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## Theory can follow Practice

When we talk of change, we try to paint a big picture, and then work towards that big picture – hence the talk of an alternative paradigm. The recently held WSF was viewed with great scepticism on this count – a lot of talk, no concrete direction, no concrete action, the debating society, the talkers' club.

Jeremy Seabrook looks at this issue another way – he tells us to look at CULTURE, that is where the action needs to be, in fact already is - we need to just recognise it, hold it, strengthen it.

Culture is not merely enacting plays, singing and dancing to revolutionary, patriotic or development theme songs. It is certainly that, - and more, much MORE. It is a composite of practices that span the entire spectrum of human endeavour, that reflects the values we hold dear – in our commerce, our daily intercourse, the way we deal with children, families, the political and the recreational, the economic and the spiritual.

This is where we are losing out to globalisation – it is assiduously positing an insidious and seductive culture.

We cannot just shout it down. Or come out with prescriptive alternatives.



## Unchaining Captive Hearts

*Jeremy Seabrook*

Muktagacha is a market town in northern Bangladesh. The market encroaches on to the highway, leaving little room for the traffic to pass. Most of the produce comes from walking distance and none from more than a cycle or bullock-cart ride away.

Kerosene lamps play a smoky, shifting light over piles of goods: goats, cows, chickens and ducks; baskets, wooden ploughs, skins, jute, paddy, green vegetables, gourds, cucumbers, bamboo; fodder, rice-straw, fawn grasses, tamarind in rusty brown pods, pink-blush pomelos, squat deshi bananas with mildewed skins, okra, aubergines, tomatoes; papery opals of garlic, indelible-ink onions, green peppers, red flames of chilli. There are woven bamboo vessels, ornaments, building materials, musical instruments and tools. ***Here is the market at its most basic and elementary – embedded in all societies, energetic, noisy and disputatious. Here, everything is local.***

**Muktagacha is not only a market: its products represent a whole culture. Similarly, globalization is not only a market system: it, too, is a whole culture.**

Cultures and economics are closely intertwined. If globalization exercises such a hold over the imagination of people, this is because it disseminates its culture of leisure and affluence first, and discloses its economic terms (or ‘conditionalities’, as the IMF might call them) only later.

*Globalization has nothing to do with pluralism or diversity. Its culture is monoculture, as Vandana Shiva says, for it involves the reduction of all the living richness of the world into commodities: this is why the 20,000 items on a supermarket shelf do not constitute diversity. It isn't*



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simply that Disney and McDonald's make inroads into cultural practice, although of course they do. Traditional cultures are rendered inferior in the presence of more powerful technology, of the English language and of the glamour and wealth of Western imagery, which carries a promise of transcendence: we are in the realm of religious transformation.

Cultures do not simply yield to globalization, but neither do they remain untouched. All are inflected in the same way. They may not lose their outer forms – language, religious belief, cultural expression – but these are changed from within. Image is all-important to capitalism so that, although the core may be damaged, appearances remain. In this way, cultures may seem intact, even though internally they have become unrecognizable: fundamentalism bears witness to this. Cultural diversity is as threatened as biodiversity – and for the same reasons.

*The opponents of globalization have been, perhaps, too concerned with looking for a new paradigm to justify their challenge. Indeed, there has been something of an obsession with defining 'an alternative'. Perhaps this reflects the fact that the supreme enabling resistance to early capitalism was the monumental passion and poetry of Marx. His great epic Das Kapital continues to colour efforts to resist the existing global order. If other ways of being and acting in the world are to be successful, it has led people to assume, they must have a watertight and all-embracing theoretical basis.*

It is surprising that theory should preoccupy the opponents of capitalism, that most promiscuous of ideologies which will couple with anything that yields profit. And it is poignant that the shadow of Marx hangs over those seeking to escape the brutal necessities of universal industrialism. But it is time to set aside this model of alternativism. It isn't the theory of globalization that threatens humanity.

Quite the reverse. Its crudeness and inconsistency are visible everywhere in its agents and institutions: when bankers routinely express their tenderness for the poor and moneylenders speak of social justice, we know we are in a world of fantasy. ***Its cultural power lies in its practice, its productive power and in an***

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*ideology promoted through an iconography of hope, through images of plenty that hold out a promise of liberation to the poor of the earth.*

What does this imply for effective resistance? It suggests that the search for anything so neat and comprehensive as a paradigm should be abandoned. Alternative practices are needed, pathways to disengagement from globalism, another way of being in the world.

*What runs most dramatically against the culture of individualistic consumerism is collective, shared, solidaristic behaviour.* This is what animates those people making their secular pilgrimages to the cities in which the G8 holds its imperialistic cabals. And they have succeeded in banishing those cabals to unvisitable mountain and island retreats, beyond reach of those whose lives are affected by their macabre deliberations.

Of course this is only a dramatization of deeper resistance in small villages and neighbourhoods, in schemes where people exchange goods and services without monetary transactions, in protests against GM crops, in farmers rejecting the terminator gene in seeds, in slum-dwellers fighting eviction.

Every local and uncelebrated triumph of people over the local moneylender and landowner; every small victory over the industries that have turned food against nourishment, health against well-being, understanding against education, livelihood against life: every act of local and rooted self-reliance and mutuality is a challenge to the concentrations of power of transnational corporations, financial institutions and governments.

These are sometimes heroic – the Landless People’s Movement in Brazil, the Zapatistas in Chiapas, for example. But the question arises, what culture do we, in the West, in the heartlands of the globalizing power, reclaim as our own amid the wastelands of universal industrialism?

*Cultures are organic – they rise and fall, influence others and borrow from them – but they require at their root an underlying belief or myth which gives meaning and coherence to their rituals and festivals, their re-affirmation of identity.* We are familiar with the myth of globalization: mastery of nature,

technological progress, ‘economic reason’ in Andre Gorz’s phrase<sup>2</sup>; and we see its rituals everywhere, in its deregulation of desire, the excesses of the shopping mall, the orgiastic worship of celebrity and money.



**The alternative cannot live off surrogate ideologies of indigenous peoples.**

The US anthropologist Ruth Benedict spoke of tolerance of ‘the co-existing and equally valid patterns of life which humankind has created for itself from the raw materials of existence.’<sup>3</sup> But we at the beginning of the 21st century are not alone with the raw materials of existence; we are responding to a dominant – indeed overwhelming – culture. Out of our reactive defensiveness, we experience only modest and provisional triumphs, small successes that are in themselves pinpricks against the pervasive monoculture.

These may not overturn the existing order, but they yield a positive feedback in terms of self-esteem of local communities. They strengthen faith in our own ability to do, make, create things for each other; to serve, tend and cherish one another; to provide stimulus, amusement and support: this represents a rudimentary, if dispersed, response to the totalizing violence that besets us.

*Let the practice flourish, then, and theory will take care of itself. It is the search for other ways of being in the world, not working out new dogmas, that will enrich and empower. And we know where those are to be found: in cultures driven to the edge of extinction by the imperatives of the global market, in the practices and customs of indigenous peoples which have survived for*

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millennia. These cannot always be restored; but their principles may serve as guidance for sustainable, non-violent societies. It isn't a question of going back, much less of nostalgia or worship of primitivism, but of supplementing modest material resource-use by sharing the uncounted treasures of the human resource-base.

Capitalism has enclosed and sold back all the images of the good life and the visions of a better world. This is why its icons are so powerful. The promise of riches without end to satisfy limitless desire makes alternative visions of a modest plenty, a comfortable security, look thin and austere by comparison.



And indeed, these were designed to overwhelm earlier socialist claims to offer mere health, education, wholesome food, libraries and recreation facilities – poor pallid ambitions to set beside the castles in the air of global capital which breathe seductive messages of luxury and ease to a poor suffering humanity.

Out of the ravages of globalization's dance of death the alternative will arise: an internationalism that respects other ways of life rather than merely marketing them; a diversity of ways of answering human need rather than forcing all through the global economic machine; a re-sacralizing of the elements without which life is impossible.

Globalization has deformed the visions of brother- and sisterhood, of universal kinship, of plenitude and sufficiency. In such a world, every act of humanity, every effort to answer need locally, every shared gesture, every pooling of

resources, every act of giving out of the generosity of the unsubdued spirit is a form of resistance. Whether we can re-integrate need with community in the manner of Muktagacha is another matter.

**You cannot prescribe cultural alternatives.** Cultures are organic, living things. In our admiration of some aspects of indigenous and traditional cultures, we often adopt, despite ourselves, a consumerist or touristic response: other people's cultures are there to be possessed, appropriated or imitated. Nor can you will cultures: values in the abstract are without value. They express themselves through the harsh materialities of daily life.

But the loosest ideology must bind together the scattered and sometimes chaotic movements, the small acts of charity and courage; for together, they constitute a powerful impulse towards retrieval. Just as it is now recognized that the polluted landscapes, the poisoned soils and damaged air must be restored and rehabilitated, how much more true must this be of our depleted humanity.



This is not weak or sentimental.

***The absence of ideology means only that there are no dogmas, revelations or doctrines in the name of which more human beings must be made to suffer.***

The spaces unoccupied by ideology give room for manoeuvre – like the protesters at Seattle, Gothenburg and Genoa dancing between armoured vehicles or clouds of teargas.

The unwieldy, inefficient structures that hold our needs captive can be made to perish from neglect. It requires only 10 per cent of the business of any transnational corporation to fail for its profits to be wiped out. Surely we can find the equivalent – and a great deal more – within the rich storehouse of our own generosity to each other; the unbought gifts and uncalculating mercies, the commitment and succour we can offer one another. In a world which has used up so much of its material base, it is out of the neglected inner resources that cultures of resistance will be, and are being, built.



