A Plea for Understanding

A Comment on **Cultural Dependence?**, **IDS Bulletin,** vol. 7 no. 1. April 1975

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The concept of dependence can provide a framework of analysis which can make a serious contribution to understanding the constraints operating in developing countries, preventing them from using their human and natural potential. It is unfortunately also a recent catchword in the development field, which, in the process of going through its initiation towards professional respectability has to sustain the kind of 'hazing' necessary to join the fraternity of seriousness. It provides a lot of trendy exchanges which belie the important issues to be considered. It is now essential to raise the level of discussion about dependency above the declamatory and the suppositious, to listen to hypotheses being raised and to consider them on their merits. The Goonatilake-Lipton exchange helps little in this attempt, remaining as it does at the level of polemical exchange.

On the part of Susantha Goonatilake, the demonstration of the wickedness of Western social science by mentioning the contaminated names, countries or events is worthy of a university broadsheet for trying to rally the faithful (which is not to deny its importance in the appropriate circumstances). It is not analysis. One would like to ask what the ILO mission suggested for Sri Lanka, and why it was considered to be so harmful by a Sri Lankan intellectual? What was the 'wrong' advice which inhibited Sri Lankan development? On the other hand, Michael Lipton seems to want to underplay the significance of the ideological bias and the negative impact of certain elements of Western social science in the development field in the last 20 years. To suggest also that, at best, Sri Lanka can only hope for one great social scientist in this generation is imposing boundaries on the world distribution of intelligence—a dubious undertaking.

As for the study of dependence itself, it is no longer sufficient to enumerate the influences of rich metropolitan countries on certain developing countries: we need to know **how** such influences have affected the internal structures of particular countries, and whether or not the process is irreversible. Case studies are needed rather than further debate about the terms of analysis. Structuralists and Marxists have until now been mainly concerned with the terms of analysis: it would appear apposite to seek some empirical

verification of their broad ideas. Sectorial and country studies can assist this.

Cultural dependence is not, in my view, a separate area of enquiry, to be divided off artificially from a more holistic or general approach to the problem. At the moment it is often used to group aspects of taste transfer, television programmes, books which only document the symptoms of the problem. For example, what do we know when we have documented that UNILEVER made an exceptionally successful campaign in the old city of Kano some 12 years ago to prove that even very traditional people could be persuaded to buy New Blue OMO, or that a Kenyan civil servant and family appear in **Africa** or **Time** magazine displaying their prosperity alongside a new red Datsun? It seems to me much less interesting to calculate the number of attitude variables to be found among Thais and Ethiopians who watch **'Mission Impossible'** or **'Bonanza'** than to know why radio and television in those countries is so poorly utilized for national purposes, or why broadcasting is a relatively low status professional occupation. Both of the latter questions may be analysed in terms of dependence and this will offer understanding of the dynamics of the process, rather than just documentation of categories of cultural dependence.

The assimilation of values and behaviour associated with the use of certain technologies, the effects of derivative educational policy and the role of professions, to take only a few examples, all show striking signs of the perpetuation of dependence on metropolitan practices grafted onto a system. They are cultural insofar as their expression is by necessity interpreted through the society's system of values and beliefs, but as an object of study they must be considered with reference to the economic/political situation in which they arise. For example, in the area of technological transfer, the effects of the introduction of a certain machine or process on factory design or labour utilization is only part of the issue. Further analysis would consider the constraints operating on the decision-makers involved in the choice of a particular technology, which can be economic (often well documented) or non-economic, requiring among other things a consideration of training or professional education, which provide the individual with knowledge brought to bear on the decision. It would study the professional identity of the group concerned and the extent to which status or development of their profession is linked to capital intensive equipment. From this perspective, a whole set of new questions can be asked which will illuminate analysis, but which are not

specifically cultural. None of these influences are "intangible" as suggested in the Editorial on Cultural Dependence (IDS Bulletin, April 1975). They are merely impossible to analyse in numerical terms. In trying to examine such questions, the penetration of the mechanisms of dependence becomes clearer. If our analyses were just to stop at magazine readership and taste transfers or the taxonomic identification of a transnational elite, the analytical support they could provide for economic studies of dependence would be unnecessarily limited. Until now social factors have been considered in separate categories and therefore largely ignored in the theoretical debates—dominated by economists.

A great many of the economic analyses under the rubric of dependence require the support of behavioural and attitudinal factors, including class analysis and the effects of types of education, training and working relationships. It is these factors which may make the perpetuation of dependence more profound, even when economic policies or the political · elite have changed. Research ought to consider the transfer of institutions as well as attitudes: debate on the methodological tools of inquiry remains open. Dependence cannot presume to be a sole explanation of problems, and empirical analysis needs to acknowledge the influence of other factors. It is here that certain indigenous cultural aspects may become important. Because of specific historical and socio-economic factors some cultures have been more easily penetrated by outside influences and others have been more resistant. Certain dominating cultures have demanded greater adherence to their central language and set of ideas. Certain classes in dominated societies have become more affected than others by the metropolitan system.

In view of such historical conditions, it is difficult for me to regard the search for authenticity and the use of local languages as mere parochialism which currently inhibits Third World scholars and their cultures from participating in our universal community, as implied by Michael Lipton. Universalist intellectuals have always wished to stand aside from movements of national authenticity or language revival. Pitted against that group concerned with national goals who met in Balkan coffee houses or Dublin pubs at the turn of the century, the 'universalists' reflect an interesting segment of repeated intellectual history. Authenticity is the language of political actors. I do not know that anyone is substituting it for analysis. But to preach universalism is to preach modernization or growth. In the mass media, for example, the universalism known as

free flow of information across cultural boundaries supported so vigorously by UNESCO in the last two decades has resulted in the domination of entertainment and information by rich countries, in particular the United States. And ought one not to be wary of preaching universalism, as we in the rich world largely control that universalism still?

I would agree with Michael Lipton that ex-President Tombalbaye's practices in recent years were discreditable and dangerous. But perhaps the state-supported revival of the artistic tradition of medieval Algerian miniatures is more acceptable. Not all search for authenticity is demagogery. And culture, even when justified on the grounds of authenticity, can be remarkably like other aspects of commodity flows. For example, prestige theatrical and cinema productions made in developing countries are sometimes destined to win international recognition (the recent Algerian film success at Cannes is an interesting case in point). They are expensive and often consume large amounts of funds, thus preventing other more experimental productions. They tour Europe but are rarely seen in the populous villages of their own countries. They are made in the name of authenticity about the people in the Third World to enrich the cultural diet of Europeans.

It might be interesting to consider alongside the effects of authenticity their varying distribution and impact within one country. For example, while prestige national and foreign productions are enjoyed by the elite, the cheaper cinemas may be playing Indian or Egyptian films. Perhaps a Third World transnational culture is also emerging at a popular level, while we concentrate mainly on the effects of metropolitan reference groups and behaviour among only the elite. Or more likely, the bulk of expenditure on culture is in the capital city or on local productions to be sent abroad, while the rich sources of authenticity remaining in many rural peripheries are unaffected by national cultural campaigns (they need it less perhaps than urbanites), and, more important, remain as an untapped source.

One of the most frequent criticisms of dependence as an orientation for analysis is that all countries are dependent on each other after all. It is not simply the unequal relationship between rich and poor nations or the exploitation inherent in certain characteristics of that relationship which determines dependence. It is rather the internal changes wrought by the situation which preclude independent action and direct development only along certain lines, or which reinforce

the possibilities of exploitation and marginalization within the dependent or peripheral system. Part of the strength of this approach is its comprehensive view of the development problem. Thus, I think it is unimportant for the moment to be concerned about the following oft heard criticisms[1]:

> (from the right) "The dependency school is neo-colonial in trying to tell the elites of developing countries that they are dependent".
> (from the left) "The dependency school is placing too much hope on the elites of developing countries who are themselves part of a network of international exploitation".

With such misunderstandings so common I feel the need to get beyond the debating chamber, buffer myself from declamatory demands for solidarity and get to work.

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1 These do not represent the views of Susantha Goonatilake or Michael Lipton whose exchange prompted me to write, but provide the background to the 'hazing' I referred to earlier.