

Rector
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Conference on the Impact of Culture and
Thought on Global Transformation
Algiers, December 1981.

This is my intervention:

Mr. Chairman, I am very grateful to you for giving me the floor. It provides me with an opportunity to express, however belatedly, my pleasure and the honour I feel about being here, and to add my words of welcome to those of the Chairman at the opening session. Speaking now, at the same time, gives me a different kind of opportunity, namely to interact with you as a participant, and it is an opportunity I welcome very much. Especially, because of the importance of this meeting. Its importance is in a sense demonstrated by the fact that this conference has been able to bring together all of you, people of intellectual stature and prominence in a variety of fields. I believe that it was our awareness of the importance of the subject matter that has added to the attraction of Algerian hospitality for all of us to come to Algiers.

I am quite sure that the importance of the topic in our own minds has something to do with the increasing awareness among all of us of the extent to which economics, the social sciences, as well as philosophy have been unable to adequately explain human and collective behaviour in the past 20 years. Neither have they been able to make any informed projections about future behaviour. The reasons for this are obvious, but require much more rigorous analysis. There is in the first place, of course, the increasing complexity of the various processes of the social change. There is also the increasing rate of change, the increasing rapidity and the scale of social change. Another reason is that factors that have been neglected in social theory turned out to have a much more profound impact on social change than expected. The role of religion is a case in point, and generally the very profound shift in values taking place in different directions and in different places in the world. We have also seen the manifestation of the erosion and malfunctioning of many institutions, including the state itself, profoundly affecting the dynamics of social change and global transformation.

All this requires us to review our present arsenal of conceptual tools and intellectual categories of thought. We will have also to review the relevance of our conventional dichotomies and possibly reconceptualize much of our ways of relating to social reality and change.

It is with this in mind that I have followed the discussions so far quite intensely. I have enjoyed the opportunity to listen to a large number of important statements. If I may say so, however, I have also been struck by what was not raised in the discussions. I would like to limit my intervention to a discussion of some of these points. One major item which I felt was missing was a discussion of the impact of modern communications on social processes and on institutions to the point where they have become a major factor contributing to their erosion. This raises questions about the impact of modern communications on the capacity of a system towards solidarity-making and towards developing and maintaining an adequate capacity for social and political cohesion. Inevitably we will have to look at the modes in which the images are formed through which we reconstruct social reality in our minds, and develop the conceptual tools for our understanding of that reality. It leads us into the need for semantic analysis of our concepts in the social sciences and also for a deeper historical and comparative analysis of the social sciences as a social phenomenon itself. In addition it has also become clear that^{as} social change does not take place within specific social systems in isolation, but as a result of the pervasiveness of communication and information, we will have to study processes of solidarity-making within the context of interdependence, and specifically within the context of the interaction between universalizing tendencies and those tending towards cultural specificity. We are therefore dealing with problems of self-reliance, not through decoupling or through development in isolation, or in any autarchic sense, but through the proper management of interdependence. This forces on each civilization the necessity to constantly redefine itself in terms of the changing values resulting from the impact of science and technology, high energy cost, communications and also the impact of biotechnology. In doing so each culture will have to confront the basic questions that determine its essential character - or one might say pre-figure the perception of the experience of reality - that is the culture conceptions of death, love, loyalty, courage, purpose and meaning of life and the use of force.

The re-definition of these fundamental concepts is a difficult and painful process which each culture will have to undertake in constant interaction with the outside world without losing a sense of cultural continuity. In other words, at the political level ideology should be nationally relevant and internationally viable or credible. We, therefore, need a communications theory of social transformation. This might help us to explain more adequately the phenomenon of the "state" in the Third World, its power, the relations within it, between those who support the social political system and those who don't, the patterns of distribution of power, and how these affect patterns of technology choice and of industrialization.

The second item which I felt was missing was a discussion of the process of increasing militarization, the increasing tendency towards resort to arms in a polarized world, but also at the national level, the increasingly easy access to the means of violence. It is obvious that the process of militarization and reliance on arms is not limited to the role of the armed forces. What we are dealing with is a process of militarization of society in general, and the impact this has on processes of social transformation. It should be noted that at the same time new expressions of commitment to non-violence are also emerging. The process of militarization also has affected the world of science. One might say that the area of scientific information is becoming increasingly a closed one, because of the increasing control and participation of the military in the development of science and technology. The role of military research and development, but also of the think tanks and institutes of strategic studies, the field of informatics, and electronics have shown increasing intrusion and control by the military. In this regard we should also look at the area of cryptology. This is bound to have a profound impact on the development of ideas that govern a society's perception of itself and its surrounding reality.

These are some of the considerations that came to mind as I was listening to the discussions. We cannot disregard the increasing violence at the sub-national, at the national and international levels, that accompany these processes of social transformation and we have to be able to understand the internal dynamics of our societies much better, but also their interaction with the environment in which they function. I hope that my intervention will contribute to a discussion of these, in my view, rather important points.

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Soedjatmoko
25 January, 1982.