

World on Fire
Amy Chua

The role of "market dominant minorities" throughout the world, and the question of intelligence

Mrs. Chua pounds home the point that "Market Dominant Minorities" are a significant factor, often the dominant players, in developing countries. The situation differs from continent to continent. Ethnic Chinese dominate many Southeast Asian economies, basically everything from Burma eastward. Overseas Indians and a few local tribes are the entrepreneurs of East Africa and Lebanese share West Africa with the locals. Former colonials, of course, retain important roles in South Africa, Zimbabwe and a few other countries.

The notion of "Market Dominant Minorities" plays out somewhat differently in Europe, especially the newly capitalistic Russia. There, in less than a generation, long suppressed Jews, representing something like 1% of the population, have become the tycoons. Latin America, mixture that it is of European, Native American and African bloodlines, is a different situation. Nonetheless as Mrs. Chua points out, the elites have a decidedly white cast.

And why is this a dangerous situation? Because democracy puts the majority in control. Rule of law is not sufficient to prevent them from expropriating the wealth of the minorities. Or worse -- killing and looting, such as the Chinese minority suffered in Indonesia, whites have suffered in Zimbabwe, and Tutsis suffered at the hands of Hutus in Rwanda. She expands her thesis to explain that the USA dominates the world economy much as Chinese and others dominate certain nations, and that 9-11 was an expression of the rage and frustration of countries that find themselves unable to compete with the US.

Miss Chua cites Thomas Friedman, "The Lexus and the Olive Tree", to refute his optimism, and Samuel Huntington and Thomas Sowell as supporting authors. Still, in the end she finds no reason why certain minorities always seem to wind up on top.

I think that the Chinese Mrs. Chua is being modest and disingenuous. I would suggest that she read the black Mr. Sowell more deeply. There are significant differences among peoples. At a minimum they are, as Mr. Sowell suggests in "Race and Culture," cultural. Other authors, among them Lynn and VanHansen in "IQ and the Wealth of Nations, Arthur Jensen in "The g Factor", and Murray and Herrnstein in "The Bell Curve" see significant differences in average intelligence among peoples, with Jews and Chinese like the Chua-Rubinfelds likely to be at the top of the heap.

Folks in academia shy away from this conclusion. MIT's Steven Pinker dances around it in his excellent "The Blank Slate." Stanford's Luigi Cavalli-Sforza lays out a wealth of excellent research on human evolution in "Genes, Peoples and Languages" but declines to follow where it might lead. Jared Diamond makes a powerful case in "Guns, Germs and Steel" that accidents of geography gave Asians and Europeans a tremendous cultural endowment, but declines to consider that evolution might have favored intelligence these among peoples with a richer material culture to manage. And now Mrs. Chua feigns having no notion of what might be special about her own people that makes them bubble to the top in situation after situation, with or without education, connections, or seed capital, and despite formidable obstacles.

For only one reason would I endorse her reticence. If some peoples turn out to be smarter than others there isn't much we can do about it. One might twist Christ's words to say, "the rich will always be with you." Moreover, they will always be a minority. As savants from Malthus to Herbert Spencer have remarked, the smart and the rich don't seem to be terribly fertile. Maybe they have found something more fun than sex?

Her most trenchant observation, that the rich should find ways to buy off the poor, is probably the best wisdom in the book. It happens in the US. Rich folks from Carnegie through Rockefeller, Gates and Soros, well fixed unto the third generation, have given away vast sums. More than democracy, then, the U.S. needs to export a philosophy of philanthropy.

One further observation. Large numbers of Jews, Chinese and other smart folks in the United States are, like Mrs. Chua herself, sufficiently confident of their material survival that they eschew crass lucre for the pursuit of ideas. She left Wall Street to write this trenchant book. I hope that her example inspires others.