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CULTURAL IDENTITY OF THIRD WORLD

COUNTRIES AND THE IMPACT OF

MODERN COMMUNICATIONS

This essay has no pretension of being in any way a definitive
study. At best it should be seen as a feeble attempt at cutting
the underbrush in order to gain a clearer field of vision and to
undertake a provisional scanning of the problem .
With the onset of the Information Age, it has almost become
common place to discuss in broad and general terms the impact
communications have had on almost all aspects of our lives.
From the size and mode of operation of business entreprises and
government organisations, population movements to and away from
urban settlements, the style of politics, the arts, to livesty-
les, interpersonal relationships as well as international rela-
tions, they have all in one way or another, sometimes directly
and sometimes subtly, been influenced by modern communications.
Still, our systematic knowledge about the impact of communica-
tions on whole cultures is extremely limited. Despite some im-
pressive pioneering work, the communications research field is
still relatively new and fragmented, while the comparative
study of macro social systems in sociology is
still in search of an aggreed methodology. Almost inevitably
then, any venture into this field will have to be impressionis-
tic, and highly tentative.

The extent of our ignorance in this area becomes even more
obvious when we turn the question of the communications impact
on Third World cultures around, and address it first to the indus-
trialized West.

There is, for instance, no question about the fact that mass cul-
ture is a product of modern communications. It is not difficult
to remember the concern that this development engendered among
the protagonists of the high culture of the West. The homogeni-
zation of modern man and his increasing other - directedness,
the growing superficiality and spiritual emptiness of modern
life, the coming revolt of the masses, the rapidly changing fads
in dress and music, and in general the high volatility of moods
and lifestyles, culminating in mindless consumerism, were con-
cerns which at one time or another over the last 50 years have
dominated intellectual discourse among the culturati of the West.
Still, what one observes now are phenomena which seem to run
counter to those earlier tendencies. One can see a new asserti-
veness of the individual, a new concern for personal identity,
a search for authenticity, and a new privatism. There also seems
to be an emergent emphasis on a new particularism of both a
local and ethnic kind.

Modern communications and cybernetics have made possible the
growth of large organisations. They did
lead to the growth of large government bureaucracies as well as
of large business entreprises which subsequently became the major
engines for economic growth, but these did not lead to the growth
of the larger political entities which had also become, at least
in principle, possible. Rather, they seem to have led to aliena-
tion, a declining willingness to identify with the concerns and
symbols of the nation-state, a corresponding commitment to local
politics and community related activities, and a yearning to
return to smaller social and political units in a search
for modes of production and of living on a smaller and more
human scale.

the West

It is probably true that in/ traditional differences in national
character have become blurred, at least as perceived from the
outside. Still, the stereotypes that distinguish a Frenchman from
a German, an American or an Italian or a Russian, seem to stick
with an almost irrational persistence, despite the similarities
in fashion, dress and consumerist lifestyles. At the same time,
one has to conclude that, seen from the inside, the sense of
separate cultural identity as the expression of a nationally
shared subjectivity does not seem to have diminished a great deal,
despite the homogenizing impact of modern communications. The po-
litical assertiveness/ of language as a focus for cultural identity has turned
out to be a problem defying the conformities of mass culture.
Phenomena like these make one realize the multiplicity of levels
within a culture, and their different susceptibility to the impact
of modern communications. They raise also the broader question of
the relationship between improved availability of, and access to
information, and the profound shifts in value orientation which
are now so clearly discernible in the West. While it is true that
availability and access to information was an essential precondi-
tion for the rise in productivity, one wonders whether these had
not also something to do with the apparent loss of the work-
ethos in the West. Also, increased communication has led to more
efficient production, and in many ways to more rational behaviour.
But what has made the ultimate irrationality of the continuing
arms race between the super powers, so impervious to the ratio-
nalizing impact of information availability ? For all the ratio-
nal sophistication that has gone into the calculus of mutual
nuclear deterrence, the nuclear arms race can only be seen as an
expression of basic irrationalities of the major information -
intensive civilizations in the world.
In addition, the information and knowledge explosion has not
seem to have led to the complete secularisation of Western socie-
ty as it, at first, seemed it would. On the contrary, it has not
prevented the resurgence of religiosity, reflected in the number
and kinds of religious cults, the increasing number of reconver-

sions, first to fundamentalist Christianity, and the/movement subsequent
from this into the more establishment churches in the United
States, although this is less true in Europe.

It is then, at least for the time being, almost impossible to
make clearcut and unambiguous statements about how exactly modern
communications have affected Western cultures.
We are all aware that somehow communications have played an
important role in what seem to be the swings of a cultural pen-
dulum. But our understanding of their precise correlation
is very inadequate, and there is not much that we can say about
this, except that communications most likely have considerably
added to the amplitude and possibly the frequency of these swings.

It would be, therefore even more unrealistic, in turning the
question towards the cultures of the Third World, to hope to get
more than impressionistic, intuitive and speculative answers,
which may however still have some heuristic value.
Before doing so however, one remark should be made about the
North - South context within which the question is posed.
The question itself obviously, is a valid one, and one which
engages the minds of many people, especially in the South, but
also in the North.

There is a genuine concern that as a result of the expansion of
modern communications across the globe, some Third World coun-
tries will lose their cultural identity, and that other cultures
may be destroyed or at least marginalized. The plausibility of
this happening, however, very much depends on whether Western -
and to some extent also Soviet - dominance of modern communica-
tions, in terms of both of infrastructure and information flows,
will continue indefinitely.
During the last decade however, profound changes in global power
configuration have taken place and continue to take place. There
has been a considerable diffusion of power across the globe, as

well as a reduction of relative power of the West, even though, in absolute terms, United States power may have increased. And we are witnessing the emergence of new powers, both on the global as well as on the regional level. It may well be that we are at the beginning of a major process of fundamental historical change which will eventually see the emergence of a number of major non-Western civilisations, a Sinitic, a Moslem, a Hindu and likely a number of other ones, taking their place side by side with Western civilisation, on a basis of rough parity. It is now already no longer possible for the West, unilaterally, to impose international solutions, let alone, a viable international system on the international community, without the consent of the Third World, however divided it is within itself. Undoubtedly, at some point such shifts in power relations will find their reflection in the sharing of control over international communications, through the Third World's participation in making the decisions that will ensure a more equitable allocation of both broadcasting and non-broadcasting frequencies, in the allocation of electronic spectrum use, and of satellite parking slots. Also, through participation in the policy decisions affecting the symmetry and asymmetry of information flows, the question of prior consent for transborder home reception, the production of communications technology, and decisions on definitions of privacy, transborder data flows, and the developing countries' capacity to develop their own media. In short, the struggle for a New World Information Order should be seen as a manifestation of the Third World's determination to act no longer as the passive periphery to the West's active center.

It therefore matters a great deal whether one tries to respond to the topic under discussion from a future perspective of continued Western dominance, or from the future perspective of a pluralistic world in which power disparities have been considerably reduced. In the first case, the major problem is the struggle of Third World countries to retain their cultural identity against the onslaught of homogenizing Western dominated communications. In the second, the problem is the largely autonomous socio-cultural transformation of Third World countries, the process of redefinition of their cultural identity, and the manner in which interaction and communication with other cultures will affect this.

Unless the world breaks apart into an inherently unstable
collection of autarkic groupings, it is most likely that the
North and the South, the East and the West will be linked toge-
ther by broader or narrower bands of what might be called cosmo-
politan culture-shaped by modern communications, covering rules
of behaviour and to some extent also, lifestyles, shared by im-
portant parts of the elites in the various countries, but also
covering activities in the fields of industrial production, inter-
national commerce and the exchange of information and knowledge,
science, technology and culture. This cosmopolitan culture, for
the moment mainly rooted in Western cultures, but later, inevita-
bly and increasingly, fed and stimulated by the world's non-
Western cultures as well, are, and will continue to be, a major
carrier of universal humanistic values, expressive of a growing
sense of global human solidarity, as well as of a growing under-
standing of the fragility of the globe's ecological system, now
dependent for its maintenance on humankinds mutual dependency.
It would be wrong however, to assume that this band, or these
bands, will also be the dominant factors in the political and
socio-cultural dynamics of the large non-Western civilisations
in the world.

The essence of a culture is defined by its responses to the ulti-
mate questions of human existence: death, hope, tragedy, love,
loyalty, power, the meaning and purpose of life, and the place
of the transcendental in human existence. The responses to these
questions may be affected by science and technology, and by the
secularizing impact of modernisation, but need not necessarily
be destroyed by them. Considering the indications that modern
man in Western society now seems to be increasingly unwilling to
live permanently in a totally secularized world, it is rather
unlikely that in those parts of the Third World where the tradi-
tional social systems have been largely shaped by religion, we
will see the same degree of secularisation which has characte-
rized Western modernisation, even though changing social struc-
tures are bound to effect religious perceptions there as well.
It is quite likely that the great civilisations of Asia at least,

will show the same degree of resilience and historical conti-
nuity which has taken them through both the colonial and post-
colonial era. Moreover, in many parts of the Third World today,
we can observe the beginnings of a moral and religious backlash
against the materialism, commercialism, consumerism and greed
which seems inevitably to accompany the development and moderni-
sation process. This backlash is of two kinds. In the first place,
a neo-fundamentalistic reaction hostile to modernisation. Second-
ly, a religious counter-modernisation, not hostile to modernity
per se, but insisting on its moral and religious reinterpretation
as a basis for the development effort. Many of the cultures of
the Third World will therefore retain their distinctive features,
despite the sharing of universalistic values, intellectual orien-
tations, and fashions, as well as lifestyles of Third World eli-
tes with the West. The case of post war modern Japan seems to
argue against this thesis, but American protection and Japan's
successes in production and exports resulting from their mastery
of science and technology, may simply have delayed the point at
which Japan will, culturally, come into its own, resolving its own
insecurities about the meaning of its civilisation and about its
role in the world beyond the sales of automobiles and electronic
hardware.

History also shows that in the process of interaction with other
cultures, countries go through alternating waves of openness and
closedness towards external influence. The opportunity cost of
closing its bounderies may come very high to a country, in terms
of sharing in the advances of science and technology, but resort
to it may have been taken only when the mediating mechanisms or
filtering processes which integrate external influences and in-
formation into the cultural life of a nation, become overloaded,
for the sake of maintaining cultural continuity and national
integrity. Of course, there is obviously a point where such
isolation becomes disfunctional. We have seen such alternating
waves of open - and closedness of non-Western cultures in the
face of Western science, technology and power in Japan's and

China's history, but also in the history of imperial Russia and even of the Soviet Union today. It is to be expected that in the years to come we will at times see more expressions of this recurring need for privacy. This should be simply a matter of national sovereignty and privilege, were it not, that such isolation from, and such impediments to the free flow of information, quite often, at the same time, facilitates the suppression of dissent at home.

Another tendency reinforcing the continuity of cultural identity is the increasing power and the expanding role of the governments of nationstates in the Third World. Ironically, this may in part be the result of growing interdependence and the legitimate desire of such governments to maximize their interests in the shifting patterns of international power. In this process, which in economic terms involves rearangements in the international division of labor, and the struggle for a new international economic order, the governments of these states have become the prime negotiators with the outside world. These extensions into the international field of the decolonisation struggle inevitably strengthens the sense of national and cultural identity.
A great deal of power, of course, has also accrued to governments of developing countries as a result of their role as the main development agent in the country. For these purposes, the expansion of the domestic communications system become essential instruments to these governments. This leads us to a consideration of the impact of development on the communications system and vice versa, as well as of their impact on the cultural identity of these countries.

It is becoming increasingly evident that the large and populous developing countries will be unable to solve their problems of deep and widespread poverty and of massive rural unemployment by replicating the Western model of industrialisation through the gradual enlargement of their modern sectors. Through the development of indigenous rural technology, taking it gradually up to subsequent steps on the technological ladder, while simul-

taneously developing the social organisation which will allow
rural people to maintain command of their technologies and not
relinquish it to the cities; through the development of appro-
priate technology, and the dispersal of modern industries in rural
areas with appropriate linkages to rural productive capacity,
these countries will have to follow a different industrialisation
trajectory from that of the West. It is a course that through
a heavy emphasis on rural and regional employment creating deve-
lopment will lead to a different structural transformation of
their societies and different systems of production of goods and
services, as well as to different urban-rural configurations.
This course of development would take more time in its initial
stages, but would broaden the base of development so as to inclu-
de the whole of society, especially the rural poor and unemployed,
turning their energies into a basic resource. It is essentially a
process of revitalizing the bottom income levels of society through
stimulation of self-organisation and-management, rather than the
mere implantation of technology, capital and skills from the out-
side. This would lead to the growth of largely selfreliant social
systems, suitable for high density living at relatively low per
capita income, but also ones that are resource-conserving and eco-
logically responsible. Poverty and demography therefore, are
forcing upon these countries a development strategy which may lead
to alternative forms of societal organisation, which might be less
prone to many of the problems that have followed in the wake of
Western industrialisation: alienation, atomisation, spiritual
emptiness and consumerism.
Part of the search for different ways in which to organize the
nation towards these ends, will have to include the development
of greater capability for self enjoyment through continued active
participation in the arts, and not through passive listening or
viewing. The stimulation of the innate artistic capabilities of
people will have to be an intrinsic part of this effort.
The reduction of personal space as a result of very high density
living will force the development - or sometimes rediscovery-of
cultural values which will enable people to live together in

relative harmony and civility. It will also require the develop-
ment - or rediscovery - of concepts of inner space, most likely
through art and religion. By integrating the whole of man's
existential experience in this way, impelled by man's yearning
for a return of the "sacred" in human life, it may be possible
to overcome the intellectual dichotomy between religion and
science, as well as the inner fragmentation at the personal level
which science and present development models seem to bring in
their wake. This would make it possible for large numbers of peo-
ple, living closely together, at low and only slowly rising levels
of per capita income, to find a sufficient degree of satisfaction
and meaning in life through a greater capacity for self realisa-
tion in community, without losing their drive and vitality.
It should be realized, of course, that what is desirable and possi-
ble, need not necessarily happen. In truth, it can be stated that
the success or failure of the cultures of Third World countries
to achieve such autonomous development towards less exploitative,
and more humane societies of free human beings, will be the mea-
sure of the vitality and creativity of their cultures. Still, for
the large populous countries, there may be no other way.

This is, of course, not the only scenario that is possible.
Different scenarios are already being played out by smaller, less
populous countries in the Third World, which have successfully
attained a high level of economic well being by applying the
Western industrialisation models, and by fully plugging them-
selves into the network of international trade and communications.
Important though these successes in themselves are, -and not all
small countries have chosen to make that decision -, they will
most likely be phenomena marginal to the success or failure in
terms of their revitalisation and self renewal of the large,
more populous developing countries.

It is by grappling with these problems of poverty and demography,
through turning people into a resource for societal growth and
emancipation, through increased self awareness, self confidence

and pride, and through the selection and evolvement of the
methods and manner in which these goals are pursued, that the
cultural identities of these countries will be transformed, rede-
fined and strengthened from within. They will also be modern, in
the sense that they will be capable to deal effectively and in
their own way with the problems of the turn of the century.

It is obvious that in this process of self renewal of a nation,
and a culture, and in this autonomous development trajectory,
communications will play a very important role. It can however,
only play this role to the extent that it is an indigenous ins-
trument in the service of indigenously and autonomously articu-
lated goals, with regard to overcoming poverty, inequity, oppressi-
veness, and the transformation of the social and political struc-
tures underlying them. Such an autonomous development trajectory
has of course, its own information requirements. It needs above
all an improved capacity to produce relevant, locally generated
information which, especially in rural development is culture-,
area-, and even country-specific. Local relevance will require
decentralized, locally controlled programming in collaboration
with local farmers, responsive to their needs. It will require
giving careful attention to problems of suitable packaging of
such information in line with local educational levels and in-
tellectual orientations, but also to problems of proper location of,
and access to communications equipment for the poorest parts of
both rural and urban populations. This to ensure equal access to
information, and that the availability of modern communications will
reduce, rather than widen, the gap - also in power - between the
information - poor and the information - rich sectors of society.
These countries have also have to build up their indigenous in-
tellectual and artistic creativity, as well as their indigenous
and autonomous capacity in science and technology, responsive to
their own problems and aspirations. Indigenous development by it-
self will therefore provide the greatest impetus towards esta-
blishing modern communications in these countries. They will not
come into being as merely the extension into the hinterland of
any international network. The establishment of modern communi-

cation networks in the rural areas of these large and populous
countries is an unavoidable condition for the maintenance of the
momentum of development, because of the increasing inadequacy of
the traditional means of supplying information to the rural popu-
lation: the village headman, and the extension services.
At some point in the development process, rapidly changing produc-
tion and market requirements will create a demand for a volume
and a range of information, which can only be handled through
direct access by the farmer and the rural population in general.
It is against this background that problems like the right to
privacy and shared control of the international communication
infrastructure and policies, and possibly even Third World represen-
tation on the board of international newsagencies by competent
individuals, in the contemporary international debate on freedom
of informationflow, have to be seen and understood.
Still, global interdependence and the interests of the developing
countries in international trade, industrial development and in
the international exchange of information in the area of science
and culture, require linkages with the domestic autonomous commu-
nications system. Moreover, independent access to international
news and information by the population would help to keep up the
quality, integrity and completeness of coverage of the domestic
information system. Nevertheless, in most of these large populous
developing countries it is unlikely that the impact of the inter-
national system will be much more than marginal to the internal
dynamics of the country's autonomous societal growth.

At the same time, global interdependence, intensified and made
instantaneous by the development of communications, make it inevi-
table that the forging of these cultural identities will take
place in continuous dialogue and interaction, and even conflict,
with the First and the Second World. In earlier centuries civili-
sations rose and fell without much affecting other civilisations.
Later on we have seen Asian and African cultures succumbing to
superior Western power.

In the Information Age however, a change in the constellation of
power almost anywhere in the world, is bound to affect the global
balance of power.

It may well be that only those processes of selfrenewal and cultural
redefinition encompassing alternative moral visions of man, of
his relationship to society and history, to nature and the trans-
cendental, will be viable only if they are compatible with, and
meaningful to others beyond their borders. What may help this search
along is the realisation that both the rich and the poor countries,
the industrial and the industrializing countries are all clearly
unprepared for the future, and that all the great ideologies
seem to have spent their strength, while the large majority of
humankind has lost it's faith in the viability of the existing
international system, and has come to consider it as basically
immoral. The struggle for redefinition and transformation from
within, of their cultural identities on the part of Third World
countries should therefore be seen as part of a general search
among people all over the world, for new moral foundations on
which a viable international order can rest.

No nation, rich or poor, powerful or weak, can work out its
salvation in isolation. The answers we are all looking for cannot
be found by any single culture alone. They can only be found to-
gether. In both success or failure, the role of communications
may well be crucial.