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Cultural leader and the dynamics of assimilation [☆]

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Abstract

This paper studies the population dynamics of cultural traits in a model of intergenerational cultural transmission with a perfectly-forward looking cultural leader. We show that there exists a threshold size in terms of population above which the cultural leader becomes active. We also show that a policy affecting some key parameters (such as the cost of providing the religious good) has a different impact in the short run and in the long run due to over-reactions or under-reactions of the different cultural groups. Finally, we study the cultural competition between two forward-looking cultural leaders with opposite objectives. We show that the steady-state cultural equilibrium depends on the time preference structure of the two leaders. © 2018 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

The social integration of immigrants into a host society is a very heated debate, especially in Europe. It is not clear, however, what “integration” means. Immigrants often have a relationship with at least two cultures, their ethnic cultural background (the minority culture) and the majority

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culture in the country where they live. Different European countries have different views of their integration policy and in later years, there has been a marked change in the attitude to the question of diversity (integration) versus assimilation. Certain countries consider it to be a successful integration policy when immigrants leave their cultural background and are “assimilated” into the new culture. An obvious example is the French law on religious symbols at school. Since the fall of 2004, religious symbols have been forbidden in French schools. This means that Muslim girls are no longer allowed to wear veils at school. But such a law forces immigrants to leave their original culture and choose the French culture. Other countries consider that a successful integration policy is that immigrants can keep their original culture while also accepting the new culture (or at least not rejecting it). This is the British model. Language instruction is an important part of this. By improving their knowledge of the language, immigrants are assisted in becoming more quickly adjusted to the new country without abandoning their own culture.

In this debate on the integration of immigrants in the host country, there is one important issue that has been somewhat neglected by policy discussions: the *role of cultural leaders* and their influence as coordinating socialization agents. It is, indeed, well-documented that cultural leaders or the cultural institutions that they represent (churches, mosques, schools, ethnic associations) have an important impact on the integration and assimilation of immigrants in Europe and the United States. For example, in the United States, sermons, lectures, and discussions held in places of worship on immigration influence the ways that parishioners think about immigration policy (Nteta and Wallsten, 2012). Within Islam, contemporary pronouncements by clerics can have substantial sway among lay Muslims, defining norms of acceptability and permissibility for the entire range of human action (Nielsen, 2012). In Germany, imams paid by the Turkish state transmit their religious knowledge by means of sermons in the mosque, in particular, Friday sermons which offer a one-way flow of knowledge from the imam to the believers (Yurdakul and Yükleyn, 2009). Some religious leaders even give anti-German speeches in mosques. In his Friday sermon at Mevlana Mosque, a well-established mosque in Kreuzberg directed by the Islam Federation in Berlin (IFB), an Imam was filmed by German TV station ZDF giving such an address. Among other things, the imam said Germans will go to hell, they do not shave their armpits and they stink. After the broadcast, the imam apologized, but IFB removed him from his position (Yükleyn and Yurdakul, 2011).

In this paper, we would like to investigate these issues by focusing on the role of cultural leaders in the integration of immigrants in the host country. Indeed, to have an effective integration policy, one needs to understand the way ethnic minorities form their identity, get culturally organized and how they identify themselves with different role models. Surprisingly, in economics, there is little research on the role of cultural leaders in the formation of cultural identity of immigrants, even though community leaders are common in immigrant communities.

For that, we develop a model where individuals get socialized to specific cultural traits in two ways. The first channel is the usual *decentralized* evolutionary mechanism working through parents direct inculturation efforts (*vertical socialization*) and social exposure to peers (*oblique socialization*). The second mechanism involves community leaders or cultural institutions with a longer-term view and more encompassing vision on cultural dynamics at the *group* level, which therefore implies a more *centralized* process of socialization.

To be more precise, individuals can be of two types (*a* or *b*), for example, “religious” or “secular”, “ethnic” or “mainstream”, etc. They enjoy utility from consuming a public good related to their trait and the incentives to choose their preferred action increase with the amount of specific public good provided for that trait. For example, for a religious Muslim person, the public good could be a mosque or an Islamic school, while for members of a specific ethnic group, it would

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