

## *Toward Hyper-Critical Development Alternatives A Study in Semiotics*

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**ABSTRACT:** The idea of human freedom is essentially rooted in the concept of human development, according to Noble Laureate Amartya Sen's "Development as Freedom" thesis [that outlines an entitlement to capacity-building process]. And the idea of human progress is a construct that is designed around the axis of freedom. What is freedom? Is it only lack of societal constraint, withdrawal of discipline and punish, willing suspension of the panoptic Super Ego that they address as the "mainstream"? Or is freedom a concept much more fundamental, to be read into the texts of Rabindranath Tagore, Roman Rolland or Walden? Sociologists claim that civilization is what we are and culture is merely an arrangement of artifacts that we happen to use during the course of our politics everyday life. Civilization, however, is also a system of values that is handed down generations as a movement of socialization that laymen identify as "progress".

### *The Progress Vs Development*

How can progress be distinguished from "development", if at all? A most prominent item on today's humanitarian global agenda, apart from mantras like good governance, social capital, neo-liberal communitarianism, grass-roots empowerment, civil societal capacity-building<sup>66</sup> and gender sensitization, is certainly the notion of sustain-

able development<sup>67</sup>. This has become almost a catchword of sorts in the Third World, decolonized state nations that are more or less grappling to muster a political system around pluralistic identities of nationhood enmeshed in ethnicity, language, religion, region and mutual distrust. It is almost as if "soft states" are hanging loose and can only be brought back on to the fast track of development by way of external intervention and advocacy on the past of the Eurocentric West. Development, it may be appreciated at this

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<sup>66</sup> The contemporary view of capacity-building goes beyond the conventional perception of training. The central concerns of environmental management - to manage change, to resolve conflict, to manage institutional pluralism, to enhance coordination, to foster communication, and to ensure that data and information are shared - require a broad and holistic view of capacity development. This definition covers both institutional and community-based capacity-building.  
<http://nrm.massey.ac.nz/changelinks/capacity.html>

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<sup>67</sup> Almost every aspect of sustainable development will be affected by the quality of civil society, political participation and decision-making, and responsible and reliable governance. Because good governance is the fundamental requirement for progress and sustainability, furthering it is at the core of U.S. strategy to foster sustainable development.  
<http://usembassy.state.gov/tokyo/www/hgl0469.html>

point, is not anything extrinsic like politics imposed from the above without any regard whatsoever to the end-users of limited political resources. Actors who are supposed to interface with their very own institutions are nearly always better comfortable if left alone with the material conditions of daily life that breed organic ethos of community existence. This is where the colonial masters went wrong in Asia, Africa and South America when they bled the colonies white and left behind a legacy of comprador bourgeois and crony capitalism that, in turn, fostered a repressive state apparatus and a perverted anti-people bureaucratic managerial state system that was not only anti-people but was also occasionally anti-progress.

Richard Cobden<sup>68</sup> discussed about this mechanistic attitude of the political élite [in capitalist systems] and party leadership [in socialist societies] that are smug in the cocoon of their mistaken convictions that people at the top echelons of power, authority and

influence have necessarily a working knowledge of "the greatest good of the greatest number". This is not a utilitarian or even a welfarist state approach - it is actually self-defeating as amply evidenced in the erstwhile USSR where an insane arms and space race with the United States [incidentally the only country in the entire world to have actually materially gained from the First and Second World Wars with minimum military casualties] led the once powerful communist country to a more or less incredible situation of mind-boggling bankruptcy.

Military hardware and nukes were being manufactured at the cost of basic consumer requirements like bread, potatoes and vodka, following Stalin's rhetoric of an entire generation making sacrifices [read being purged if found to be politically incorrect] for the cause of a better Russia of the future. Moscow's huge and sprawling department store GUM was always nearly empty while the party's top brass were running around in their imported limousines, shopping in dollar shops selling Swiss chocolates and watches, Scotch whisky, French champagne and perfumes. Add rampant corruption and repression to accept a second-hand political ideology not originating from the ground realities of people and you have ideal recipes for killing fields like the infamous Prague Spring.

#### *Public Action Enterprises*

We are reminded of Professor Mohammad Yunus of Bangladesh in this respect - the magician of the Grameen Bank ["rural bank"] microcredit revolution who even hugely impressed Hilary Rodham Clinton. What Professor Yunus still does is amazingly simple - he organizes self-help groups in

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<sup>68</sup> Cobden, Richard (1804-65). British economist and statesman, known as the Apostle of Free Trade. In Parliament Cobden favored a laissez-faire economic philosophy, that is, minimum interference of government in business. He opposed factory reforms and trade unions and objected to the intervention of government in the affairs of foreign nations. His opposition to British foreign policy cost him his seat in Parliament in 1857. He was so respected by his political opponents; however, that Prime Minister Palmerston offered Cobden the post of president of the Board of Trade in his cabinet in 1859. Cobden rejected the offer, but remained politically active. The following year he negotiated an Anglo-French commercial treaty. His last important political action was to support the Union in the American Civil War, at a time when other British leaders were hesitant. He died in London on April 12, 1865. <http://encarta.msn.com/encnet/refpages/refarticle.aspx?refid=761557174>

the manner of cooperatives and tries to make them economically self-reliant in areas as humble as poultry, weaving, dairy and even small-scale production. But when such cottage industries are linked ["forward and backward integration"] in the larger context of market forces they become formidable in their control of the overall agrarian and even the urban economy. Peasant women in Bangladesh carry mobile telephones to communicate with distant markets, distributors and dealers! This may sound incredible but it is true nevertheless, proving the validity of Cobden's observation.

Operation Flood in Anand [Gujarat] and the Lijjat and Kissan enterprises are other such brilliant instances of people working toward their common good [based on innovative techniques like outsourcing of manpower and material resources, subcontracting or leasing of plant and machinery, breaking down the production process to delimit financial risk liability ventures somewhat akin to Adam Smith's exposition of the division of labor dynamics] without any outside intervention whatsoever. One must remember that neither India nor Bangladesh tends to practise authoritarian régime maintenance. What was possible once in Beijing's Tiananmen Square when the People's Liberation Army crushed pro-reform students under tanks and armored carriers is unimaginable in either India or Bangladesh [that secured its liberation in 1971 by way of Indian military cooperation]. So democracy is an essential requirement if "the progress of freedom" is to continue unabated.

### *Voice of the People*

By democracy we ordinarily mean popular authority or rule. As made popular by Jean Jacques Rousseau, one of the ideologues of the French Revolution [that effectively altered the course of European history by beginning the disintegration process of the medieval and feudalistic Age of Empires], the voice of God is heard in the voice of the People. This was a far cry from the autocratic self-styled pronouncement of French Emperor Louis XIV - "I am the State". It was no wonder that Louis XVI's wife Marie Antoinette [later sentenced to die to rather unceremoniously at the guillotine] had once expressed her wonder in such a naive fashion on hearing about the simmering discontent among the Parisian mob standing in endless queues or bread lines and more often than not starting violent riots among themselves - "If they cannot eat bread why don't they eat cake!"

This vulgar ignorance of the ruled on the part of their rulers is rather inimical to democracy. But we must remember that democracy as dynamic capacity-building agency in the post 9/11 world has all of a sudden underscored its long-ignored extrinsic quality. Democracy is not really insular, stretching from the East Coast to the West Coast of the US. If the notion of external sovereignty has suffered quite extensively since the height of the Cold War when the world was almost vertically divided into the NATO and Warsaw Pact countries [save the NAM states being led by Nehru, Nasser and Tito], the idea of external democracy has gained much popular and diplomatic acceptance.

Simply put, powerful nations can no longer ignore internal human rights or

civil rights agendas vis-à-vis world public opinion. But this is what the US is consistently trying to follow as its most shortsighted foreign policy since the Malta Summit Conference when President George Bush Senior and CPSU General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev officially declared the end of the Cold War, a historic event that even prompted Francis Fukuyama to write a banal work on the end of history and the last man.

Since the days of its Nineteenth Century isolationist Munroe Doctrine the US has put up apparently impregnable walls around itself that couldn't even be dismantled during the Marshall Plan for the Reconstruction of Europe after the Second World War or establishment of first the League of Nations [as an initiative of President Woodrow Wilson's historic Atlantic Charter] and then the UNO, the International Monetary Fund, World Bank and now the omnipotent World Trade Organization that apparently dictates the movements of a new specter of the new millennium, namely Globalization.

The US foreign policy has always been designed on lines of "muddle and meddle" - Vietnam, Korea, Bay of Pigs, Irangate, Afghanistan and now Iraq. The country boasts of democracy and swears by it, boiling with righteous motivation to export Yankee democracy around the underdeveloped world, but has, however, classified the JFK assassination archives for no apparent reason whatsoever. Clandestine covert operations, the strategic defense initiative [Star Wars], research in biological and chemical weapons - you name it and you would find the dirty trick invariably up America's [read the CIA and FBI's] sleeves. In fact, it is

the only nation to date that has used atomic weapons during a war, destroying Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the process to avenge the Pearl Harbor attack and crippling generations of Japanese children long after the holocaust as a result of toxic radioactive radiation carried forward genetically by succeeding generations.

Since the Gulf War fought by Senior Bush as the much-hyped Operation Desert Storm so graphically shown by CNN across millions of idiot boxes around the world, nobody knows exactly how many innocent Iraqi children have died from malnutrition, disease and hunger due to the US-imposed and UNO-condoned sanctions against Iraq. The US condemns Osama bin Laden but should actively engage in soul-searching regarding its own virulent international terrorist status in our contemporary unipolar world where might is right in a Hobbesian state of affairs where human life, property and security are all indeed "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, short". The US, in brief, should radically reorient its foreign policy to address the dignity of human life and internal sovereignty of nation states around the world.

It is a most regrettable fact that civil servants in the Third World more often than not act as if they are the masters of the people rather than being their servants, which, in constitutional terms, they actually are. This perverted phenomenon is a spillover from the colonial days when the questionable legacy of the "steel-frame of the administration" was passed down generations of bureaucrats. They were brainwashed at the administrative training college in Haileybury, England by the East India Company na-

bobs that they were about to return to India - the Brightest Jewel in the Crown - to assist the British in their self-appointed task euphemistically called the White Man's Burden. This was nothing else but a sustained exercise over a couple of centuries to systematically fleece this once-rich country and its defenseless people like nobody's business. This "drain of wealth" resulted in the man-made Famines of 1770 and 1943 when sheer hunger provoked cannibalism and human tragedies like selling off one's wives and daughters into prostitution.

#### *Negotiating Globalization*

Contemporary state systems guided by the dynamics of globalization are like so many Januses - the phenomenon assumes a most robust character in the developed North but an almost impotent identity in the developing or still underdeveloped South. So globalization necessitates a dialog between the rich and the poor outside its essentialist assumptions of an uneven power discourse as conditions of Good Governance and Structural Adjustment Programs<sup>69</sup> benchmark most Third World postcolonial democracies today<sup>70</sup>.

While there are contentions that aggressive market forces make it difficult for welfarist governments to pro-

tect their citizens from transnational actors that are as elusive as their hot money, there are also counter-arguments<sup>71</sup> that institutions like the International Monetary Fund or the World Trade Organization actually safeguard citizens from the administrative limitations of their respective national governments. There appears to be a consensus, however, that powerful markets tend to undermine political élites at home.

#### *Global Village*

John Echeverri-Gent<sup>72</sup> has pointed out that if globalization, on the one hand, facilitates decentralization then, on the other, it also helps develop pockets of dynamic Free Trade Areas in large developing countries like China and India by reorganizing their economic geography, Foreign Direct Investment and global commodity chains. This process, however, creates large hinterlands of economic backwardness and entrenches economic inequality within the developing south. Globalization, therefore, intensifies regional disparities in the Third World. John Rapley has found that Structural Adjustment Programs have varied widely in the results they have yielded. While Latin America has partially benefited from structural adjustment, Africa has not. Rapley has also argued that Rolling Back the State - that is less government as an imperative of contempo-

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<sup>69</sup> See Gary, Craig and Marjorie Mayo (eds) (1995). *Community Empowerment: A Reader in Participation and Development*. London / New Jersey: Zed Books

<sup>70</sup> See Ray, Aswini K (1996). "Democratic Rights in a Post-Colonial Democracy". *Agora Project Working Papers* (Uppsala: The University of Uppsala). See also Ray (1989). "Towards the Concept of a Post-Colonial Democracy: A Schematic View". Zoya Hasan et al (eds), *The State, Political Processes and Identity: Reflections on Modern India*. New Delhi: Sage

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<sup>71</sup> See Keohane, Robert O (Spring 1998). "International Institutions: Can Interdependence Work?" *Foreign Policy*

<sup>72</sup> See Echeverri-Gent, John (July 1997). "Governance in a Globalizing World: Deconstructing Decentralization in India, China and the United States." Charlottesville: Department of Government and Foreign Affairs, University of Virginia (mimeo)

rary globalization - does not always lead to enhanced economic growth.

Globalization, therefore, would appear to be an open-ended journey toward a globalized world order whose weightless economy<sup>73</sup> may be described as one that defies both national and international borders so far as economic transactions are concerned. This is a situation where freight charges are nil and trade / tariff barriers would disappear. Such a pilgrim's progress, however, is nothing new. Technological innovations during the past five centuries have steadily helped integrate the global community into an emergent global civil society. Transatlantic communications have developed from sailing boats to steamships, to the telegraph, the telephone, the commercial aircraft and now the Internet where even nationalism as a conventional political ideology has been reduced to "banal nationalism"<sup>74</sup>.

#### *State and Civil Society*

Liberal democratic régimes like India or even the US can only be politically successful deliver the common good and thereby continue in power in a more stable [read pro-people] manner if they are able to correctly read the obtainable ground realities and problems thereof. These problems are more or less popular in nature, and have a propensity to develop into discontent of the ruled actors against their ruling institutions. So the actors in power have to continuously shuffle and delicately balance priorities of human development, well-being and

accessible freedoms like the ever-important agenda of human rights and civil liberties, a responsive and responsible administrative machinery, transparency at all levels of public expenditures and domestic and international peacekeeping projects rather than playing mutually harmful "spy versus spy" games.

Eminent political scientist Subrata K. Mitra has quite rightly cautioned that "If the wielders of power concede the point to those who challenge established values and norms, they risk losing their legitimacy. On the other hand, the failure to give satisfaction to the discontented might deepen their sense of outrage and alienation which can further reduce their legitimacy."

Powers-that-be will do well to continually redress grievances of political actors at the grassroots in a political manner by establishing and ably handling pro-people institutions. Only then organic identification would bind actors with institutions - only then the incipient involvement noticed at the level of "actors and institutions" would, arguably enough, transcend itself to the level of "actors in institutions", consolidating both the level and the quality of progress of freedom in the process.

#### *Fear of Freedom?*

So the question we are left with while winding up is: do we prefer freedom backed up by minimum government or would we be merely satisfied with sobriety that is imposed on our lives and liberty by the dictates of high politics from the above. It is amply clear by the beginning of a new millennium already imperiled by the grim possibility of a nuclear war that civilized human beings organized as systems of politics across porous international

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<sup>73</sup> See Huws, Ursula (1999). "Material World: The Myth of the Weightless Economy". Leo Pantich and Colin Leys (eds). *Socialist Register*. London: Merlin

<sup>74</sup> See Billig, Michael (1995). *Banal Nationalism*. London: Sage

borders can no longer afford to unquestioningly follow the policy prescriptions of their domestic governments, foreign offices and state departments. More intense people-to-people contacts should be sustained on long-term basis as such transnational networks can better work toward the so-called Track Two diplomacy between intellectuals and academics, social activists, policy analysts, development consultants and the common people<sup>75</sup>.

It is the unknown citizen who should really be brought back into primary focus by Rolling Back the State<sup>76</sup> -

nowhere men and women like you and me should be constituted as indices of basic empowerment, freedom and development. Yet another fundamental war should be waged against hunger, poverty and illiteracy - based on enduring peace, better quality of education for all and a higher quality of material and ethical well-being in general. This sounds like a grand Utopia all right but even stranger events did happen during the course of human civilization and progress.

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<sup>75</sup> See Maiti, Prasenjit (2001). "A Human Ecological Analysis of the Narmada Bachao Andolan". Electronic Green Journal. Idaho: University of Idaho Library. This paper written in support of the protracted Save the Narmada Movement in India indicates how the government, its insensitive bureaucracy and repressive system of police administration and even the judiciary can actually defeat - albeit temporarily - popular aims and aspirations. The Government of India has of late decided to link up all the major rivers of the country so that river water from the Gangetic Basin of North India can flow into the comparatively arid regions of South India and facilitate both irrigation and hydroelectricity generation. However, experts are convinced that this move would not only considerably dry up the already reduced water volume of the Ganges [as a result of the water sharing treaty with Bangladesh across the Farakka Barrage in West Bengal] but would also result in annual floods and siltification of the different river basins of South India as well. The Supreme Court of India - the country's apex federal court - has already had set up a Water Disputes Tribunal to settle disputes and resolve bitter conflicts between states like Tamil Nadu and Karnataka in South India over the contentious issue of sharing water of the River Cauvery on a mutual basis as this river flows across both these states.

<sup>76</sup> See McGrew, A. (1992). "Globalization". Stuart Hall et al (eds). *Modernity and Its Futures*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. See also Slater, David (1996). "Other Contexts of the Global: A Critical Geopolitics

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of North South Relations". Elenore Kofman and Gillian Youngs (eds). *Globalization: Theory and Practice*. London: Pinter