



From cultural capital to growth

Thorvaldur Gylfason
University of Iceland

Summary

Capital in the traditional, narrow sense of Karl Marx and Milton Friedman – physical capital, a real capital – is clearly a key pillar of economic growth. Even so, there are other kinds of capital that also matter for growth, including – obviously – financial capital. Further, it has long been well understood that human capital, built up through health care, education, and on-the-job training, is also good for growth as China’s barefoot doctors and many others know well from experience. More recently, we have begun also to understand the importance of social capital, which is why researchers now keep gathering internationally comparable data on democracy, equality, justice, transparency, and trust and look for their relationship to economic and social development across countries. Again, the data convey a rather strong impression that also social capital, including democracy, equality, and transparency, is good for growth.

And then there is the separate category of cultural capital.

The importance of music

Let us begin with music.

Scientific research suggests that singing increases the singer’s physical well-being by, among other things, producing the same chemicals in the brain as, for example, chocolate and exercise. A study of 600 choir singers in the United Kingdom shows that, like healthy exercise, singing improves mental health by stimulating the pituitary gland to produce neurotransmitter endorphins, a k a endogenous morphine. Singing also strengthens the immune system according to the results of German scientists. A study by sociologists in Australia revealed that choir singers are generally happier than other people. A study of residents of nursing homes for the elderly in Australia revealed that singing reduces anxiety and depression. Singing also improves breathing, stimulates blood circulation, lowers blood pressure, and lightens people’s mood as well. This is why nursing homes and hos-

pitals, in the United States and elsewhere, increasingly choose to have musicians on their payroll, a growing trend based on hard medical evidence. The more, the merrier.

Singing alone has all these effects on the singer, as does choral singing, but there is one difference. Singing together is a social activity to an even greater extent than solo singing, with or without accompaniment. The social aspect of choir singing, the togetherness involved, is an important part of the singer’s enjoyment of singing. Research suggests that this partly explains why choir singers generally enjoy life more and sleep better than other people. Singing increases prosperity and prolongs life. Choir singing is an important part of Africa’s social fabric up and down the continent from South Africa to Ghana and beyond.

There is more. Music teaches people courtesy, as my father used to say. Even the Red Army did not dare attack the singing revolutionaries in the Baltic States 1986-1991, when ultimately they formed a human chain from Estonia to Lithuania, holding hands and singing patriotic songs in their peaceful quest for liberty, which in the end they won.

For all these reasons, public and private investment in music training, music appreciation, and music performance is, if judiciously organized, money well spent from a long-run economic and social point of view. For example, some 60 years ago, through new legislation, the Icelandic parliament laid the foundation for shared public and private financing of music schools. Since then, the number of students attending music schools in Iceland has increased sixteen-fold, from 0,5% of the total population in the mid-1960s to 4% today, while the country’s population doubled.

Also, let us not forget that jazz, sometimes called America’s chief contribution to 20th century music and the arts, can be traced – but of course! – to Africa, The Congo to be precise. African music has tremendous potential, also as a source of economic and social development as well as a promising export commodity.

Visual arts

Africa’s rich cultural heritage and cultural life are not confined to music.

African art – carvings in wood and bronze, paintings, textiles, fashion design, you name it – is a wonderful treasure waiting to be discovered by discerning art lovers around the world as well as at home.

I recall being told of an international conference in Italy in the 1960s or 1970s or thereabouts. Italy was still a bit depressed after the Second World War. Several of the Italian economists present gloomily expressed their apprehensions about the economic prospects of their country. An American conference participant, Harvard economist John Kenneth Galbraith, ever the optimist, told his Italian hosts not to worry. Italy is beautiful, he said. Just look around. Beauty brings hope, prosperity, and long and happy lives. And he was right. Milan is now a world capital of fashion. Tourists flock to Italy, an art museum of sorts, on a large scale. Italy is doing just fine. But I digress.

Back to Africa. Some years ago, I struck up an acquaintance with a well-known Tanzanian artist, Mohamed Charinda (1947-2021). Having purchased a few of his colorful and socially conscious oil paintings of African life, I met with him at his home for a long and friendly chat, with his son as interpreter. I had heard of Mr. Charinda’s large portrait of Mao Zedong and Julius Nyerere adorning the Tanzanian Embassy in Beijing. So, I inquired whether I might humbly commission from him a parallel portrait of President Nyerere and another unnamed African leader. My wish was generously granted. Ten days later, I visited Mr. Charinda again to pick up the painting, which, along with another work of his, has ever since adorned my Reykjavik home, a beautiful, large oil painting.

And then, a few years later, on a visit to the British Museum in London, whose painting did I see prominently displayed in the Museum? Here he was again, my friend, Mohamed Charinda, with yet another of his magnificent large oil paintings. I was

pleased.

I realize that the British Museum acquired its Charinda painting quite legally, just as I did mine. But the same cannot be said of a vast number of pieces of earlier African art on display in museums in the United Kingdom, France, and elsewhere. I welcome the several negotiations underway between museums in Britain and France and their former colonies about the long overdue return of many precious works of African art to museums or other rightful owners in their countries of origin.

Socially conscious, I said about Mr. Charinda. He prepared a painting for the World Cup in South Africa in 2012, a brilliant piece in which the two teams have a noticeably different number of players on a tilted playing field. He had his way of expressing his view of unequal opportunity. This painting, as it happened, for technical reasons, was not among the artworks exhibited in South Africa during the 2012 World Cup. It ended up in my possession in Iceland. Again, I was pleased.

Now, at last, to my main point. There is, as I see it, considerable but still to be discovered interest abroad in Tanzania's Tingatinga paintings as well as in Beninese bronze sculptures, Dogon doors from Mali, Congolese music and textiles, wood carvings from across the continent, Ardmore ceramics from South Africa, South African and West African fashion design, Zambian and Zimbabwean shona sculptures, old and new, and more, much more. Cultural Ministries and business associations across Africa would do well to promote these works around the world as well as at home.

If you ask me, Africa sits on a cultural gold mine.

Reference

Thorvaldur Gylfason (2019), From equality, democracy, and public health to economic prosperity, ifo DICE Report 2/2019.