

Archie Mafeje Debates in the CODESRIA Bulletin

Culture and Development in Africa: The Missing Link*

The Problematique in its Historical Setting

The problem of culture and development is at least as old as the social sciences, which are largely the product of the West. Within the West two principal traditions which date back to the nineteenth century can be identified. These are idealism and materialism, which in contemporary society feature as liberalism and Marxism, respectively. Of the two, the former is hegemonic and fully elaborated in the social sciences. In contrast, Marxism has not been part of academic social science until the onset of the current world economic crisis, which saw the resurrection of political economy and the ascendancy of neo-Marxist studies, especially in development theory. This has meant a renewed confrontation between these two major European traditions. In the Third World this has coincided with the questioning of Eurocentric social science which, in turn, is a reflection of the intensification of anti-imperialist struggles which are its antecedents.

Here, we do not propose to go into a detailed history of these different traditions. However, in order to set the stage for a possible African debate and research on the question of culture and development, it might be expedient to identify the relevant western schools of thought:

(a) The best known school “modernization theorists”. Amongst them would be included writers such as W. E. Moore, N. J. Smelser, B. F. Hoselitz, E. E. Hagen, S. N. Eisenstadt, E. M. Rogers, D. McClelland, etc. Although these writers are a mixture of sociologists and what could be called “institutional economists”, basically, their work derives from Talcott Parsons’ theory of “pattern variables”, as expounded in *The Social System* (1948). In his book Talcott Parsons set up a paradigm which consisted of two polar ends or binary opposites, *modernity* and *traditionalism*. These could be identified by means of certain indi-

Archie Mafeje
American University
Cairo, Egypt

ces, which he called “pattern variables”. Simply put, these were: traditionalism is to modernity as parochialism is to universalism, ascription to achievement, affective to effective, and diffuseness to specificity. These attributes depended on the type of social values each society has. Significant shifts from the traditional end of the spectrum towards the other marked *social change*. Parsonians have always argued that theirs is not a dichotomous schema, counter-posing the traditional against the modern, but rather a continuum capable of several combinations of variables. If granted, this implies a significant departure from Weber’s sociology, of which Talcott Parsons is supposed to be the American heir-apparent. Max Weber is renowned among sociologists for his ideal-type analysis and cultural relativity. In the hands of Parsons the former became real-types, capable of measurement along a progressive scale of modernity. Secondly, modern capitalist society such as that of the United States became a terminus of all development. This dispensed with cultural relativity and replaced it with an absolute ethnocentric standard, the western bourgeois society. It also implied a unilineal model of development.

(b) Over-time the Parsonian paradigm infected cultural anthropologists as well in America, especially what came to be known as the Chicago School. Prominent among these were Robert Redfield (*The Primitive World and Its Transformation*, 1953) and Oscar Lewis (*The Children of Sanchez*, 1961). In their case traditional/primitive society was explicitly associated with “low culture” / “Little tradition”,

as against the “high culture” / “great tradition” of modern industrial society. Regrettable as it was from the point of view of liberal romanticism, the primitive or traditional societies were destined to be swept away by modern civilization. This was supposed to be reflected in the way traditional villages were being penetrated by metropolitan mores even in the most remote parts of countries such as Mexico. This found expression in the so-called “rural-urban” continuum which is associated with the Chicago School. The basic thesis was that with the spread of European Industrial culture, rustic or traditional values were being gradually displaced by modern, “universal” values. Unlike the “modernization” theorists, cultural anthropologists did not think of this as either desirable or necessary but inevitable. From this point of view their position was more akin to that of Weber than to Talcott Parsons.

(c) The third and less well-known school which dealt with the problem of development and social values is that of the technological evolutionists. They are often referred to as the Columbia School of technological evolutionists. Marvin Harris and George Foster are the best known representatives among anthropologists. But there are others, mainly economists, who derived their ideas from C. E. Ayres instrumentalist philosophy. Among these, K. Baldwin, R. Manners, E. Service and Louis Junker are the best advocates. Their basic thesis is that social values can be divided into two main categories, ceremonial and instrumental. Traditional societies are characterized by the predominance of “ceremonial” values which militate against experimentation, whereas modern societies are characterized by instrumental values which encourage experimentation and reward technological innovation. This is reminiscent of Talcott Parsons’ “effective” versus “affective”, and “achievement” versus

“prescriptive” values. Both ascribe social progress to individual initiative and achievement. The only difference is that in Parsonian sociology technological progress is endemic in modern societies and this is how “the social system” regulates itself in such a way that it maintains its equilibrium indefinitely. In contrast, the technological evolutionists saw technology not only as a prime mover but also as liberating force from retrograde “ceremonial” values.

- (d) The fourth and opposed school within the western tradition is Marxism, as has already been remarked. If it were not for its epistemology, the Marxist paradigm comes closest to that of the technological evolutionists. Whilst in Marxist theory a distinction is made between the superstructure, which represents philosophical and legal rationalizations, social ideologies and cultural forms and beliefs, and the infrastructure, which represents material and productive forces, it is the latter two (accumulated and live labour) which are accorded a determinant role. The superstructure is treated as a derivative category i.e. it is a reflection of what goes on in the infrastructure. For this reasons, in Marxist theory the concept of “culture” is hardly elaborated (see Worsley, 1981), except in the general sense of “civilization” or the development of the arts.

The only occasion in which “culture received a positive treatment in Marxist theory is in relation to the question of the right of nations to self-determination or definition of nation, as such. Even then, it remains a subjective category. This is notwithstanding the fact that Marxists have had some difficulties with language and family, both of which straddle the supra- and infrastructure. Kinship relations can denote both culture and production relations. Language can be symbolic/expressive as well instrumental at the level of cognition and conceptualization as in the development of science. What all this points to is the fact that Marxism is a child of European rationalism and is ill-equipped to deal with what is perceived as subjective aspects of social existence. However, it must be recognized that its emphasis on material factors at the expense of non-material factors was a reaction against Hegelian idealism. The question, then is whether Marx’s followers the world over should forever be haunted by Hegel’s ghost.

The Problematique in its Contemporary Setting

As is well-known, “modernization theories” have suffered a sharp decline since the mid-sixties. This was part of a general disillusionment with functionalism (see Gouldner 1971). But more specifically, it was a nationalistic revulsion from Third World social scientists against the western or northern presumption that in order to develop, their countries should be carbon copies of the west/north. The strongest attack on “modernization theories” came from Latin-America, spearheaded in particular by the “*dependencia*” theorists. They all denied that underdevelopment in Latin-America was due to traditional values or culture (see Sunkel, 1980). Instead, they maintained that it was attributable to structural factors that gave rise to the dependence of the south on the north, which had a constraining effect on the autonomous development of the south. As is acknowledged, Gunder Frank is probably the one who put in the last nail on the coffin of “modernization theories” when he published his article, “Sociology of Development and Underdevelopment of Sociology” in 1966. The final verdict was that, on the basis of the Latin-American experience, “modernization theories” were empirically invalid and theoretically wanting “by their own standards”.

A straight reading of this would lead to the conclusion that culture *qua* culture was irrelevant to the problem of development. Structural relationships between developed and underdeveloped countries was the underlying problem. In other words, while not ascribing an active role to culture in the process of development, the Latin-Americans were satisfied that whatever cultures existed in their region were not a barrier to development. It is conceivable that Latin-Americans whose modern culture is a derivative of European culture (including language) could afford this minimalist position. Therefore, if culture could be treated as a common variable between them and Mediterranean Europe, then their underdevelopment could not be explained by recourse to the same variable. The logical conclusion which could be drawn from this is that the nationalism of the “*dependencia*” theorists was *structural* rather than cultural. This deduction might not appeal to some chauvinistic Latin-Americans. But from the point of view of the sociology of knowledge, it is not without significance that the most effective critique of theo-

ries which attributed lack of development to cultural differences came from Latin-America. In order to test the critical role of any variable, it is always convenient to be able to hold certain variables constant. For the reasons already given, Latin-America is the only region in the Third World which could do that *, culturally.

The 1970s saw “modernization” theorists on the retreat (see Gouldner, 1971 and Bottomore et al., 1982), yielding ground to the *dependistas*. The “*dependencia*” theorists anticipated anti-imperialist or nationalist struggles. What they did not anticipate was cultural revivalism in the Third World, which received its most dramatic expression in the Iranian revolution and Islamic fundamentalism in general. Notwithstanding the ambiguity of the political results thus far, it is clear that revulsions against western domination have issued an increasing and general emphasis on local culture and traditions. This is the fountain from which nationalist movements draw their sustenance. However, such a quest for authenticity and an independent identity has not necessarily been linked directly to what in the current jargon is called “development”. Third World nationalists often appeal to local culture, without saying clearly what kind of new society they wish to build, as is exemplified by Iran or Afghanistan. In Africa the nationalists have shown a great inclination towards western capitalism. Then, the interesting question is: if a genuine case were to be made, where would the African intellectuals begin?

It is obvious that evolutionist theories would oblige them to accept industrial capitalism and bourgeois culture as the apogee of development so far. The anthropological view of writers such as Kroeber or Redfield and Weber’s cultural relativism would seem attractive, but this would be succumbing to liberal idealism which has very little to do with the nasty praxis of development. It is true that Weber in his *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1921) did tackle head on the question of values and development. Nevertheless, Weber, along with classical anthropologists, has been criticized for ignoring structural and material forces in his theory of development and change. Most of this criticism came, though not exclusively, from Marxists, starting with Lukacs’ *tour de force*, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies*

in *Marxist Dialectics* (1926). But as has been warned, Marxists have never used “culture” as a critical concept in their theorization of society. Therefore, a radical call for the re-instatement of culture in development studies, justified as it is in the context of anti-imperialist. On the other hand, it is a deviation from classical Marxist theory, which is anti-imperialist in so far as it is anti-capitalist. Consequently, any explorations in this field represent a *terra nova* which should be approached with some reverence.

The Necessity of Culture

As is well-known, culture distinguishes man from brutes. It characterizes the human species and simultaneously divides it over time and space. The history of human civilizations testifies to this. Modern western civilization is the first civilization to try and homogenize culture. This is not only impoverishing, culturally-speaking, but is also inimical to development in so far as it denies so many other unexpected possibilities. Nonetheless, the invitation to the study of these possibilities should not be seen as affirmation,

without negations. All cultures are subject to mutations and transformations. Since Tylor’s celebrated definition in 1871, it is generally known what culture encompasses in its complexity. What is not known in advance is what elements are possessed with a potential for farther development. This is a sensitive and intricate problem which cannot be deciphered through received theory or contrived universalism. It requires intimate knowledge of the dynamics of African culture in a contemporary setting. This has to be so because there is no way in which modern Africans can re-live their pre-colonial past. This does not detract from any calls for authenticity. Indeed, there have been calls from Third World intellectuals for the indigenization of the social sciences. This presupposes a rejection of received theory and an awareness and knowledge of indigenous modes of thought and doing. Africa is the worst victim of intellectual and cultural imperialism and, consequently, is in the grips of the worst development crisis ever. And yet, no clear views have emerged from African intellectuals as to how the situation could be

remedied. This could be a measure of the social alienation of most African intellectuals. For instance, when views are solicited on the problem of rural and agricultural development, “experts” from the former imperial countries have more to say than the indigenous scholars. The reason is that the latter suffer from illusions of grandeurs. They imagine that they could reach the summit, without having established a solid foundation. The foundation in Africa culturally- and practically-speaking, in the agrarian sector. If anything unique is to be discovered on the continent, it is most likely embedded there. The immediate challenge is to produce intellectual tools for unraveling it. This cannot be a solitary but a collective enterprise, involving a series of workshops and seminars in which well-considered papers, grounded on regional or local reality, are presented.

FESPAC in December, 1988 in Dakar could offer a useful and convenient platform for introducing the topic, raising the relevant questions and for setting up the machinery for further discussions and research.

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Archie Mafeje