

Global Media Journal

German Edition

Book Review

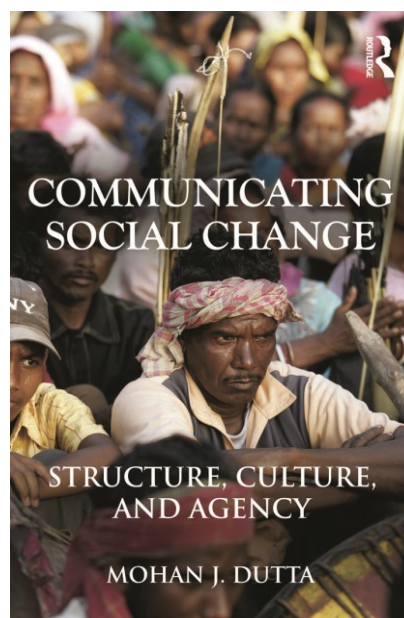
Communicating Social Change: Structure, Culture, and Agency

Dutta, Mohan J. (2011): Social Change: Structure, Culture, and Agency. London: Routledge. 342pp.; ISBN 978-0415878746.

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To cite this article: Ulrich, Dirk-Claas (2011). Dutta, Mohan J. (2011): Communicating Social Change: Structure, Culture, and Agency. *Global Media Journal – German Edition*, 1(2).

With *Communicating Social Change. Structure, Culture, and Agency* Mohan J. Dutta is enthusiastically engaged in the constantly contentious debates of structurally caused inequalities and disparities in current inter-/intranational relations. From a critical theory perspective, he analyzes the significance and modes of peripheral/subaltern communication processes towards a global societal change and structural transformation by examining inherent hegemonic alignments of common theories, methodologies, and politics. These are finally contrasted with a refreshing margin-sensitive approach to social change that attempts to communicatively overcome the adherence to the prevailing neoliberal dogma.



The volume in its outline is divided into three parts and encompasses, along with a theoretical-conceptual part, an issue specific and communication oriented part as well.

In the *first* part, the proposed *culture-centered approach* to social change communication is characterized as strongly affiliated with traditions of thought such as

postcolonial theory and subaltern studies. Drawing from these theoretical foundations, Dutta situates his approach in a wider theoretical framework of (global) social change communication, distinguishing it from parallel existing academic approaches like modernization theory driven development campaigns, likewise top-down oriented Marxist theory, as well as conventional ideas of participatory development. Thereby the culture-centered approach emphasizes an explicit orientation towards processes of structural transformation and a grassroots/participatory perspective at once – albeit a slightly terminologically incoherent visualization of the theoretical framework is provided (figure 1.1, p. 33). Ultimately, its twofold intentions are an interrogation of the predominant global hegemonic structures dominantly shaped and perpetuated by a neoliberal model of globalization and the commitment to a pronounced engagement with the global margins.

In doing so, an often-missed sensitivity and presumably still neglected awareness towards peripheral or subaltern perspectives and voices and their significance for social change and structural transformation processes are claimed. Hence, dialogue is understood as a pivotal communicative idea within the approach's participatory aspirations of enhanced visibility of subalternity in social and political main discourses on redefining the (global) common good. Furthermore, Dutta's culture-centered approach itself is contextualized by the triad of interdependent constituents as structure (implicit or explicit configurations of societal resource access), culture (meaning, interpretation), and agency (explicit capability of independent choices by marginalized individuals and groups in negotiating structural conditions). In a general sense these aspects are understood as principal constituents in enabling or restricting pathways of societal change. In particular, the participatory perspective within the culture-centered approach, accentuated by the aspect of agency, should have been further elaborated on in the theoretical part of the book to ensure a more precise distinction from the described participatory development angle and its mainly rhetorical commitment to an inclusive participation from the very beginning of reasoning – notwithstanding a more sophisticated description is provided in the ninth chapter.

The *second* part is dedicated to the most urgent issues of our time and thereby reflects the agenda of the UN-Development Goals (MDG) to a large extent. Thus, the current patterns and underlying causes of poverty, inequalities in relation to agriculture and food security, as well as health and gender issues are investigated in separate chapters and illustrated by numerous case studies of concerned world regions that are predominantly perceived as having peripheral importance. The core reason for the observed conflictual status quo in context of the issue specific foci above is, synoptically stated, traced back to the neoliberal formula of liberalization, deregulation, and privatization, whereas this triad is related to the canon of Western values and the constitutive assumptions of modernization theory. Therefore, development policies and programs following the Washington Consensus like NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement), GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade), TRIPS (Agreement on Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual

Property Rights), and Structural Adjustment Programs recommended by global institutions such as the International Monetary Funds (IMF) and the World Bank are understood as a self-perpetuation of existing structural inequities. It is argued that, due to the prevailing trust in the invisible hand or self-regulating mechanisms of the free market, these policies are counteracting the superordinate purpose of a just and root-sensitive social change process.

Although Dutta on the whole presents a conglomerate of familiar arguments, it is noteworthy that he follows his suggested culture-centered approach by consequently referencing otherwise systematically omitted subaltern voices from the social periphery. Accordingly, he intentionally stresses the relationship between the so-called material and symbolic realm – meaning the interdependence of material prosperity and the symbolic representation in main discourses or the mainstream public sphere. Notably the latter enables marginalized groups to question their own persistent absence, to interrogate the dominant political, economical, as well as social structures, and to enact agency by communicatively initiating processes of structural redefinition and transformation.

Therefore especially the third part of this volume deals with the epistemological modus and wide ranged opportunities of communication together with organizational, mobilization specific and media related aspects of communication as a fundamental entity of social transformative processes. Preliminary, dialogue as an essential communicative modus is conceptualized as crucial to the idea of the culture-centered approach. Hence, dialogue understood as influencing, as well as effected instance in the interplay of structure, culture, and agency promotes, due to its engagement with subaltern perspectives, disruptions of persistent marginalization routines. Further following Dutta, nevertheless, a strong solidary commitment to the transformation process itself, a high degree of process related reflexivity, and a methodological self-reflexivity are indispensable to purposefully establish inclusive subaltern dialogic spaces, to avoid a monopolization or co-optation of these alternative discourse spaces by still hegemonic structures, to adequately meet the heterogeneity of the subaltern space, and to scrutinize methodological tool kits and theoretical knowledge categories either way.

Against the backdrop of a primarily mass media-shaped understanding of societal communication, Dutta furthermore introduces a diverse compilation of performance-based opportunities of communication in the subsequent seventh chapter. Among these alternative forms of expressions, phenomena like street protest, speeches, poetry, visual art, theater, but also (hunger) strikes, and suicides are regarded as symbolic representations which are challenging common assumptions of social reality and therefore conscientize and mobilize publics from a local to a global scale. Moreover, in chapter eight a rough overview of social mobilization related aspects is provided in an even more practice-oriented manner. By addressing challenges of issue identification and framing, adequate information sharing, tasks of establishing a movement identity as well as interlinkages into transformative

global policy networks, a number of significant factors for a succeeding social change process are stressed and discussed. Required networking and lobbying efforts with institutionalized political structures and a sensitivity towards conflict-regulating mechanisms, due to competing ideas in heterogeneous movements, as well as an awareness of co-optation tendencies are completing this enumeration.

Although the reviewer does not in the least depreciate the potential virtues of the introduced forms of performative communication mentioned above, a particular focus (tenth chapter) on the media in increasingly mediatized societies is ineluctable – wherein the relative relevance of mass media communication, due to the highly differentiated societal character, plays a vital role in restricting and enabling resonance with a broader audience contesting the hegemony of the criticized dominant structures. But even though power as an important media-related issue in a widely neoliberal (global) context is thematized by Dutta, the missing in-depth reflection of conflicting relationships between mainstream mass media and subaltern media in mediated public spheres remains disputable. In focusing intentionally on access-related aspects of media communication, illustrated by an impressive number of significant examples of alternative media outlets (e.g. Z Magazine), ICT-media induced, mobilized, or supported social movements (e.g. prominent the Zapatista movement and ATTAC among others), alternative media projects are, to some extent, depicted as quasi-autarkic, self-sufficient entities. In redefining issues and reframing solutions, they are held to offer challenges to the mainstream media, but Dutta – all too euphoric – thereby neglects to question the seemingly minor impacts and only slightly sustainable influences on (global) mainstream discourses related to issues of peripheral media representation in social transformation processes. Notwithstanding, the exemplary current media performance of the Occupy Wall Street movement mainstream media logics (e.g. news values, temporal news definition) are obviously incidentally mapping with the zeitgeist rather than declaring social progress as a new leading maxim. Therefore, the indubitable importance of alternative/subaltern media outlets in general – or as in the latter case of the Canadian magazine *Adbusters* – is not to be diminished although effectiveness must, to some extent, be qualified in the culture-centered approach suggested by Dutta. Finally, in the closing chapter of this volume, the potential role of academia in global transformative processes is stressed. Hence, a permanent deconstruction of power structures in academic knowledge generation is claimed and a constant reflexivity on theory, methodology, and praxis is understood as a critical expression of a necessary commitment to the deeply political project of social change and engagement with the global margins.

Unfortunately, by an unfavorable formal representation of the book's (chapter inherent) heading structure, reading orientation is frequently attenuated while a more sophisticated approach to the sectioning would have helped to avoid an often confusing situation which interferes with the intended coherent line of reasoning.

In sum, Dutta's contribution could be understood as an emphatic plea to interrogate the status quo of international and inter-/intra-societal relations and despite partially repetitious claims against the global neoliberal hegemony, this volume pleasantly emphasizes the fundamental impact of a locally inspired approach to communication for a progressive movement which particularly dedicates itself to a pan-global process of social change aiming a more equitable balance of power that is shaping community of mankind's kismet. In any case, this volume is appropriately published at a time when almost ontologically received paradigms – like the neoliberal one – are increasingly facing resistance and an explicit re-articulation in contexts of the current financial and economic crisis scenario. This temporal constellation could, as presumably desired by Dutta, provide the social impetus for a conscious rediscovery of the marginalized majority in a communicatively constituted world society whose basal structural entanglements are neglected more often than not. Applying the pivotal ideas of the author's culture-centered approach could, therefore, help smoothen the ubiquitous fault lines of a rigorous neoliberal hegemony by refusing an atomistic individualism in favor of a collectively understood social change, nurturing the thought of radical redistributive justice in political, economical, and communicative terms on a local, national, and global scale.