

LETTERS

CULTURAL CRITIQUE OF DEVELOPMENT AND THE QUESTION OF POWER: A COMMENT ON SARKAR

I decided to write a commentary on Sarkar's article which appeared in *Pravada* (vol. 8 & 9) for two specific reasons. First, both the empirical and theoretical implications of Sarkar's viewpoints on the cultural critique of development extend beyond the empirical examples cited in the article. Second, Sarkar, to a large extent, mischaracterizes (perhaps even misrepresents) the cultural critique of development as being a "cultural trap," by referring only to its most extremist strand.

I am sympathetic towards Sarkar's overall concern about the potential dangers of a cultural critique when it is nothing but an uncritical, romanticized veneration of ancient glories and "indigenous" cultures. I accept that such sacralized accounts can indeed mystify realities. Such glorification can be politically manipulated to mask existing forms of exploitative and oppressive social relations and social inequalities.

My critique of the article is based on two observations. First, Sarkar's characterization of the cultural critique of development merely as a plea towards returning to an Arcadia is misleading. The second major problem is that Sarkar pays no attention to the question of power. This is important because the cultural critique has been developed not only as an alternative strategy to existing development practice, but also as a deconstruction of a system of knowledge that has historically dislocated Third World people from their own place.

Beginnings of the Critique

Although Sarkar traces the cultural critique to the recent uprising of fundamentalist activities and a few extremist writings, the debate on culture and development extends much beyond that, both historically and theoretically. One of the first such critiques is that of Marshall Sahlins which eloquently examines the essentialist and reductionist economism in modern social analysis. Although Sahlins did not argue for the kind of "third worldist" argument that we have today, Sahlins clearly pointed out the fact that the "economic is also cultural". Then, as early as the 1970s, Dudley Seers elaborated that, for Third World societies, development conceived as modernization is a form of cultural dependence. Again in the 1970s, work by Sandra Wallman,

Van Nieuvenjuize, Peter Worsely ignited the cultural critique from different directions - as a flaws in the way in which development is theorized and disseminated in Third World societies.

Another wave of the cultural critique of development emerged with various nationalist movements in Third World societies - Sri Lanka and India being good examples. They were not only demanding political freedom but to a large extent cultural and economic freedom too. In more recent times, new social movements and various forms of resistance in the Third World as well as in the First - which were articulated both in cultural and ecological terms - have further deepened the critique in an enduring and rigorous manner. This stirred up enthusiasm for deconstructing the dominant western development models as well as for reconstructing new development narratives. This enthusiasm has been reinvigorated by a number of "post" traditions which emerged as a critique of the modernist discourse. Works by Michael Foucault, Edward Said, Ranjit Guha (*Subaltern Studies*), Gayatri Spivak have been quite significant and influential within the "post" tradition.

The point I want to make is that the cultural critique of development is not a narrow project of cultural or religious fundamentalism or of a return to a culturally unique past as Sarkar claims. Sarkar's (mis)representation is almost similar to the liberal/modernist labeling of it as "anti-development", giving it possibly the most negative connotation.

Additionally, most societies carry some notion of social change whether or not it is described by the term "development". Sarkar himself makes this point that each culture has a particular vision of change, but which is suppressed by modern development.

Sarkar also fails to note some of the recent, moderate (and perhaps best) work on culture and development (Marglin and Marglin, 1989). The issues raised therein are extremely complex and broad and they spell out the motivations behind the cultural critique (esp. see Banuri's work in volume edited by Marglin). Failure to acknowledge such work has led Sarkar to largely misread the purpose, logic and significance of the cultural critique.

Basis of the Cultural Critique

The cultural critique of development has largely emerged as a reaction to the dominance of the western discourse of development although its manifestations vary in different contexts, the challenge of "religious or cultural" fundamentalism being only one such instance.

This reaction emerges from not only resistance movements and activists in Third World societies. It is also articulated in the critiques of modernity - post modernism and postcolonialism. The epistemological drive towards metanarratives of the world became increasingly challenged by these "post" critics. Work by Said, Mitchell, Adas, Sahlins and some of the recent post colonial critics such as Spivak, Guha and Appadurai have enhanced the debate although they are not directly writing on the issues of development.

Within this broad context, the fundamental question raised within the cultural critique is how development is historically being conceptualized and problematized. It questions the way in which Third World people are represented in the dominant development discourse as "traditional", "primitive" and "irrational". It shows how unequal power relations have been historically substantiated through the production of development knowledge (see specifically Escobar's work).

Notwithstanding this contextual background of the cultural critique, Sarkar hastens to label it merely as a cultural "trap" which eventually leads to the assertion of cultural identity and celebration of "difference" as endangering and detrimental to "mankind". Failing to realize that issues of culture, identity and power are intricately related, Sarkar misinterprets the "people's right to be different" and views striving towards one's cultural identity as a parochial, almost primitive act. (I think it is dehumanizing if it is done by negating others' identity).

The root cause of the problem is intolerance of difference. Antagonisms develop when differences are not tolerated and operate on the assumption that all people should do things in the same way. This kind of intolerance of difference is "rationalized" in various logics (largely dominant/hegemonic/hierarchical) through various categories. Besides the religious-humanistic quest for the good life for human beings encouraged by the Enlightenment, generally the discourse of modernity has shown an intolerance to the difference of other people. This is precisely why modernization theory is often criticized for being ethnocentric. The question of cultural identity thus is controversial (at least for Third World societies) since our pursuit of knowledge is still thoroughly set in the ambit of modernist discourse. (It appears that even the postcolonial efforts entail some such strings).

Sarkar's emphasis on cultural identity as the problem devalidates all ethnonationalist projects regardless of specific goals. Nationalist efforts are not only for political independence, but may also be grounded in the fear of particular ethnic groups that their identities might be effected by hegemonic/

dominant cultures. Or, they see that the hegemonic political order provides less opportunities to retain their identity. (See Chatterjee, 1984). If one follows Sarkar's argument, then all nationalist projects are cruel and degenerating. (Yes, it is true when we think about the violence involved with them).

"Cultural Trap" and the Issue of Power

I am amazed that Sarkar talks about culture and development without ever mentioning the word 'power.' Sarkar's immature questions ("who is compelling them (people in the Third World) to be like them ("Europeans") and statements ("nobody prevented us from using camels or bullock carts or wearing dhotis instead of trousers") indicate the lack of attention to the fact of power. True enough. Nobody asked us except that the modern discourse guided people towards what is better and what is not. Therefore, the cars and trousers became better while other things were "old". (Here, there is no implication that modern technology and scientific advancements have no positive side). But most of us have to accept the fact that our cognitive space within which development is conceived is "largely occupied by western imagery. It is through this imagery that trousers and cars became better than dhotis and carts.

Most importantly, such imagery is ingrained and bred into political and economic institutions. The historical-structural relationships between the First and Third Worlds at the global level, such as colonialism and imperialism, reinforced and justified them. The cultural critique attempts to deconstruct the power relations between the west and the rest established through the discourse of modernity. It is a all-too-common fact that modernist discourse within which modernization theory (the most dominant theory with practical implications) is embedded, has mapped out a hierarchical world with a linear history in which the West maintains the dominant and leading position (see Pletsch). It divided the world into two distinctive categories as modern and traditional through which history is negated to "certain" societies. Most of the people in the world have been historically socialized into the discourse of modernity through the economic and political power of the West.

Such a conceptualization of development portrayed cultural differences (this includes the fact that some people wore dhotis and used bullock carts) as something to be eliminated. The fact that certain groups of people in the world do things differently and behave differently is exploited to justify the scientific and technological advancements that the west has achieved. The "traditional" thus became a "pretext" for the modernist discourse (see Banuri, 1989).

Nobody asked these people not to use camels and carts, but within the discourse into which they were socialized, such practices were "traditional" and primitive and to be replaced by the modern. Trousers became better than the dhotis not because they were inefficient or unsuitable for the Indian people, but because they were the means of achieving modernity or becoming "developed".

This simple example takes us to an important point that is raised within the cultural critique of development. As both Appadurai and Banuri elaborate, the problem lies with the "terms of cultural change". Is there a right (or more correctly freedom) for people in the Third World to be different? I think the opportunities and possibilities for the Third World people to assert their cultural differences are highly conditioned by the continuing dominance of modernist discourse and the power of global capitalism. Actually, to claim the superiority of indigenous cultures and pasts has become a strategy of asserting some power. Here, I am neither complaining nor arguing that only the capitalist system sanctions freedom. Even socialist systems, patriarchal ideologies and local discourses can be equally restrictive. The issue is how can we enhance the multiple visions of change (thus choices) and assert freedom for their sustenance. For example, how can we give a verdict (as Sarkar does) that Third World people want to be like the west. Are these people given any other choice is one of the most challenging questions raised by the cultural critique.

There are many interesting questions raised by the cultural critique of development; it is by no means reducible to the extremist strand that Sarkar cites. While the deconstructive function of the cultural critique has rather been effective, the constructive part is still to be seen. In this reconstructive project, there are a number of facts that should be kept in mind.

First, we no longer live in isolated localities. Even if we could live in geographically isolated places, sociological integration of the world is a fact that cannot be denied. The cultural critique itself should be a democratic project. The cultural critique in large part emerged because the modernist discourse provided no intellectual space for multiple knowledge claims and truths. The cultural protagonist should not commit the same mistake (that is to provide a metanarrative of cultural development to replace modern development) by arguing that their's is the only congenial alternative to development. If the "local" visions are imposed upon people, it is equally unethical and undemocratic.

However, what we should strive towards is the multiplicity of knowledge. Yet, since knowledge and power are so intricately related, it is difficult to envision a reality of "culturally-one mankind". However, by attempting to maintain the democracy of the production of knowledge we can hope for a world that is even a little better. The real problem that the cultural critique faces is that constantly evaluated by the standards of modernity. Often, people expect on one hand "mass production" of alternative knowledge and cultural development and on the other hand quick "efficient" remedies to problems. This is perhaps the ultimate paradox of the cultural critique of development.

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