laid the foundations of modern capitalism. The value placed by the non-conformists on frugality, asceticism and saving, along with their belief that wealth was a sign of redemption, were the motor that fuelled the industrial revolution. This symbolic and cultural system, Weber argued, enabled the Puritans to deny affective, particularistic obligations, and to act purposively and rationally in the pursuit of profit and the accumulation of capital (Weber, 1930). He thus identified an ‘elective affinity’ between Puritanism as a cultural system and industrial capitalism.

The present paper considers some of the pitfalls of this Weberian hypothesis as it has come to be applied to studies of ethnic entrepreneurship. My aim is to expose false presuppositions about the universal meaning of value for moderns which underpin invidious comparisons of economic ‘success’. To disclose these, I examine a series of case studies of Jewish, South Asian, Caribbean and African American entrepreneurs in Britain and the USA. Essentialist comparisons of this type also fail, I argue, to recognise the creative, changing dimensions of ethnic economic culture, the fact it is not simply an extension of some fixed, originary symbolic system. Third, I will argue in line with the work of consumption theorists that at the very heartland of capitalism, frugality, saving and impersonal rationality may not be the magic door to capitalist success. Nor, and this is my final point, are the people who create highly esteemed collective social and cultural value in our society.
always commensurably rewarded for their talents, a fact that throws in doubt simple financial definitions of ‘modern’ success.

Failure

There is a kind of repetitive litany running through the ethnic entrepreneurship literature in line with the Weberian question. Why are some ethnic groups (Jews, Japanese, Koreans) so successful in accumulating wealth while others (such as blacks) have failed? An international version of this question, one which itself failed to anticipate the Pacific Rim economic melt-down or US boom of the late ’90s, reflected on why America was failing as an economic power (Harrison, 1992)? Whereas the failure of blacks in the ghetto was attributed by Harrison to the perpetual legacy of slavery, and the success of Asians and Jews to their upholding of Jewish and Confucian versions of the Protestant ethic – the failure of America, once the land of the Puritans, was attributed to corrupting influence of television (Harrison, 1992).

Some British researchers too have agonised as to why Indians appear to be more successful than Pakistanis or Afro-Caribbeans? Sometimes the question is put in religious terms – why are Hindus more successful than Muslims? Such invidious questions, however well intentioned, leave us to ponder what might be the intrinsic nature of Pakistanihood, or blackness, or Muslimness, which leads to failure. From here to assumptions about the essential biological, mental or cultural inferiority or blacks or Muslims the route in short. In Perlmann’s words, as cultures are ranked, there is a ‘blurring [of] the distinction between values conducive to upward mobility and “better” values’ (1988: 7).

We need to remember, however, that the people seeking cultural reasons for what they define as ‘ethnic’ failure are not consciously racists. They are genuinely puzzled by the apparent success of some ethnic groups. If Chinese or Japanese or Jews succeed everywhere, they reason, there must be some cultural causal explanation for this global phenomenon.

But even a shift in emphasis to structural causalities of success or failure is unsatisfactory, I propose. One of the implicit dangers of this line of argumentation is the assumption that success is to be measured by the degree of assimilation into the capitalist, industrial order of modernity. Success is defined in economistic terms – the most successful ethnic groups are those which statistically have the
highest incomes, own the largest firms, occupy the best jobs. The least successful are those with low incomes or with high rates of unemployment. The unit of analysis is the individual. The measure of success in a single, common yardstick of value, ultimately translatable into hard currency. Such studies take for granted that value in our society has a financial, quantitative measure. Yet this assumption, we shall see, falsifies the full complexity of our modern, Western notions of value. These, I shall argue, are rooted as much in nationalist patriotism and aesthetic romanticism as in capitalism. They thus imply a notion of success which has collective as well as individual meanings.

The privileging of quantitative measures is true even of more serious works that interrogate the relative impact of class or ‘structure’ versus ‘culture’ in determining the successful mobility of ethnic groups in the West. This is at the heart of arguments by Steinberg (1981), Waldinger (1996), Light and Rosenstein (1995) and indeed Perlmann himself (1988). In Britain, the recent Fourth Ethnic Survey of Ethnic Minorities gives a fine-grained analysis of the structural factors affecting success rates of different ethnic minorities (Modood et al, 1997). So far, however, these arguments too have relied heavily on macro-statistics of aggregated individual cases, seen as isolable units of enumeration. Each individual in such statistical samples is defined by past or current occupation, income and education as well as ethnic origin. More subtle interpretations take account of family structure (Perlmann, 1988). Nevertheless, all these analyses take for granted a definition of success and failure as the achievement of assimilation into the higher income, professional or managerial echelons of western industrial society.

Defining success

To move the argument further, we need to consider in more abstract theoretical terms what we mean by success and failure. Very generally, I propose to define success as the competitive achievement of prestige or honour, and of the symbolic goods signalling these, within a specific regime of value. Success may be collective or individual, but even individual success depends on a context of sociality which elicits, facilitates and finally recognises success as success. Big men in Mount Hagen, Papua New Guinea, depend on their wives, clansmen and partners for pigs and other goods in order to stage a successful Moka ceremonial. They depend on their competitors to

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acknowledge that success. They share with their rivals the view that large quantities of pigs and shells are, indeed, a measure of success. The glory achieved and the debts incurred by a successful Moka are simultaneously personal and male-collective, even as they obscure the crucial contribution of women to the event (A. Strathern, 1971; M. Strathern, 1988: 146–64, 255).

The example makes clear that what success is, is determined by particular regimes of value. These define the goals to be desires, the rules and context of their achievement, and the competitive tournaments of value in which their successful attainment is displayed (see Appadurai, 1986: 4, 20–1). We may say that success is always relative to the definition of value in a particular social and cultural context. A world renouncer may be judged successful by his extreme poverty and asceticism; a capitalist by his profits, turnover and shareholdings.

Seen historically, it might appear that a radical divide in the constitution of value regimes occurred with the rise of modernity and capitalism. Whereas before, value (and hence success) were culturally embedded in traditional spheres of exchange and power, capitalism, according to this view, introduced common yardsticks of exchange which made it possible to measure and convert value (and hence success) quantitatively, across and between cultural domains; to alienate goods and labour and to accumulate fluid forms of capital. The movement is often seen as one from personalised gifts to alienable commodities (Mauss, 1966). The present essay begins by tracing recent debates in anthropology on the limitations of this hypothesised transition before moving on to consider some critical evaluations of Pierre Bourdieu’s work on the production of cultural value in capitalist societies (Bourdieu, 1984, 1995). Both Bourdieu’s own work and that of his critics challenge the idea that value in the context of modernity has been universally commoditised.

Constituting value

A classic anthropological example of the way value is socially constituted is that of Kula, a gift exchange system practised in the Massim circle of islands off the coast of New Guinea. As ceremonial Kula objects circulate their ‘fame’ increases in direct relation to the succession of famous chiefs who temporarly own them (Malinowski, 1922: 510; Munn, 1986). Some of the most famous objects are known to have been circulating for more than 100 years.
In Mauss’s terms, the objects exchanged personify all their prior owners and this becomes one measure of their value (Mauss, 1966). By the same token, the successful capturing of such a valuable enhances the fame of its present owner even as it further enhances the value of the ceremonial object owned. Famous Kula valuables tend also to be especially beautiful, a factor which further increases their attraction and hence value.

At first glance it may appear that non-commoditised gift economies of this type are entirely remote from the way value is fixed in modern capitalist societies. Recent discussions in anthropology have stresses, however, that even where gift economies predominate, some goods may also be alienated as commodities through barter, for example (Thomas, 1992: 35 passim, 81). Objects typically have a ‘social biography’ – they may go through a succession of different transformations at different historical moments (Appadurai, 1986); so too commodities may be converted into gifts and vice versa (Gregory, 1982: 166–209) or be ambiguously both gifts and commodities, as in the case of the gold jewellery given as dowry to South Asian brides (Werbner, 1990a: 291, 333). In modern capitalist societies, Carrier has argued, the gift economy persists in the domestic domain, even if the objects exchanged are purchased on the open market (Carrier, 1995; see also Werbner, 1990a and 1996a). Nicholas, writing about twentieth-century Fiji, suggests that ideas about gifting may be consciously preserved in opposition to what is perceived to be a commodity economy imposed from above (1992: 197–8). Miller (1987: 12, 190–2 passim) has argued that even ordinary everyday consumption in western capitalist societies can be interpreted as a creative act of personal or group reincorporation or ‘sublation’, overcoming the alienation of the mass cultural market economy. Drawing on French structuralist traditions, Marshall Sahlins has analysed the semiotics of fashion and consumption in America (Sahlins, 1976). For Baudrillard, the efflorescence of consumption objects in late capitalism has become a play of signs, entirely remote from any use values they originally may have had (see, for example, Baudrillard, 1989).

In somewhat different ways, all these writers stress the potentially hybrid juxtaposition of value regimes, despite and alongside the global spread of capitalism. The value of objects, even mass produced objects, is, in this view, not entirely fixed by their exchange value on the open market. What such analyses also make clear is that objects may be placed ambiguously in several quite different regimes of value simultaneously. This means that the individuals or
groups that produce or manufacture such objects may be ambiguously defined as successful from one perspective, and as failures from another. Very fine musicians, for example, may be successful in the professional judgement of colleagues while failing to obtain commensurate financial rewards for their talent.

We may say that personified gifts of the kind exchanged in Kula acquire an ‘aura’ of their transactors, not unlike the aura attaching to a work of art. Walter Benjamin defines aura as ‘The authenticity of a thing . . . the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history it has experienced’ (1973: 215). The aura of an art object, for Benjamin, is its uniqueness, its originary combination of genius, tradition and ritual. I cite his views, because they also exemplify the sort of statements which uphold the modern emergence of an autonomous art sphere, a separate regime of value with its expert critics, aesthetic canons of taste, prophets and priests. The separation of this aesthetic ‘field’ from the mass popular market is identified by Pierre Bourdieu as a crucial feature of modernity. To be recognised as uniquely valuable, new works of art (including novels, dramas and music) must go through a process of consecration (Bourdieu, 1995: 120–5; see also Lash, 1993: 193) – by critics, museums and professional academies.

Both Western and Primitive works of High Culture, to be deemed successful, must have a social biography, starting from their original producer or context of production and tracing their movements through various owners until, in the case of the most distinguished objects, their final purchase by state and national museums. With each new owner the value of the object is enhanced, its ‘fame’ increases and its authentic uniqueness is further underlined. In line with this ‘artifacts’ may become ‘art’ (on this movement see Clifford, 1988, chapters 9 and 10). The owner of a consecrated object gains fame through association with it.

By contrast, the value regimes of cheap, mass produced cultural goods, which may imitate or draw upon innovations in the art field but which cater to popular tastes, are subject to the exigencies of the market rather than to autonomous canons of taste (Bourdieu, 1984, 1995: 125–31). Bourdieu posits a homology between distinction in aesthetic appreciation and class. The struggle over the value of symbolic goods is, ultimately, a class struggle waged by elites claiming exclusive cultural and economic capital and with it the right to own, recognise and impose particular aesthetic canons upon the masses.
Yet the success of a class fraction is not identical to the success of individuals within it. Indeed, both Bourdieu and Becker recognise that the struggles over value are as much internal as external to a particular field of aesthetic production. Hence, one problem with the assumption of a homology between taste and class, a problem especially pertinent to the present discussion, is that by definition, in order to exist, a cultural ‘field’ must include both successes and failures: success is a relative term and is always defined competitively. Yet success in the field of art is an elusive quality. Unsuccessful artists are often discovered posthumously. Popular art is recovered as High Art, with profits accruing to the Brahmins of taste rather than the original creative artists. Great works are demoted as banal. Actors, novelists, poets, may be recognised only within small circles of like-minded aficionados. Their products may sell intermittently and they may sink into oblivion. At the same time, seen collectively, the cultural capital produced by a particular circle of artists, musicians, novelists or actors may achieve international acclaim. Their glory may be appropriated and claimed by their city or nation and embody that nation’s cultural distinction. Success, rather than being an individual achievement, then, is often defined collectively – as the establishment and reproduction of a new value regime and its association with a particular ‘place’ or ‘community’.

The autonomy of institutionalised, expert aesthetic spheres or value which Becker, Bourdieu and Habermas (1983) recognise as a crucial feature of modernity has recently been questioned by Nestor Canclini (1995). Canclini argues that such models do not ‘help us to understand what happens when even the signs and spaces of the elites are massified and mixed with those of the popular . . . when museums receive millions of visitors and classic or vanguard literary works are sold in supermarkets, or made into videos’ (Canclini, 1995: 17). The aggressive intervention of commercial, advertising and marketing forces in the artsphere has rendered the value of works of High art ambiguous since often enough, commercial judgement fails to coincide with expert judgement (1995: 32–3); yet it is only commercial choice that can ensure for the artist public recognition and financial survival (1995: 37). Commercialisation has meant that selective works of art have now become a privileged area of capital investment; so much so that museums can no longer afford to exhibit them because of prohibitive insurance costs. This fetishization of creative works is matched by the enormous profits made by popular cultural artists and film stars. When value regimes
cut across each other notions of success and failure are necessarily rendered ambiguous.

**Collective value**

In his critical review of Bourdieu, Lash suggests that beyond invidious distinctions, competitive classifications of symbolic value are ways of constituting collective identity (Lash, 1993: 205). In consumption terms, this is expressed in new life styles. But Lash's insight raises further issues which neither he nor Bourdieu address: a cultural product may be valued for its aesthetic achievements within an autonomous art field or for the price it commands (the assumption being that these will be homologous); but it may also be valued, as I have hinted already, in being an objectification of an aesthetic genre associated with a collectivity. This collectivity could be a highly valued one such as the nation or a significant ethnic group within the nation. In Hegelian or Durkheimian terms, once 'culture' becomes an emblematic objectification of the group, it achieves a transcendent value beyond its market value. Indeed, it may not even have a clear market value. This is reflected in the fact that much High and even popular culture in Europe today is state subsidized. Novelists, artists, musicians, actors, athletes, as well theatres, orchestras, galleries, museums, sports stadiums – can rarely survive without one form or another of substantial state or local state (or, in the 1990s, state lottery) support. Such support is also increasingly being afforded to 'folk', experimental or common cultural events.

Let us take a concrete example from Britain. Ten years ago the Arts Council of Great Britain organised a travelling exhibition of carnival masque costumes from the Notting Hill Carnival, a street festival which takes place annually in London. These quite magnificent costumes of imaginary butterflies, African queens and birds of paradise are gigantic and elaborate affairs, built on wire frames and decorated with sequins. Each costume is a work of art. Each takes almost a year to make and its creation is the product of a collective effort by an expert carnival masque designer and a team of amateur tailors and other helpers. Abner Cohen, the anthropologist who studied the Notting Hill Carnival, describes the complex network of groups and committees that plan the carnival floats and dancing masque groups and make these costumes throughout the year (Cohen, 1993). They are used for one brief day of glorious display
before being dismantled and their materials reincorporated into next year’s designs.

By contrast to these unique, but highly ephemeral creations are the clothes manufactured and sold by post-War Pakistani settlers in Manchester in markets throughout England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland. These fashion clothes are manifestly cheap and poorly made. Most are based on imitations rather than original designs. They too are meant to have an ephemeral and relatively short life. They are sold in markets to teenagers, the impoverished and the unemployed who cannot afford to shop in high street stores such as C&A or Marks and Spencer.

Which is more valuable – the carnival costume or the cheap garment manufactured by Asians in Manchester? In reality, the question is a meaningless one because the two objects are not comparable. They exist within different regimes of cultural value. The carnival costume is not a commodity. In this respect, it is priceless. The garments manufactured by Pakistanis are cheap commodities manufactured in the hundreds of thousands. Value resides not in a single garment but in its thousand-fold multiple.

Anti-relativists make the mistake of comparing the incommensurable, that is, objects or practices plucked out of their context of production and exchange. Statistics often suppress or mask such incommensurables. But there is an important sense, I want to suggest, in which we might be able to compare the carnival masque costume and the Pakistani-manufactured garment: seen analytically, both are the product of collective effort by migrant settlers.

According to Scott Lash, Bourdieu’s approach can be traced to Max Weber’s sociology of religion, recast as a framework for understanding artistic and cultural products as an economic market, based on the emergence of charismatic innovators and sacralising routinisers (Lash, 1993). Scott, however, fails to see that in another sense, Bourdieu’s approach is far closer to the interpretation of capitalism suggested by Weber’s contemporary and adversary, Werner Sombart (1967): whereas Weber attributed the rise of capitalism to the rational frugality of the puritan sects, Sombart argued that modern capitalism was fuelled by the growth in demand for luxury goods in Europe during the age of imperial expansion. He also saw Jews rather than Protestants as crucially instrumental in this expansion (Sombart, 1962). Moreover, Sombart recognised the complex structure of the luxury industries, built around chains of suppliers and producers. A later study, by Howard Becker, or art ‘worlds’ (Becker, 1982), similarly shows that the production of a work of art
relies crucially on a hidden collaborative network of artisans, suppliers and distributors. Both Becker’s and Bourdieu’s studies make clear that the nature of the symbolic objects produced critically shapes the structure of the culture industries that produce them. It makes sense to argue, then, that such objects should be the starting point for an analysis of the politics of value within a cultural economy of success and failure.

The organisation of art worlds helps illuminate the study of ethnic and immigrant entrepreneurs, I propose, because such entrepreneurs tend to concentrate predominantly in the mass culture industries. Each segment, or sector, of these industries has its own unique structure, depending on the goods produced; but they share in common a tendency towards vertical disaggregation, a feature that opens up numerous spaces for undercapitalised petty entrepreneurs at different stages of the production and distribution process. Over time, as my research in Manchester has demonstrated (Werbner, 1990a and 1990b), ethnic movement into particular niches in an industry generates cumulative ethnic know-how and credit relations, and these become the basis for the formation of ethnic enclave economies. Many positions within these enclaves rely on artisan or marketing skills which do not require formal training beyond casual apprenticeships. It is from these ethnic enclave economies, I shall argue here, that certain individuals rise to fame and fortune. Such ‘successful’ individuals may thus be conceived of as the tip of an iceberg; they mask the networks of small businesses beneath them upon which their fortunes are built.

In line with the view proposed here that value is a collective achievement, the present essay regards the formation of such ethnic enclave economies, composed of networks of small businesses, as a key measure of ‘success’. Outstanding individuals rise on the back, so to speak, of these networks which are usually geographically dispersed. The essay thus rejects a common notion in the literature that defines ethnic economic enclaves as territorially concentrated clusters of businesses. Instead, ethnic enclave economies, I propose, are best grasped as networked spaces embedded in particular industries which focus around the production and distribution of particular types of objects. Part of this production or distribution may well be clustered in ‘industrial districts’, but this is only the most visible sector of a wider network of interconnected firms. ‘Success’ and ‘failure’ in such circumstances obviously have collective as well as individual meanings.
Bootstrap capitalism and immigrant pioneers

Bootstrap capitalism, capitalism which starts with little more than a bootstrap and lifts itself from the bottom upwards, is almost always a collective effort. In the case of South Asian settlers, the early beginnings were extremely modest. According to biographical narratives I collected, the first known migrants to Manchester arrived penniless shortly before the Second World War. It was a time of severe recession, and they worked as door-to-door peddlers. Ironically, it was the war that gave them their first opportunity. They were enlisted to armaments factories and during the lunch breaks they sold their female co-workers nylon stockings. The fortunes of these early pioneer traders were thus built on nylon stockings. After the war they were joined by relatives and friends from Pakistan and India. They initiated these newcomers into market trading by giving them credit and goods, while they themselves became wholesalers. They provided the newcomers with accommodation and loaned them money to buy their own houses. Many market traders also obtained credit from Jewish wholesalers who at that time dominated the clothing trade in Manchester. Jews themselves had started off as peripatetic market traders. Marks and Spencer had a penny stall on Market Street in Manchester.

Manchester had, since its foundation, been the commercial hub of a large hinterland with a consequent demand for service and retail industries – and hence also for self-employed entrepreneurs. The economic niche captured by Asian settlers was one being vacated by earlier, Jewish entrepreneurs.1

Like in the case of Jews, however, the clothing ethnic enclave economy and its expansion were built, first, on credit rather than on savings, and second, on social network links, on chains of entrepreneurs, or ‘entrepreneurial chains’ (Werbner, 1990a and 1990b). As newcomers entered into the petty manufacturing or market trading of garments, established traders expanded into wholesaling, importing or large scale manufacturing. As the clothing enclave expanded, a few people made fortunes; most people managed to survive and make a living.

For a long time Indian and Pakistani clothing traders in the city were barely visible. Market traders operate from their homes where they store their goods, and they travel widely over a large area. Traders based in Manchester had stalls in markets all over Greater Manchester, in the Lake District in Wales and Scotland. None of
the economic surveys on which statistics are based can identify these peripatetic traders. They constitute an invisible presence, part of a subterranean economy. In 1975, when I first started my research, the Asian clothing enclave economy seemed barely to exist. Ten years later, Asian traders had taken over whole tracts of urban space surrounding the city centre as the number of clothing wholesalers and manufacturers increased exponentially (see Werbner, 1990b). Today some of these wholesalers are in decline, but the markets continue to flourish.

During this time Asians continued to manufacture and sell relatively cheap clothing at very cheap prices. They occupied the bottom end of the fashion trade. Yet they sold their clothes widely, to ordinary Englishmen and women. Some Asians opened delicatessens, restaurants, jewellery or sari shops catering specifically to the needs of the ethnic community. They carved out an ethnic niche for South Asian cultural commodity products sold to local Asian settlers. But the vast majority of migrants did not operate within the restrictions of the ethnic niche. Instead, they operated within the ethnic enclave economy which manufactured and sold clothing and related goods to outsiders, beyond the ethnic group.

Once the clothing enclave was established, it created a need for a support network of new kinds of services: for accountants, solicitors and transporters; for travel agents, insurance brokers and taxi drivers; for plumbers, electricians and decorators; for fashion designers and clerical workers. Later, as Asians in Manchester moved into knitwear and bought costly computerised knitwear machinery, there was also a demand for computer programmers and technicians. As some Asians made a lot of money, they began to buy luxury goods – flashy cars, large suburban houses. Asian hotels opened to accommodate buyers in the trade. Pharmacies, newsagents, takeaways, fancy goods merchants were added. All these services built up very gradually. They constituted an economic penumbra servicing the ethnic niche and ethnic enclave economy.

Asian businesses were by no means uniformly successful. Undercapitalised and often run by inexperienced traders and manufacturers, hundreds of small businesses collapsed or went into liquidation. Asian millionaires rose and fell. But the gradual expansion of the enclave and its penumbra continued. Its viability throughout was based on extensive internal credit relations between traders; and this required a certain level of trust. Asians upheld the enclave by prioritising ethnic social networks in business as they did in leisure. The ethnic enclave economy expanded through both credit

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and a collective accumulation of experience and know-how, and this, despite the intense competition which existed between co-ethnic traders. Rivalry needed to be managed alongside trust: Asians never formed a solidary group but on the contrary, they engaged in cut-throat competition with one another (on this see also Panayiotopoulos, 1996).

**Ethnic enclave economies versus ethnic economies**

I stress the way businesses clustered around particular goods. The nature of the goods traded in, I want to argue here, is as significant in shaping the enclave as the social networks through which these goods flow. Recent discussions of ethnic entrepreneurship have questioned the utility of retaining the concept of an ethnic ‘enclave’ economy. Light, for example, in a series of articles, argues cogently that in measuring rates of ethnic employment generated by ethnic entrepreneurship, the spatial clustering of ethnic businesses is irrelevant. Far more important, he proposes, is the absolute number of ethnic employers, employees and self-employed provided with jobs by co-ethnics. This aggregation of workers and employees, scattered over a wide range of different industries, he defines as the ‘ethnic economy’. The notion is pitched against the stress on spatial conglomeration as the key feature of ethnic business success. An oft-cited example is the heterogeneous clustering of Cuban businesses in Miami’s ‘Little Havana’ (see Light et al, 1994 and 1995). The economies of scale that such ethnic enclave economies allow have been linked, according to one reading of the argument, to spatial proximity.

Light’s aim is to move beyond the focus on such spatial concentrations. The problem, however, with his own analysis of the generalised ethnic ‘economy’ is that it fails to identify and explain the processual principles governing the entry of ethnic groups into entrepreneurial activities, the causal chains which lead to the expansion of their businesses and the dynamics of growth that enable the financial success of the lucky few. To arrive at an understanding of these generative processes of entry, expansion and success requires us to shift our gaze from spatial and statistical parameters to a focus on the specific objects that particular industries are organised to produce. Ethnic entrepreneurs tend to cluster in one or two such industries and it is this clustering which is more usefully referred to as the ‘Ethnic Enclave Economy’. An ethnic enclave economy is
object-focused. It manufactures and markets particular types of goods. Within such ethnic enclave economies, entrepreneurs rely on their ability to retain connections across space through networking and movement. Some parts of an industry may be spatially concentrated (often manufacturing or wholesaling) while other parts of it (design, retailing) may be widely dispersed. Ethnic entrepreneurs may capture only a stage in the production or distribution process. Hence, against the focus on spatial clustering, anthropological accounts of trading networks in West Africa, for example (see Cohen, 1969; Eades, 1987), have traced the production and flows of specific goods such as cattle or kola nuts across and between bounded spaces, and the competition to gain a foothold in different production stages of a trade or industry.

Ethnic enclave economies (or ethnic ‘niches’ as they are sometimes called) are more like transnational companies than shopping malls: they respect no boundaries. Rather than models of territorial aggregation, a more useful approach would seem to be that of Actor Network Theory which stresses the agency of objects in the determination of cultural and social production (Latour, 1993; Callon and Law, 1995). The nature of the goods manufactured and sold (in the present example, clothing and knitwear) has a determining effect on the shape and organisation of distribution networks, on spatial concentration and dispersal, and on the trajectories of growth of the ethnic enclave economy. The enclave is a web shaped by the flow of specific (related) goods, services and credits through it.

In the case of the Manchester clothing and garment industry, some of the profits in the trade were channelled into new forms of investment, and in particular, rental property. Cheap inner properties could be used as collateral for bank loans and were turned into flats let out to English students, social service recipients or young professionals. Asians in Manchester became a class of landlords. This business enterprise too was relatively invisible and unlikely to be enumerated by censuses and surveys. In the meanwhile, the Asian restaurant and food trade in Manchester expanded enormously, as the English abandoned mashed potatoes and pork sausages in favour of spicy curries and continental flavours. Hence another generative process might be traced in the Asian food industry which over time became more complex – the opening of hundreds of grocery stores selling halal meat became the base for the emergence of food wholesalers and manufacturers, making anything from frozen samosa and Asian savouries to chutneys, along with big
food importers of spices and basmati rice. Some of these firms began to sell their goods to chain supermarkets. The new firms too needed servicing – they needed solicitors and accountants. So, despite the fact that many of the grocery stores were relatively unprofitable, they formed the base upon which large firms and white collar professionals relied for their custom.

The significance of this narrative is that when we gaze at that cheap market garment, we need to treat it with a good deal of respect. Because a whole world of Asian work and trading and profit came to be based upon it. Above all, what it created was the possibility of self-respect, autonomy and independence, despite endemic racism and the collapse of British manufacturing. In Asian terms it represented a shift from *nawkri*, servitude in wage labour, to *izzet*, honour and respect through self-employment. But is this a success story? Collectively, Pakistanis in Manchester have used profits from business not only to invest in extravagant lifestyles but in good works: the building of mosques, donations to the home country, voluntary activism. One of the larger clothing wholesalers in the city devotes his time these days to running the Imran Khan Hospital Benefit Appeal (on the appeal see Werbner, 1996b). He has made little attempt to expand his business. His honour cannot be measured simply in terms of his profits and turnover. The process may be seen as one of collective conversion back from commodities into gifts.

Let us go back to our carnival masque costume. It too, we have seen, is the product of social networks and collective effort. Not only that. The Notting Hill carnival today is reputedly the largest street festival in Europe. It attracts millions of people every year who come to marvel at the costumes and dancing and join in its festivities. It takes over whole areas of London which belong, for a single day, to some of the city’s poorest and most underprivileged residents. During carnival the streets of London belong to the people.

Carnival has not in the past been a great commercial money spinner. Abner Cohen reports on arguments among carnival organisers as to whether it should be commercialised. The artists and musicians have consistently argued that the pulling power of carnival comes not from overt political demonstrations or efficient marketing but quite the contrary, it derives from the aesthetic pleasure and freedom that carnival affords (see Cohen, 1991 and 1993). Moreover, Afro-Caribbeans are a group that collectively suffers from very high, endemic unemployment rates. So can we say that
the West Indian community in Britain which stages the Notting Hill carnival and others like it is a success story or a failure?

Bootstrap capitalism and the culture industries

Although this may not seem immediately self-evident, bootstrap capitalism, capitalism from the bottom upwards, is based on the possibility of selling packaged culture. Immigrants with no capital rely heavily on the only capital they can gain access to or even invent – cultural capital. And to build up from nothing to something they need another kind of capital that only social relations can create – symbolic capital. Against Bourdieus (1984: 511), it is worth highlighting the fact that these two forms of human capital remain quite distinct even in capitalist, industrial societies. Symbolic capital is the moral reputation a person gains as an honest and fair trader and dealer – a man of honour. Cultural or sub-cultural capital, by contrast, is knowledge about how to package and sell a particular form of culture. Modernity and postmodernity have been marked by the enormous efflorescence of the culture industries. Fashion and jewellery, entertainment and food, houseware and toys, music, art, poetry, journalism, computer software, films, furniture, even electronic goods, are all packaged forms of culture. In an age where design impacts on all commodities, there are, as Baudrillard reminds us, no purely utilitarian goods left. Reality has been displaced by hyperreality.

In such a context it is not frugality, rationality and saving that make for capitalist success but an aesthetic appreciation of the hedonistic pursuit of luxury, and the cultural imagination needed to tap this quest. Hence, rather than Weber’s Protestant ethic, it may be something quite different – and opposed – which is the secret elixir of entrepreneurial success in the modern world.

In an illuminating account of East European Jewish immigration to the United States, Adapting to Abundance, Andrew R. Heinz, following Veblen (1899) and Sombart (1913), describes the expansion of the luxury industries in the USA, imported by German immigrants. It is they, he argues, who above all helped build modern America as we know it today:

Contrasting sharply with the reserved demeanour of native-born Americans, the German love of song, sport and celebration endowed city life with beer gardens and bowling alleys, as well as
musical, literary, dramatic, and gymnastic clubs that transplanted German culture to America. In opposition to the Sabbatarian movement of American Protestants, Germans instituted the custom of Sunday picnicking. The efforts of commercially adept brewers and artisans made for a German presence in the mass-marketing of beer, furniture, pianos, lithographs, and eye-glasses. By the end of the [19th] century, the names of Pabst, Anheuser-Busch, Stingray, Prang, and Bausch and Lomb, among others, were widely known. (Henize, 1990: 184)

It was into this atmosphere of luxury, enjoyment and plenty that Jews arrived to New York City in their hundreds and thousands from the impoverished shtetls of Eastern Europe and the Pale of Russia. Whereas there they were limited as traders and middlemen to selling a few basic items of food and clothing, they found in America an abundance of cultural products that could be packaged and sold. Not only that. Heinze argues that it was through the consumption of luxury goods that these East European Jews saw themselves becoming true Americans. They could not change their heavy accents or improve their command of English overnight, but they could own a piano and a fur coat, and go to the movies or on summer vacations like true Americans. At the turn of the century there were almost a million and a half Jews in New York City. Most had arrived penniless with their families. Many became street peddlars, peddling a range of luxury goods at marked down prices. The streets of the Lower East Side were transformed daily into a vast emporium of cultural goodies. Jews dominated the New York clothing, fur and jewellery trades. They published their own Yiddish newspapers and opened their own theatres. Like other immigrants, they became entertainers and comedians. They capitalised on the dark Jewish humour of the European ghetto, to make Americans laugh. And, from being the promoters of high culture to the Austro-Hungarian and Hapsburg empires, set apart from the masses by their sophistication and civilisation, in New York, Heinze tells us, Jewish musicians and artists embraced and created American popular culture. Tin Pan Alley, as the popular music industry was called, was dominated by Jews (Heinze, 1990: 140–1).

Another recent book, also on American Jewry and the entertainment business, Blackface, White Noise by Michael Rogin (1996), analyses crossover forms of vaudeville in which white Jewish comedians like Al Jolson blacked their faces and appropriated black culture in a parodic and carnivalesque celebration. Rogin exposes the
ambivalence of blackface as an artistic genre which both stereotyped black people, who were virtually barred at that time from the entertainment industry, while bringing their music and dance into the mainstream. Jews both imitated black culture and, in their advocacy of the American creed of equality and freedom, joined civil rights movements attacking racism. It was through this ambivalent appropriation of black culture and jazz and its amalgamation with nostalgic European klezmer and light classical music, that popular American music emerged. Some of the greatest American popular song writers of the time, such as Irving Berlin and George Gershwin, were Jewish.

Looking at that era through politically correct lenses, as Regin does, the author fails to capture its politically incorrect effervescence. It was a moment in which immigrant entertainers and comedians of all nationalities parodied and stereotyped each other and everyone else – from snobbish Yankees to greenhorn Italians to Jewish wiseguys, drunken Irish or dumb Negroes. The legacy of this humour has been retained in the films of Charlie Chaplin and the Marx Brothers as well as in Al Jolson’s *The Jazz Singer*. Ethnic and cultural stereotypes were the stuff of comedy. What immigrant New Yorkers had discovered was that culture was there to be packaged, sold and consumed. The more attractive or entertaining the package, the better the market. A good deal was sold from peddlars’ carts or in small, cheap theatres and clubs. All that was needed for success was a bit of flair, imagination and good luck.

I stress all this because when we hear of the Jews who founded Macy’s or Sears-Roebuck, giant American department stores, and major networks such as CBS or NBC (Heinze, 1990: 6–7), or of the Jewish film moguls who invented Hollywood, we have to bear in mind that these men did not emerge out of nowhere. They were already embedded in the ethnic-dominated culture industries and they rose out of the ranks of businessmen whose companies, like theirs, were small-scale and relatively unprofitable. The story of Hollywood is particularly instructive. By 1915, Heinze tells us,

... four outstanding Jewish immigrants had laid the foundation for powerful movie enterprises ... Adolph Zuker and William Fox, who came from Hungarian shtetls in the 1880s to become the leaders of Paramount Pictures and Fox Pictures, Carl Laemmle, who immigrated from Southern Germany in 1884 and founded the Universal Studio in 1912, and Samuel Goldwyn, formerly Goldfish, a Warsaw native who came to America around
1895 and emerged as one of the most successful producers in the business after 1913. (Heinze, 1990: 207)

These men all came to America without money or formal education. To understand their rise it has to be seen in the context of the American urban entertainment industry in which, by around 1905, there were, in New York alone, one hundred and twenty three small movie houses, known as nickel theatres or nickleodeons (Heinze, 1990: 204). Most were in Jewish and Italian immigrant neighbourhoods. It was from these modest beginnings, as owners of nickleodeons, that the movie moguls rose. They rose, first, by challenging the monopoly of the American film industry at the time, and circumventing it by importing long, two-hour silent movies from Europe. They added entertainment and music to these silent movies, and built plush theatres for the nickle-paying masses. From there, it was a short step into film production, and they began to take command of the dramatic content of the films they marketed (Heinze, 1990: 209). But it was the discovery of the financial potential of charismatic film personalities that ultimately turned Hollywood into one of the USA's largest export industries. Packaged film stars, to whom the Jewish entrepreneurs willingly paid exorbitant salaries, quickly became the brand names that appealed to millions (Heinze, 1990: 210).

The point I am making is simply this: capitalist success in our modern and postmodern world is not a matter of saving and frugality. It is a matter of being part of a social network which understands what luxury, desire and hedonistic consumption means, and provides it to the masses at affordable prices. People write about the Japanese miracle as though it was simply a matter of hard work and paternalistic attitudes towards the work force; and they ignore the exceptional Japanese aesthetic talent in the field of technological design, or their sensitivity to the luxury desires of consumers (on this see Lash, 1993: 207).

But are Jews in America successful? What does it mean to be successful in our society? If we measure success in simple, economistic terms we come up against the fact raised already that some of our most valued cultural activities are grossly underpaid, at least in Britain. Both composers and rank-and-file orchestra musicians earn less than primary school teachers. Good artists often feel lucky if they sell one painting a year. Talented actors live from hand to mouth; so do poets and novelists. In Britain the theatre is currently threatened with partial collapse as young talent is blocked by the
inadequacy of state subsidies. In 1998, in the midst of an economic boom, national operas and provincial orchestras have come under threat of closure. For every Yehudi Menuhin or Daniel Barenbaum whose recordings sell in the millions, there are thousands of underpaid and unknown Jewish fiddlers and pianists who play in orchestras and teach to make ends meet. For every famous pop group in Manchester or Liverpool like Take That or Oasis there are thousands of similar pop groups whose young musicians dream of making it but never do. Mostly, their youthful members live on the dole, with musical gigs few and far between (S. Cohen, 1991). There is a thriving South Asian music industry in Britain which includes talented musicians, vocalists, studio owners, promoters, and retailers, and is supported by local Asian radio, television and newspapers. Yet Asian tapes and discs sell at ludicrously low prices and most musical bands have to rely for a living on other jobs. Now and then there is a breakthrough: Apache Indian, a British Indian singer has just set up his own charity, following an enormously successful tour of India (on the rise of Apache Indian, see Back, 1996). Is the Asian music industry a success or is it a failure? From the point of view of Asian consumers the story is one of success. Yet Asian musicians subsist on the margins of the pop industry.

Purely economistic measures simply do not work in estimating value and success, even in our own society. The Jewish entrepreneurs who made Hollywood may well have been failed actors, musicians or writers. Hence the question of success and failure leads only to stereotyping and invidious comparisons.

Statistical failures

Most writing on ethnic entrepreneurship is based on census and survey statistics. How would struggling market traders and Asian musicians be classified in these statistics? No doubt, many of them would fall into the unemployed category since their earnings are intermittent and they often operate in the black, informal economy (on the informalisation of clothing industry among Greek-Cypriot manufacturers see Panayiotopoulos, 1996). But as we have seen, vast edifices are built around such invisible struggling small enterprises; whole industries emerge. Yet however inaccurate, statistics are essential modern tools in devising policies against discrimination and disadvantage. The recent Fourth National Survey of Ethnic Minorities paints a depressing pic-
ture of high unemployment rates and low earnings for Bangladeshis, Pakistanis and Afro-Caribbeans, even if we allow for a good deal of disinformation (Modood et al., 1997, chapter 4). It also reveals a steep rise in self-employment and a correlation between earnings and educational qualifications. These obviously hold out the promise of future mobility (Modood, 1997: 120). At the same time statistical surveys often obscure or fail to illuminate the generative and expansionary logic of ethnic enclave economies and hence of the foundations of ethnic ‘success’ since the focus of such statistics is, ultimately, the individual entrepreneur as a single quantifiable unit.

An example of this may be drawn from statistics in Britain on the relative achievements and failures of different South Asian national and religious communities. Based on a survey of Asian businesses in Bradford, Muhammad Rafiq highlights the relative smallness of Muslim by comparison to Hindu and Sikh businesses (Rafiq, 1992). He thus obscures the more important finding that Asian business in Bradford is in a state of flux following the virtual collapse of the Yorkshire wool industry. With dozens of new businesses emerging every year, there are signs that clothing and food industries are being established as viable enclaves and that these are, in fact, dominated by Muslims. Although their businesses are still very small, being recent creations, it is upon a multiplicity of such small businesses that large industries and empires are built. Passing premature judgement on the business acumen of Muslims in Bradford fails to grasp the generative trajectories of their ethnic enclave economies.

Three recent analyses of survey statistics of British Pakistani performance in the UK (Anwar, 1996; Metcalfe et al., 1996; Ballard, 1996) highlight the arbitrary nature of statistical interpretation. Roger Ballard, an anthropologist, finds that ‘the Census results provide emphatic confirmation of the extent to which [Pakistanis] have . . . managed to circumvent [the] constraints [of racism and discrimination] to achieve a considerable degree of upward mobility’ (Ballard, 1996: 148). By contrast, Muhammad Anwar (1996) highlights a mixed picture of relative Pakistani success and failure. In London, for example, Pakistani children are high achievers, whereas in Birmingham they are low achievers (1996: 133). Their unemployment rate is very high but so too is their self-employment and employer rate. Finally, the team of researchers at the Policy Studies Institute (Metcalfe et al., 1996) concludes on the basis of a survey of around 150 entrepreneurs that Pakistani businesses are less successful than Indian businesses in almost every respect; unlike Indians, Pakistanis, they argue, are driven into business to escape racism. Yet
these assertions are based on relatively tentative and ambiguous findings which contain many indicators of both success and failure.

Other surveys paint widely contradictory pictures. In a survey of Oxford Asian retailers and restaurant owners, Shaila Srinivasan found few differences between Pakistanis, Indians and Bangladeshis, virtually all of whom had achieved a reasonably high standard of living and uniformly expressed very considerable satisfaction with their level of earnings (Srinivasan, 1995: 11, 92–5). Rather than being ‘pushed’, the entrepreneurs had ‘jumped’: they chose to become businessmen in order to raise both their economic and social standing (Srinivasan, 1995: 84). As in Manchester, Asian entrepreneurs in Oxford had chosen to diversify into rental property (Srinivasan, 1995: 95). Srinivasan thus presents us with a picture of Asian middle class prosperity typified by high levels of social integration into British society, along with a continued fostering of South Asian cultural values. Her survey, based on interviews she herself conducted, is persuasive in that she was introduced to all her interviewees personally, and knew some quite well. A different survey of small Asian and Afro-Caribbean retailers, by Jones, McEvoy and Barrett, while criticising invidious comparisons (Jones et al, 1992: 179), nevertheless leads the authors to the opposed conclusion that such status aspirations are mystifications which disguise continued self-exploitation (Jones et al, 1992: 185). The Afro-Caribbean firms in this sample were small and struggling (Jones et al, 1992: 197). Virtually all the enterprises surveyed avoided the use of banks (Jones et al, 1992: 199). By contrast, a survey by Curran and Blackburn (1993) revealed very high use of banking among Greek-Cypriots and Bangladeshis, with Afro-Caribbeans receiving more loans from local authority sources. Ethnic entrepreneurs surveyed across the board consulted banks and enterprise agencies as well as accountants and solicitors frequently (Curran and Blackburn, 1993: 54–61, 68–82). Afro-Caribbean businesses had larger turnovers than those of Bangladeshis (Curran and Blackburn, 1993: 24). Despite finding evidence of ‘surprising’ superior family support for Afro-Caribbeans (Curran and Blackburn, 1993: 80), Curran and Blackburn tend nevertheless to accept the stereotype of Afro-Caribbeans as having a ‘lower level of social integration’ (Curran and Blackburn, 1993: 103, 111). However, like Srinivasan they also found no mention of racial discrimination as the reason for entering small business (Curran and Blackburn, 1993: 124).

Clearly, differences in sampling elicit radically divergent pictures of the state of ethnic entrepreneurship in Britain. But even more
than this: statistical interpretations can only be understood in the context of a politics of representation. What needs to be deconstructed, in other words, in such statistical analyses, is the politics behind the interpretation. Roger Ballard is quite explicit in stating his aims: to step ‘beyond the patronising vision of black people as nothing but helpless pawns’ (1996: 147), a vision, as we have seen, represented here by Jones, McEvoy and Barrett. This assertion of the agency of minorities also motivates, Ivan Light argues (Light, forthcoming; Light and Rosenstein, 1995), migration network approaches, critical of globalisation theory’s deterministic explanations of international migrant labour movements. Muhammad Anwar, by contrast, is primarily motivated by policy issues – his statistics are mobilised as evidence of the need to improve educational and health services to immigrants. Future banking policy is also a key feature of Curran and Blackburn’s survey. Srinivasan focuses on the issue of social and cultural integration into British society and denies major differences within the Asian business community. By contrast, the motive of the PSI survey, in stressing the failure of Pakistanis and Bangladeshis, is implicitly to highlight the possible negative impact of anti-Islamic cultural racism. Muslims are forced by Islamophobia to go into business; Indians choose to do so.

This kind of implicit politicisation of research becomes evident, explicitly, in the press releases accompanying such surveys. Ballard’s report, part of a larger survey, was advertised in the press under the headline: ‘Asians have a Jewish future while Afro-Caribbeans have an Irish Future’ (Peach, 1996; Travis, 1996; Bennetto, 1996), thus compounding one stereotype by another. Such stereotypes abound in the press which regularly conducts surveys of Asian millionaires. There are now more than 300 Asian millionaires in Britain, one report claims, and their combined buying power is more than six billion pounds (Cusick, 1996). Asians are said to own 50 per cent of independent retail outlets in the UK and 80 per cent of independent newspaper and tobacco shops in London (Lyon and West, 1995: 409). All this implies an obvious success story. But the press headlines responding to the PSI survey results challenged this fable of success: END OF THE CORNER SHOP? screamed one report. ‘Young Asians not interested in shopkeeping’ (Chohan and Razvi, 1996). The English press lamented the death of the Asian/English corner-shop, drawing implications from the PSI report which it never intended. Corner shop owners confessed to reporters that they hoped their children would be doctors and lawyers, not shopkeepers. But is the Asian corner shop really such a failure? One press
analyst (Ahmed, 1996) dismissed this claim with the warning that
you cannot rely on the press or, for that matter, on spurious
research surveys. The truth is, he proclaimed, that ‘reports that
small Asian businesses are doomed are ridiculous’.

The fact that cornershops are profitable concerns, noted in
Srinivasan’s research (1995) is borne out by another convincing
ethnographic study of Asian newspaper and tobacco cornershops in
London (Lyon and West, 1995). They are, it seems, owned by
Gujerati Patels, members of the Patidar caste, and they are evenly
distributed spatially throughout London. Many of them have high
turnovers and are extremely valuable. Forty five per cent of the
shops, the researchers found, were worth £200,000 or more (based
on Lyon and West, 1995, table 5B: 414)! There is a trend, however,
towards the purchase of professional properties as ‘children of pio-
near/parent Patels have begun to enter . . . professional businesses in
recent years’ (Lyon and West, 1995: 415).

Patels have clearly uncovered a very profitable niche that no-one
knew was there. They are an upwardly mobile Indian caste which,
historically, has gone into trading wherever its members settle over-
seas, although tobacco and newspaper shops would appear to be a
local British discovery. So perhaps the cultural explanation of entre-
preneurship holds after all? Why was it not West Indians who dis-
covered the profitability of the cornershop?

Who fails?

This returns us to the so-called problem of black business failure
and the reasons for it.2 My own aim here is not to answer this ques-
tion but to deny its very validity. Black people have historically
allowed their cultural talent, creativity and originality to be approp-
riated and commodified by others. For many years they were pre-
vented by the exclusionary forces of racism from taking command
of their intellectual property. Jazz, the Blues, Soul, Spirituals –
where would ‘America’ (and the world) be without them? Perhaps
no single ethnic group has contributed more of value, directly and
indirectly, to global popular culture, to music and sports, than have
black African Americans and Afro-Caribbeans. Yet great artists like
Billy Holiday or Bessie Smith died penniless and alone. The million-
dollar profits generated by black creativity were raked in by non-
black agents, promoters and record companies.

This has all changed now. African American and British blacks
know the value of their culture as packaged commodity and they
guard their collective intellectual property from intruders and potential appropriators. In a recent study of rap music in Los Angeles and New York, Dipanita Basu found that, notwithstanding the legacy of slavery, the violence and the poverty of the black ghetto, African American rappers have used hip hop culture as a lever to fame and fortune. Around this cultural form they have developed what I call a ‘culture of entrepreneurship’ (Werbner, 1990a). They market not only rap but graffiti graphics, fashion and style. They own their own studios and record shops, and use their own musicians, DJs, cameramen, editors, mixers and producers. A whole network of secondary businesses and professional occupations had arisen around hip hop and rap, and it is almost entirely controlled by African Americans. This is because, Basu found, despite the global reach of rap, its inventiveness is based on a deep sense of localism. It tells of the hood (ie neighbourhood) in its own distinctive style, and because it is based on this very specific sense of localism, which is constantly changing and inventing itself anew, no-one seems able to copy it. It belongs in the hood, that violent ghetto neighbourhood, and even the most successful rappers must keep returning to the hood, Basu found, for inspiration. They must keep their old networks alive even after they are rich and famous (see Basu and Werbner, no date).³

The culture of entrepreneurship African Americans are developing, evident also in the recent revival of Harlem as a cultural centre, is not a legacy of the past, just as their culture of origin was not the determining legacy of Pakistani settler entrepreneurship in Manchester, or even of Jewish entrepreneurship in New York City at the turn of the century. Social and communication networks, willingness to take and extend credit, cheap materials and production processes, perceived demands for cheap goods, racism, joblessness, an appreciation of culture as a commodity to be packaged and sold, all combined to create this culture of entrepreneurship.

Conclusion

So does culture make a difference? In the first instance we need to recognise that culture is the symbolic differences created by distinctive relations of sociality which arise in the context of migration or shared experience of poverty and even violence. The culture of entrepreneurship created by Pakistanis in Manchester was not in any simple sense a legacy of peasant farming culture in the Punjab.
It was born in Manchester, by single men collectively suffering the indignities of peddling or working long hours together in factories, while also sharing lodgings and food. If there was trust, it derived from those new experiences of migration and the enduring social networks they generated.

This is not a culturally deterministic explanation as some have assumed (see Waldinger et al, 1990). Cultures of entrepreneurship are not given; they are invented traditions. At most, they are empowered, as the case of the Patidars highlights, by the knowledge that such inventiveness utilised by co-ethnics elsewhere has paid handsome dividends. But the actual goods produced and the networks supporting this production are always historically contingent, local inventions. Nor does this approach ignore problems of racism or economic restructuring. On the contrary, my aim has been here to explain the complex processes of communication, exchange and competition which allow immigrants not only to survive, but to expand into business in great numbers, in a strange land, without any prior experience. Through trading preferentially with one another, penniless immigrants are able to create culturally constituted economic value.

To study ethnic entrepreneurship, then, requires a prior understanding and knowledge of the types of industries particular ethnic groups have penetrated in numbers. By tracing the goods or services marketed and produced in these industries (chutneys, garments, rap songs), one can begin to uncover the intra- and inter-ethnic networks of supply and credit that enable the flow of goods within the industry. An appreciation of the various constraints embodied in the manufacture or movement of these objects allows us to gauge the shape of an industry and its developmental trajectories. These in turn reveal the economy of value and the economic rationality of entrepreneurs, as well as the opportunities they perceive for expansion or diversification. Much of this rationality is not particularly ‘ethnic’. Indeed, more insightful studies, such as that by Ward (1991) or Curran and Blackburn (1993) highlight the fact that researchers’ prior understanding of economic sectors allows for a superior interpretation of survey findings. Clearly then also, sampling is a decision that needs to be informed by prior fieldwork within an ethnic community. Shopkeeping is the most visible part of most industries. Even rap songs have to be marketed. But petty retailing is only a starting point for research. In itself, it is often the least revealing. As a Jewish cloth wholesaler once told me: ‘If I can sell one thing, I can sell anything’. But the goods marketed and the
services consumed have a career and a history. Their hidden narrative will very likely disclose a world of ethnic business, sociality, and competition. The spatial clustering of firms has itself to be problematised. With all the research on Little Havana, for example (see Portes and Bach, 1985), it remains quite unclear why such diverse Cuban businesses concentrate together, selling so many different types of goods.

By focusing on such goods and the challenges, opportunities and values they embody, we can begin to move away from invidious comparisons between ethnic groups or their cultures. Within any industry there are areas of profitability and creativity, as well as boredom, routinised work and low profits. But as I have argued here, the most profitable objects/services are not always the most highly valued in the wider society, or considered to have the greatest lasting collective value. Nor can status and honour be objectively measures as external to the group.

The collective creation of value is thus my preferred measure of success, whether this be a carnival masque costume, a cheap garment or a rap song. The point is that value is always relative to the context of sociality in which it is produced. This feature of value is one that has been repeatedly recognised by anthropologists and sociologists, from Mauss and Malinowski to postcolonial ethnographers or marginality and exchange. The chimera of success thus exists first and foremost in the eyes of co-ethnic interlocutors who strive competitively to gain or create collective symbols of scarcity, honour and excellence.

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Notes

1 In terms of so-called ‘interactive’ models of entrepreneurship, Manchester was a high-demand economic environment, while Asian migrant settlers were predisposed towards entrepreneurship, initially for lack of opportunities in wage employment and later because the early pioneers had established a foothold in the clothing trade which required very little start-up capital and even less knowledge and skill (for a sophisticated analysis of interactive theories, see Light and Rosenstein, 1995).

2 Exceptionally, in a recent article, Ram and Deakins (1996) praise the initiative drive and productivity of young Caribbean entrepreneurs in Britain. Their results could just as well have elicited the opposite prognosis.

3 It has been argued that the political battle over the canon in the US has not so much enhanced the value of Third World cultural products, but of African-American works whose sales have rocketed as their place in the curricula of various disciplines has come to be established.

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What colour 'success'


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Pnina Werbner


What colour ‘success’