

1978

Soedjatmoko

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Not for publication.

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 enterprises and government organisations, population movements to and away from urban settlements, the style of politics, the arts, to lifestyles, interpersonal relationships as well as international relations, 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 communications on whole cultures is extremely limited. Despite some impressive 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 agreed methodology. Almost inevitably then, any venture into this field will have to be impressionistic, and highly tentative.

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Paper prepared for the conference on " The Future of Communications, Cultural Identity in an Interdependent World", organized by the World Future Studies Federation, September 16 - 19, 1978. The views presented here are the author's own. They do not necessarily reflect those of the Indonesian National Development Planning Agency, to which the author is an adviser.

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 industrialized West.

There is, for instance, no question about the fact that mass culture 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 homogenization 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 concerns 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 assertiveness 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 enterprises 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 alienation, 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 political 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 precondition 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 rationalizing impact of information availability? For all the rational 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 society 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 subsequent movement 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 pendulum. 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 countries 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 communications, 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 together by broader or narrower bands of what might be called cosmopolitan culture-shaped by modern communications, covering rules of behaviour and to some extent also, lifestyles, shared by important parts of the elites in the various countries, but also covering activities in the fields of industrial production, international 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, inevitably 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 understanding of the fragility of the globe's ecological system, now dependent for its maintenance on humankind's 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.

Q - rel. betw. bands of elites & how elites maintain their position

The essence of a culture is defined by its responses to the ultimate 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 traditional social systems have been largely shaped by religion, we will see the same degree of secularisation which has characterized Western modernisation, even though changing social structures 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 continuity 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 modernisation process. This backlash is of two kinds. In the first place, a neo-fundamentalistic reaction hostile to modernisation. Secondly, 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 orientations, and fashions, as well as lifestyles of Third World elites 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.

examples?

political dynamics?

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 boundaries 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 information 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

evidence v. plausible but actual dynamics?

Burne?

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 rearrangements 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-

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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 appropriate 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 development 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 include 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 outside. 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 ecologically 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

Q- is this equally applicable to the developing countries? - yes, but the direction of the process is different. The process is more of a self-organizing process. The process is more of a self-organizing process. The process is more of a self-organizing process.

effect on
econ. power
people

to what extent does this differ from "indiv" vs "collective" dichotomy - or is that a false contrast?

relative harmony and civility. It will also require the development - 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 people, 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 realisation in community, without losing their drive and vitality. It should be realized, of course, that what is desirable and possible, 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 measure 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 themselves 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

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one desired
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Malaysia?

evolution

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, redefined 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 instrument in the service of indigenously and autonomously articulated goals, with regard to overcoming poverty, inequity, oppressiveness, and the transformation of the social and political structures 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 intellectual 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 intellectual 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 itself will therefore provide the greatest impetus towards establishing 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-

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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 population: the village headman, and the extension services.

At some point in the development process, rapidly changing production 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 representation on the board of international newsagencies by competent individuals, in the contemporary international debate on freedom of information flow, 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 communications 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 international 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 inevitable 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 civilisations 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 transcendental, 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 its 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 together. In both success or failure, the role of communications may well be crucial.

how strong
is this?
evidence?