

Cultural Strategies in a Changing Development: Reassessing Paulo Freire in the Information Age

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Abstract

The study of society is necessarily influenced by the social currents and the nature of the interacting forces that characterize human activities. Thus, modernization theories, post-structuralism and dependency theory all reflect cultural patterns and references which can be located in specific times and places. Paulo Freire's sociology derives its character from the cultural and societal norms of his environment, especially his analysis of historical materialist conditions. Freire advocates revolutionary action for liberation and freedom, which must be extended beyond the individual for maximum social significance. Development is a bridge that connects the individual to society, and the local to the global.

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Stratégies Culturelles dans un Environnement de Développement qui Change sans Cesse: Ré- évaluation de Paulo Freire dans l'Epoque d'Information

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Résumé

Toute étude d'une communauté est inévitablement influencée par les courants et la nature des forces sociales à la base de chaque activité. Ainsi la modernisation des théories, le post-structuralisme et les théories impliquées, sont un reflet des structures et des aspects sociaux, spécifiques aux époques et à la localité. La communication sociologique de Paulo Freire tire son caractère des normes socio-culturels de son environnement. C'est notamment le cas de son analyse de l'histoire des conditions, quelque peu matérialistes, de sa communauté. Freire est de ceux qui soutiennent l'emploi des moyens révolutionnaires, dans la libération des opprimés, ou à la recherche de la liberté. C'est une approche qui dépasse le niveau de l'individu, pour se situer au niveau de la communauté. A son avis, le développement est une espèce de lien entre l'individu et la communauté, qu'il s'agisse du plan local ou global.

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Introduction

American modernization theories of the 1950s assumed the centrality of the mass media in innovation diffusion, trickle-down processes and adoption behaviour. Modernisation theory sees under-development as a product of internal cultural barriers. The problem is assumed to be ignorance, backwardness and irrationality. The cure offered by Wilbur Schramm, Daniel Learner, Lucien Pye and others who worked for the US State Department and other agencies in ensuring hegemony over developing countries between the 1950s and 1970s called for modernisation through the mass media. The media were to break down traditional values, introduce technical skills, encourage national integration and accelerate economic growth through formal education.

The critique of modernization theory emanated from Marxist scholars like Gundar Frank who examined relations between the First and Third Worlds in terms of dependency theories. They argued that 'development' in fact, led to under development of the Third World and the concentration of wealth in the First World metropolises.

Dependency theory, for all its explanatory power however, was unable to offer anything more than critique. The theory had no solutions to the problem of asymmetrical and exploitative international economic relations. It offered no mechanisms to facilitate negotiation, conflict resolution, community or individual empowerment. It is not suprising then that the moment of 'development studies' has passed – largely deemed a failure by anti-imperialist scholars worldwide.

Post-Structuralism

Notwithstanding the postmodern era, decades-old grand narratives have survived the discursive and cultural fracturing of the postmodern global information economy. 'Nation-building', for example, a term since discarded by most of the developed

Western countries, remains the primary political discourse in Africa. Governments try in vain to control their economies, media and populations as independent entities in a world in which economic and media borders are fast disappearing. Debate in South Africa about post-apartheid reconstruction and development, as another instance, focuses on restructuring obsolete Fordist (conveyor belt mass production) modes of production. How to do this in a global economy which has moved into post-Fordist international modes is rarely discussed.

Information industries and production managed by information technology are also largely ignored in African debates. The lack of development in Africa is still opportunistically blamed on the West and capitalism, colonial exploitation and white elites. Though there is much historical truth in these allegations, solutions for Africa now need to take on new directions to escape this constraining rhetoric, which also served the accumulation of wealth for indigenous elites and cold war objectives, to the detriment of the mass of Africa's people.

Electronic technologies have relativised the world, taking it into post-Fordist modes of production, post-structuralist concepts and post-modernist conditions. In these 'post' times, the notion of truth as a fixed, transtemporal realm accessible only to empirical scientific investigation has taken a hard knock. In the unashamedly contradictory ambit of postmodernism, truth is subjective and relative to time, place and culture, all of which are dynamic moments in the 'infosphere' of the global information society. The shock of new global perceptions which began to hit home to humanity after the eruption of the atomic age at the end of the World War II, was the death knell for the totalising metanarratives of modernity. The faith which Western civilisation had placed in the efficacy of the scientific method for ascertaining truth was seriously undermined by the atomic age. Nagasaki and Hiroshima signalled humankind's final betrayal by the religion of science. The project of the enlightenment which sought human betterment through the tantalizing chimera of scientific progress was fundamentally challenged by humankind's

newfound capacity to destroy itself, placing the means in our hands of negating the thrust of evolution which has brought us to our current pinnacle of sophistication and self-awareness.

The post-World War II societies are characterised by consumerism, mass media, computerisation and bureaucracy. Technology, particularly information technology, is changing the way knowledge is stored and accessed (Lyotard in Sarup, 1988). However this new era, while breaking with the past, does not negate that past. At the heart of post-modernism is a "paradoxical dualism, or double coding", which is "both the continuation of modernism and its transcendence" (Doll, 1993).

Postmodernism challenges the way truth is constructed under the modernist paradigm, truth being relative to the web of signifying systems which construct the narratives by which people make meaning of their world. Just as Einstein's theories of relativity shook the old scientific establishment of the time, so does postmodernism undermine the closure of meaning assumed by modernist narratives. This is one of the dynamics which contributed to the demise of repressive modernist orders found in the Soviet Union and apartheid South Africa. Closed, universalising narratives could not be imposed upon humanity or even sections of it for ever, even within tightly controlled nation-states.

The elision of time and space through global media and communications networks reassembles communities of interest into new and constantly shifting networks of meaning, new telecommunities and forms of interacting. The electronic media, and especially the electronic mail network, Internet and the World Wide Web have redefined time, space, identity, knowledge, culture, production and consumption (Braman 1994). A new non-linear, self-organising post-modern world operating beyond modernist prescriptions emerged in the 1990's. The open-ended structure of Internet, for example, makes it difficult for regulators anywhere to control or regulate its content. One example of this is the anti-censorship stance taken by the Media Institute of Southern Africa in its media watch alerts which monitor on a daily

basis infringements of press freedom by African governments. Vigorous debates in the United States trends towards regulation of Internet. More media control and opportunistic incursions by capital are conducted daily on the Cultural Environment Movement (Texas) Internet network, amongst others.

And herein lies the basic contradiction for Africa - modernist economies rooted in Fordist modes of production are being prejudiced in a global economy which has fractured both the mode and relations of production across continents and classes through computers, telecommunications, multimedia and information technology.

Similarly, consumption patterns have changed and are continually changing. The new commodities are information, image, knowledge and ideas; the new inputs are time, artistic creativity, multimedia and international labour competitiveness. These dynamics have brought together an astonishing array of interacting disciplines and professions: music, media producers, software programmers, technology companies, librarians, publishers, copyright lawyers, state employment agencies and others. These sites, separated under industrial capitalism, have been rejoined via the convergence of signal distribution technologies.

Convergence results in new modes of production such as post-Fordism and 'just in time capitalism,' where products and their design are changing on a daily basis in dynamic response to international micro-markets whose tastes are shifting. Though content lags behind technological development, disciplinary boundaries and professional practices are being redefined through the integration of artists and computer programmes in producing software for the Web, video games, cinema and TV, theatre and others.

Products made by slow and geographically bound Fordist methods simply cannot compete under conditions of convergence and post-Fordism. One example in the media industry is cable TV, which is little more than a distraction in that it cannot be incorporated into single transmission systems as has been the

case with other forms of signal distribution and computers.

The dilemma for Africa is that post-Fordist methods of production, marketing and consequent consumption practices, tend to be in opposition to nation building and culturally universalising discourses. These are cemented in the modernist notion of the uniformity and integrity (economic, political, cultural, linguistic, cosmological) of the 'nation-state', national versus global citizens, and cultures bounded by geographical considerations.

A new definition of culture is required which facilitates the above kinds of information movements. Old anthropological definitions emphasising ways of life; literary high-low culture definitions based on spectrums of taste; and sociological definitions emphasising uniformities of social behaviour, are found wanting in the new globalising world of marketable difference.

South Africa as an example is located in a curious position of duality - it is a partially under-developed Third World nation-in-the-making and partially integrated into the international information economy which contests the idea of unity and geographical coherence. Largely missing from current academic debate on economics and development (and 'nation-building'), however, are terms like 'telecommunication', 'media in development', 'satellites', 'information technology', 'hypermedia', 'internet' etc (Collins et al 1992). Many of these notions and strategies are major points of debate in development support communication studies programmes in other parts of Africa and other parts of the world - so too should they be in South Africa. Politicians, in contrast, seem to be more attuned to issues of the global media than are economists (see address to Society of Electrical Engineers by Jacob Zuma, Natal-KwaZulu Provincial Parliament, June 6, 1995)

Basically, the following issues need to be urgently addressed in any assessment of the impact of new technologies on discussions of development and culture:

- few countries have retained an internal homogeneity in

the post-modern world. Top-down paradigms of development ignore the extensively intercultural and interlinguistic nature of current populations within historically defined geographical units. Questions of language, cosmology and culture are emerging as major conflicts even within large trading blocks like the European Union, and even within single federally governed nations like the USA. Local cultural specificities are being jealously guarded even as large tracts of the world become a single market via the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT), the World Trade Organization and other such regulatory bodies.

- The different cultural formations found within and across geographical and national borders exhibit different patterns and forms of communication and from this, require different foundations of mobilisation and development.
- The socio-political experience of South Africa and Latin America over the past two decades has been one of popular grassroots *movements* in conflict with dominant hegemonies. People are demanding consultation and participation at local levels on *their* terms, rather than on those imposed by the state. Planning which disregards social movements and the way *they* make sense of the world is likely to fail. However, there is always the danger of governments appropriating or using populist concerns in order to manipulate social movements for whatever means.
- New approaches to development studies internationally are now moving towards serious emphasis on the *cultural* and local dimensions of development. The classical models of rural and urban development are being seriously questioned.

Issues of *culture and communication* are crucial to any programme attempting to secure development. Significant work has been done by education-oriented development agencies like the Centre for the Study of Education of Developing Countries (CESO) in the Hague, and a host of communication scholars, who combine theories of communication, reception, anthropology, education etc with theories of development at local levels (

Boeren 1994).

CESO also examines the way the subjects of development make sense of development strategies, and how to best communicate with such communities in achieving locally determined development goals (this is sometimes known as 'development support communication'.) This form of micro-development activity is the primary activity of UNESCO, FAO and UNICEF; and agencies like the African Council for Communication Education. If we are talking about culture, we are also taking about language, linguistics, orality, ontology/philosophy, education, sociology and anthropology. Development issues cannot simply be studied from the confines of single disciplines or grand narratives such as 'economics', 'politics', 'regional planning' and so on.

Issues of communication and culture are *fundamental* to any university course as development; indeed many programmes of development, *fail* in the field because development agencies and planners so often ignore these two crucial dimensions. Such agencies - especially if state directed - tend to use development projects to secure their sectarian political goals, often at the *expense* of those to whom such projects have supposedly been targeted.

Eurocentricism

Development studies programmes as currently taught at South African institutions tend toward Eurocentric, specifically British, view of development. Few mention the vast amount of work being done by African agencies in conjunction with UNESCO and other international bodies on:

- a) development support communication;
- b) the interrelation between development and
 - i) local media;
 - ii) interpersonal and local media forms and styles characterized by culturally specific ways of making sense;

iii) the global electronic media and information networks which, though largely absent from African rural areas, significantly impact upon them.

c) The relationship between local forms and styles of mainly non technological communication practices and the globalisation of information technologies.

d) Performance disciplines such as drama, dance and music have also become major sites of educating marginalised local populations into understanding the nature of, and contributing to, development projects. Indeed these have assisted development agencies in understanding the needs and cultural considerations of local communities participating in such projects.

Media is a voice for local populations. But is also open to manipulation by those who would foist their own development myths onto others. Popular access to media is essential in promoting reflexivity and criticism to counter populist mythologies.

e) Cultural negotiation is crucial in development. The information age requires multi-culturalist rather than universalising solutions. How to resolve differences, conflicts and wars through paradigms of development which can reconcile local cultures with global imperatives is one of the key questions.

The Post-Structural Conundrum

The move by First World cultural scholars into post-cultural analysis poses major problems for developing countries which have yet to achieve the momentary grand narratives of modernism and nationhood. The effect of post structuralist thinking is the contestation of single explanations, resulting in open-ended agendas about nation-building, self-identity and ideology. Received meanings are shattered.

The sign's internal contradictions, concealed in the discourses of grand narratives, are ruthlessly exposed in the

information age. Multiple appropriations of the same signs by different constituencies provoke new meanings and new interpretations, themselves then subject to further deconstruction and rearticulation. Meanings, post-structuralists tell us, are thereby liberated, 'democratised' and constantly overturning and being overturned. This semantic energy, however, can also confuse and lead to further, much more subtle forms of social control among recipients (consumers), by those who produce such messages. It may also result in personal and group insecurity, loss of social and cultural values, and alienation.

Developing countries, which remain hostage to the global function of capital, or which actively participate in this process of wealth accumulation and concentration, are faced with the following contradiction:

- their unifying functionalist national political and economic discourses and class structures derive largely from Fordism.
- their urban populations as consumers are subject to post-modernist (advertising) discourses which contest the bases under which their economies are evolving.

While exploitative class positions remain entrenched, the divisions become blurred, even hidden, through consumption practices and the breakdown of single systems of explanation - whether class based or otherwise. What does the term 'development' mean in these circumstances?

In the following section, we attempt to link the postmodern currents of the information age to issues of individual and collective agency. In so doing, we examine the relevance of the work of Paulo Freire in the new media dominated context of the 1990s.

The Freirean Approach: A Critique

Paulo Freire (1972), in working with barely literate peasant communities, deals with the notion of individual agency and empowerment by positing a difference between living 'in' and

'with' the world. Living 'with' the world implies an 'objective' distantiating *from* the world. This assumption assumes that the world can be studied and manipulated through language. Freire argues that 'praxis' exists in the dialectical relationship between object and subject. It is only through this relationship that people are able to reflect upon themselves and upon the world. Thus, "only beings who can reflect upon the fact that they are determined are capable of freeing themselves" (p.52). Consciousness, in this view, arises from an interaction between thinking, self-aware beings and their notion of an objective world separate from themselves.

Freire derives his understanding of 'objective reality' through 'scientific' analysis of historical materialist conditions (Jacoby 1981). Technical impediments to education, he argues, are not as important as the cultural and political processes. Pre-modern, non-literate people tend to see the world as a complex of magical and natural forces. Education encloses people in an alien form of address, and attempts to conform students to the logic of its own system. The result is alienation and enstrangement. Conscientisation in Freire's schema restores to people the right to produce knowledge based upon their own experience and values. Freire's modernist/positivist conception of science, however maintains industrial notions of rationality and efficiency which led, amongst other examples, to the dehumanising oppression of communist societies.

The tele-era breaks with both modernism and post-modernism in its emphasis on inter-connectivity and pattern, self-organising phenomena and others (Jones 1993). The new paradigm conjoins the hitherto separate realms of science and art. One of the major consequences of this new world view is its break with the Cartesian split of mind, body and environment, which characterised modernism. This break was due, in part, to the decline of certainty in the physical sciences.

Heidegger problematised the distinction between "the knowing subject, the knower, and a separable object, the known" (Jones p.30). For Heidegger, being 'in' the world was more conducive to

our knowledge of it than Freire's 'being with' the world and gaining knowledge of it through a "reflective representation". This reality is conceived within the new paradigm as a patterned structure, a 'situation' in which we act "without the possibility of disengagement" from the overall pattern of activity. This precludes the possibility of the 'detached observer', an assertion borne out in sub-atomic physics. In this quantum realm, interpretations of quantum realm, interpretations of quantum phenomena relating to the problem of measurement, as well as to the interrelation of the observer (more precisely the consciousness of the observer) in affecting the probable outcome of events, seem to support a holistic or unitary view of reality. This is the domain of the so-called "new physics", which understands both matter and space to be intrinsically interrelated with consciousness (Talbot 1981).

The implications of such emerging scientific discourse are quite clear for theories of meaning, in that they force a reappraisal of the very ontological foundations of human existence. In the first place, if consciousness and matter are bound up in one continuum, the observer of a physical experiment cannot separate his/her consciousness from the probability of an event's occurrence, no matter what precautions are taken in the laboratory. From this perspective, the atomist conception of physical reality is but the 'maya' of Tantric tradition which obscures our intrinsic interconnectedness with the cosmos. In other words, it has profound implications for our interpretation of the world, or the paradigmatic framework we choose to explicate it (eg. the mathematician Poincarre on geometry, that "one geometry cannot be more true than another; it can only be more convenient" (Talbot 1987 p7).

Freire's idea of manipulating the 'objective' world through language also presents a problem. Jaques Derrida (1989) interprets Heidegger's notions of knowledge in terms of 'conceptual structures', patterns and systems of knowledge (Jones, 1993 p.30), regarding rationalism as limited in its ability to discern certain structures. Derrida's critique of language as a means of ascertaining reality dealt with the lack of direct correlation

between signifiers and signifieds. He argues that meaning is dispersed across the system of signifiers in language. The meaning of a sign is absent in a sense as it is always defined by what the sign is not; so the sign must be written under erasure because it contains that otherness which is beyond definition (Sarup, 1988).

The dissolution of meaning and subject/object differences in hyper-real media space, and the undermining of this dualism by digital, computer graphic representations, cognitive and language studies, force a fundamental reappraisal of Freire's conception of praxis and empowerment. As Jean Lyotard notes, knowledge equals information in these postmodern times. In this view, the binary code of computer technology is redefining the nature of knowledge because it is no longer associated with training/learning, but rather with storage and accessibility, thus being produced no longer as "an end in itself", but "in order to be sold" (Sarup, 1988). This sea-change in the nature of knowledge is reflected in the altered nature of the workforce, with more people engaged in information management rather than actual production in the more sophisticated economies (the 'post-Fordist' scenario). So, knowledge has become the major 'force of production' in these societies. In this sense, the 'ontological' notion of space is that area where (a) knowledge is stored (ie. in computers); or (b) where knowledge is transmitted (through telephone cables, or via the airwaves in broadcasting). There is also that perceptual space occupied by the media, whether it be a billboard or a newspaper. One could also say that the 'space' where information/knowledge exists cannot in fact be measured; on the one hand, the space occupied by our entire space-time continuum can be said to consist of information, and on the other hand one may posit the question: just how large is the human mind, or the imagination of one individual?

Instead of a subject/object dialectic, we are presented in the new paradigm with organic patterns of interconnectedness, which harken to a pre-modern, 'magical' (Renaissance) conception of the universe (Adorno and Horkheimer 1972; McLuhan 1972;

Jones 1993), which is harmonious and holistic. In this model, it is the perception of pattern from which meaning is derived; this is a condition where, for example, words and their essential content are distinct yet inseparable from one another (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1972); where nature was invested with spiritual energy by means of pre-modern magic rituals (McLuhan, 1964); or where reality is translated into hyper-real media (Baudrillard 1981). From a Freirean perspective, this realisation recovers questions of holistic cosmology - those paradigms which view the world as a holistic unity (Kunene 1994). Holism, largely excluded by Freire from his marxist theories, can now be inserted into the notion of indigenously-generated knowledge.

One effect of pattern in communication is felt where common perceptual or knowledge space defined by media or computer communication system is conceived of in terms of complex, dynamic, self-organising (autopoietic) systems. It follows that the organising principles which define such systems apply to development in this space. These principles are based on logical systems which are open rather than closed, emphasising probability rather than absolute predictability, biological and associative models rather than mechanistic, hierarchical ones and self-referentiality rather than "the classical system-environment model based on external control" (Jones 1993: p.33). Within this space, which is to some extent contiguous with a potentialised public sphere where egalitarian relations of media production can apply (eg. networked computer communications), the nature of borders is a defining characteristic of difference rather than the modernist subject/object split. Here, "reference to the other" is "a special case of self-reference" (Jones 1993: p. 33) which undermines, for example, the us/them dichotomy of oppressors and oppressed. A new understanding of oppression as affecting both parties in a de-humanising manner results.

Freire's solution to the problem of unequal power distribution and concomitant repression in society was the process of conscientisation of the oppressed, which can take place through

a recognition of social conditioning. The problem here is in the difference between the "culture of silence", which he attributes to surbordinate (primarily Third World) groups and the culture which "has a voice", that is, that of the oppressors (First World). Freire sees the only possibility for those subjects of the silent society to gain a voice in being in radical structural dominance of the over-society's voice, which results in a lack of structural perception'. This situation is only changed in societies experiencing structural change- the dominated wish for a voice, while the elites attempt to deny them this privilege. So we see in the commodified environment of late capitalism, with its attendant information age communication systems, an extractive model of information flow which operates in a disempowering fashion.

Meaning is lost in media hyper-reality, a space which no longer effects a 'sharing' dialogue in information exchange. The meaning of information no longer relates to the concerns of fulfilling human needs of capitalism in creating passive and/or active consumer markets for its products. In this ubiquitous field of 'media space', the capacity for self-knowledge or 'conscientisation' in Freirean terms, no longer rests with the objective distancing from determining social structures, but rather with self-reflexibility and an awareness of autopoietic social patterning. In this autopoietic model, patterns of social action and awareness are created through intertextual weaving, a process of creative production of meaning which requires alternate methods of communication in order to undermine existing social stratification and attendant power relations. In our post-modern context, this requires the application of technology to fulfilling the requirement of alternative, democratising communications.

Alternative in this sense, means the popularisation of interpretations which are different to, and contest the dominant discourses of late capitalism. Some examples of these are 'environmentalism', 'feminism', the 'gay and lesbian' movement, and so on.

Defining Culture in Hyper-reality

A definition of culture which responds to the above imperatives would explain how networks of meaning are:

- emerging historically;
- socially constructed;
- articulated and rearticulated through social institutions, social interaction and the media into social practices and distinct ways of making sense. Communities living within these frameworks of meaning more or less agree on general interpretations, the nature of their encounters with the word, and on appropriate ways of doing things, though their cosmological realms may differ fundamentally.

Two crucial elements are relevant here:

- the agreement on interpretation is short-lived, constantly shifting, reformulating and fracturing into new and different meanings. The media and new paradigms are directly implicated in this process.
- the role of the media, especially the electronic media (TV, radio, computers, Internet, etc), have become the principal mediators of continuously re-making meaning in post-modern societies.

Our definition of culture thus includes the following dimensions:

- networks of meaning and how individuals encounter these and interpellate them into existing and new social practices.
- Ways of making sense within these networks and social practices in relation to other networks and intersecting networks.
- The way in which individuals as subjects of social practices and particular networks of meaning interpellate their behaviour into social action distinguishes them from other kinds of interpretive communities.
- Self-identities of groups and communities of individuals are studied in terms of how their respective frameworks of meaning and behaviour shift and adapt, form and reform

in different contexts and periods. Such identities question received categories like 'nation' and 'nationality', substituting less formal categories bound up with ethnicity, origin, language and cosmology. These sites of meaning - both inherited and made - provide self-identity in the face of disintegrating and contested grand narratives, contending cosmological beliefs and their associated practices.

Meaning cannot be fixed. Subjectivities of individuals in the post-modern world cannot be assumed static, stable or even predictable. The subject/object dichotomy of Cartesian cosmology is being questioned by the new paradigm. This modernist split is returning to re-integration but in a new way. The ability to create alternative meanings is itself a form of liberation. It is through this process that the individual can be reconnected to the collective, though the collective loses its concrete geographical, linguistic and cultural status as it is always in a constant state of change and transformation. Development becomes a way of connecting the local to the global, the global to the local in ways which benefit all parties in the encounter.

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