



LISTENING TO SOCIAL SILENCE

Anthropology is vital for building back better

Gillian Tett

When the news broke in 2020 that scientists had raced ahead with efforts to create vaccines for COVID-19, policymakers and voters around the world cheered. No wonder: the development of these vaccines is a triumph for 21st century medical and computer science, raising the chances that the world will beat the pandemic.

However, in 2021 it has emerged that there is a catch: quite apart from the fact that distribution of the vaccine has proved to be lamentably—and dangerously—inequitable, not least because of the structures of the global political economy, vaccination even in some rich countries is turning out to be difficult. The reason? Culture—as defined by the web of half-acknowledged rituals, symbols, ideas, spatial patterns, and social affiliations that shape humans, wherever they live. Most notably, in places such as the United States, there has been so much vaccine resistance—or “hesitancy,” to use the polite euphemism—that it has undermined efforts to stop the pandemic.

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And while some jurisdictions—such as France—have managed to overcome initial vaccination hesitancy (at least to some degree), the fact that there even are such battles illustrates a crucial, but oft-ignored, point about policymaking today. Effective responses to fast-moving (or even slow-moving) challenges require more than reliance on so-called hard sciences, such as medical research or the powers of big data. You need “soft” science too, to understand human behavior and culture.

Or to put it another way, it is a profound mistake to try to solve public policy problems today just by relying on one set of intellectual tools, deployed with tunnel vision. You need lateral vision, to appreciate the wider human context and how elements that lie outside your model, big data set, or scientific trial could affect what is happening. Culture, as defined above, matters, along with environmental and political systems—and not just the pieces of our cultural systems that we openly notice (the “noise”) but also the pieces we tend to ignore because they are embarrassing or familiar or too complex to discuss (the “silence”).

We need lateral vision to deal not only with pandemics but also with a host of other issues around economic development and policymaking—climate change, pensions, and so on. Trying to devise effective policy purely on a technical basis, such as with a narrowly bounded economic model or with engineering science, is akin to walking through a dark wood at night looking only at a compass dial. No matter how technically brilliant your tool might be, if your eyes are fixed on it alone, you will trip over a tree root. Context matters.

How can policymakers adopt that lateral vision? I would suggest that one way to do this is to borrow some ideas from a field I trained in, before becoming a financial journalist: cultural anthropology. This might sound odd to some policymakers, given the discipline’s often rather dusty, exotic image—its adherents viewed as academic versions of Indiana Jones who spend their time traveling to remote locations to study colorful rituals that seem far removed from 21st century economic challenges.

However, this stereotype is not just wrong—it also creates a gigantic missed opportunity. Yes, anthropologists are dedicated to studying human culture, in all its glorious spectrum of difference. But they do not do this in a patronizing manner (unlike the early 19th century anthropologists, who had a deplorably racist, sexist, and imperialist bent). Instead 21st

century anthropologists believe that it is important to study different cultures, with respect, because that process not only yields empathy for strangers, which is crucial in a globally integrated world, it also helps us understand our own cultures better—wherever we initially hail from. It is a win-win.

After all, as the Chinese proverb goes: “A fish cannot see water.” People cannot clearly evaluate the underlying cultural assumptions they have absorbed from their surroundings unless they step back and compare them to those of others—or jump out of the fishbowl. Immersing yourself in the lives of others and tasting a little culture shock, as anthropologists do, gives you a more objective sense of your own society’s strengths and flaws—and “social silences.” As an added bonus, peering at other cultures can introduce you to new ideas and ways of solving problems. Last but not least, since anthropologists tend to take a worm’s-eye view (that is, look at things from the bottom up, in a holistic way), taking a good look at other cultures offers a different vantage point than bird’s-eye (that is, top-down) analyses.

This sounds abstract. But consider for a moment what might have happened if policymakers had adopted an anthropologist’s lens when COVID-19 erupted. To some extent, Western governments and voters would not have been so badly tripped up if they had known more about the spread of epidemics in other cultures. Assuming that diseases such as SARS, Ebola—and COVID-19—were problems exclusive to the other side of the world, Wuhan, or to people who seemed so “weird” or “exotic,” led to dangerous complacency. Nor would Western governments have had so much hubris about their own health care systems. Looking at the way the West developed medicines, conveyed health care messages, and promoted public health with an insider-outsider eye would have made it easier to see the shortcomings.

An anthropologist’s mindset could have helped Western governments import valuable lessons from other regions. Take masks. Anthropologists working in Asia have long argued that the efficacy of masks does not rest simply on physical factors—how fabric can stop germs—the act of putting one on is a powerful psychological prompt that reminds people to change their behavior and signals a person’s commitment to protecting a social group, which is crucial in a pandemic. This suggests that policymakers grappling with a pandemic should use every



IF WE IGNORE THE CULTURAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONTEXT OF PEOPLE'S LIVES, WE ALL SUFFER.



signal possible to encourage people to embrace this practice, even if it flies in the face of Western ideas about individualism. But this is not what initially happened in some places. In the United Kingdom, for example, the government discouraged mask wearing early on, and even after it later changed tack, the prime minister, Boris Johnson, shunned masks in public. Although that stance eventually changed, policymakers in Britain (and elsewhere) might have paid more attention to consistent messaging if they had known more about the Asian experience.

Similarly, governments should have recognized earlier the importance of cultural context when trying to disseminate health care messages and change behavior, since people rarely think about risk the way scientists do. Anybody who knew anything about Ebola in West Africa in 2014 understood this point well, since the disease was beaten—after earlier missteps—only when the messaging became more sensitive to cultural context and behavioral science was blended with anthropology, medical science, and computing. To cite one example, when global health groups initially built centers to treat Ebola victims in 2014, these featured opaque walls, which made it impossible for victims' families to see what was happening to their loved ones, and messages about Ebola were presented in terms that local people could not understand. When the messaging became more sensitive and the walls of treatment centers were redesigned to be transparent, compliance with doctors increased. Listening to local voices is crucial.

Some of these lessons about the need to be culturally sensitive have been adopted with COVID-19. Although vaccination messages were initially presented almost exclusively through the voice of scientists, for example, governments in the United States and Europe have (belatedly) realized that these “elite” messages do not resonate with some people and have switched to community voices. But this lesson now needs to be applied to numerous other policy challenges too. Climate change is perhaps the most important example. Unless governments and scientists can present environmental messages in ways that resonate in different cultures, with the right incentives, they will not

rally voter support for green policies or persuade people to embrace behavioral changes, let alone motivate them to collaborate for the good of others. Top-down models of green policies are not enough: you need a worm's-eye view as well, with empathy for people's lives, to build a just transition and avoid a backlash against green reforms.

Consider attitudes toward renewable energy. In the eyes of Western urban elites, it seems self-evident that energy sources such as wind and solar are morally superior to fossil fuels such as coal. However, these privileged urbanites live far from rural locations that could be blighted by the construction of wind turbines. Nor do they suffer the loss of identity (and livelihood) that can occur in a coal mining town when the local mine shuts down or the economic hardship of poor people when the cost of transportation rises. Empathy is needed for effective strategies to fight climate change, as well as awareness that most ordinary citizens do not see the world the way engineers and economists do.

Don't get me wrong: I am not saying that economists, doctors, computer scientists, and financiers should jettison their tools, nor that cultural anthropology is a magic wand that imparts wisdom. Like all intellectual traditions, the discipline has shortcomings, most notably that its insights can be hard to scale, and since it is mostly a qualitative, not quantitative, lens on the world, the messages can be difficult to communicate. Defining culture can seem like chasing soap in the bath: it is everywhere, but nowhere.

The key point is this: if we ignore the cultural and environmental context of people's lives, we all suffer. Conversely, if we incorporate it into our analysis, we can create more effective policy tools, with better checks and balances. The key is to combine computer, medical, economic, and financial science with social sciences and blend a worm's- and bird's-eye view. This will help us study both the noise in our lives and the silence—and build back better. **FD**

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