Book Review

Savita Bailur
s.bailur@lse.ac.uk
Post-doctoral Researcher
Information Systems and
Innovations Group
London School of Economics
Houghton Street
London WC2A 2AE
UK
Senior Researcher
Innovations Group, World
Bank Institute
1818 H Street, NW
Washington, DC 20433
USA

Savita Bailur

All too often, the conclusions of ICTD papers read that insufficient attention has been paid to societal structure, culture, and the agency of individuals, or that we do not discuss the nuances of the "D" in ICTD. Mohan Dutta's comprehensive book, *Communicating Social Change: Structure, Culture and Agency*, addresses these critiques with the argument that it is only through a participatory, culture-centered approach that we can understand and address inequality.

The book begins by discussing and defining terms such as culture, structure, and agency. Dutta argues that the value of a culture-centered approach is in its exploration of how marginality is created—economically, as well as socially—and that engaging with these minority/marginalized voices gives voice to the voiceless. An accessible overview of theories of power is provided, including postcolonial, subaltern, and cultural theories, along with examples of empowerment against hegemonies, such as the Zapatistas' use of global networks of solidarity and protests in India against industrialization and mining.

Part I illustrates how cultural marginalization occurs in poverty, agriculture and food, health, and gender, broadly relating back to the Millennium Development Goals. Drawing on interviews with research subjects who see poverty variously as invisibility, humiliation, or dependency, Dutta argues that symbolic marginalization is as important as material marginalization. In agriculture, innovations such as the green revolution are seen as having been imposed on passive recipients, reinforcing dependency on transnationals and Western governments, repressing indigenous knowledge. Instead, companies such as Navdanya, an Indian organic seed producer, are working with farmers on sustainable agriculture, biodiversity, and promoting the rejuvenation of indigenous skills. Similarly, Dutta argues that Western-constructed global health policy reinforces health inequalities, with the majority of the world's population serving as the targets of government interventions and tests funded by pharmaceutical companies. Dutta calls for local constructions of critical health issues, giving an example of a sex worker in Kolkata, India who states that locally constructed HIV-AIDS health policy is more appropriate because the fieldworkers know best what is needed. Finally, the traditional marginalization of women and the (according to Dutta) fundamentally patriarchal nature of neoliberalism, itself based on the values of competition, private property, profit, greed, and economic efficiency, are eschewed in favor of listening to the voices of women at the local level. Throughout Part I, the theme is that structural inequality can only be understood with a participatory, culture-centered theoretical and methodological perspective.

Part II analyzes the role of communication in social change. Dutta begins by reviewing the history of dialogue theories, including Freire's (1972) negotiation between oppressor and oppressed, Habermas' (1989) theory of communicative action (dialogue through a public domain involving common space, respect for the other, and cooperative action), and Bakhtin's (1981) "heteroglossia" (diversity of voices in dialogue). The UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues is given as an example of a space for listening to indigenous groups. Another such example is Land Is Life, where indigenous communities dialogue with "dominant hegemonies." Dutta then presents diverse participatory methods of communicating social change, including street protests, speeches, visual art, songs, theatre, and of course, new media. The organization of social change is discussed, and here we see the potential of the Internet and new media to unite scattered networks of solidarity.

The final chapter discusses issues of authenticity, reflexivity, and commitment of the researcher to social change. Dutta states that researching and communicating social change are meaningless without questioning academic politics (privatized and concentrated knowledge production), the ethics of research being funded by multinationals, and whether the research reasonably reflects (or preferably, is co-created with) marginalized groups. In terms of reflexivity, he suggests that we move from the dualistic researcher/"research subject" model, and instead, explore how issues affect us all. Finally, in terms of commitment to social change and solidarity, he suggests humility and openness to learning from other ways of knowing.

Despite the extensive theory and literature presented, four main concerns emerge on reading this book. First, the *process* of participation in achieving social change is not clearly articulated (neither the detailed mechanics, nor the causality between participation and outcome). One example that Dutta gives is of the indigenous people of Niyamgiri, Orissa, India, who use Facebook and YouTube to create a "Save Niyamgiri" online campaign to "articulate local cultural voices" under threat of displacement from bauxite mining. Dutta does not explore exactly how this online presence "directly challenges the grand narrative of development, perpetrated by the state, the corporate social responsibility programmes . . . and public relations [of the

mining company]" other than through raising awareness. Second, it would be more constructive to understand exactly *how* participation occurs at the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues or Land is Life. A greater discussion on structural constraints and how agency can actually challenge or change structure would be quite valuable, as would concrete suggestions on how a "culture centred approach" can be undertaken.

Related to this is the third critique, that Dutta's frequent bifurcation between "dominant hegemonies" and "subalterns" appears too stark. For example, he considers the Kolkata sex worker mentioned above as a "subaltern." But do the sex workers consider themselves as such, or rather, as a more dominant, knowledgeable intermediary who understands the community? In other words, "local" is not a holistic entity (Mohan & Stokke, 2002), and neither are "dominant hegemonies" or "subalterns." What of the role of intermediaries and multiple actors? Who, after all, created the above online campaign, and what is their own agenda or bias? ICTD authors (Avgerou, 2008; Heeks, 2006; Madon, Reinhard, Roode, & Walsham, 2009; Walsham & Sahay, 2006) and community media authors (Carpentier, 2007; Gumucio Dagron, 2009; Tacchi, Watkins, & Keerthirathne, 2009) deconstruct the culture-centered approach more diligently, identifying multiple groups and communicative ecologies, as well as how information and communication can both travel and be blocked at all levels. Dutta often lapses into binary distinctions (oppressor vs. oppressed), a critique levelled at Freire almost 40 years ago.

The fourth and final critique is of particular relevance to ICTD scholars, in that only two out of the book's 342 pages are specifically dedicated to new media, which is interpreted as largely meaning the Internet. There should be more discussion about mobile or smartphones; crowdsourcing platforms, such as Ushaidi; or integrated, mediated technologies (e.g., radio browsing, where a disc jockey browses the Web and shares what is found with the radio audience; see discussion on Kothmale community radio by Pringle and David, 2002). New media encompasses a much wider range than is discussed here.

Despite these four critiques, Dutta's research is a welcome contribution as a supplementary text in ICTD studies, in emphasizing the focus on local cultures when designing projects and research. As

such, one cannot argue with his overall premise that an interpretive, ethnographic, co-created approach (either in implementing or researching) is more contextual to one that is macro, quantitative, and bearing an externally defined agenda. The book's greatest contribution to ICTD is likely to be theoretical, with the range of literature covered running the gamut from post-colonial to subaltern, cultural, dialogic, and participatory theories. Therefore, the *rationale* for a culture-centered approach is well argued. What is more problematic is the lack of both detailed empirical analysis on how the process of participation actually occurs and concrete suggestions on how a culture-centered approach can be executed. The book would be improved by a more subtle, less dualistic approach with detailed ICTD examples (admittedly, ICTD is not the focus of this book, but this would make it more relevant to the ICTD community). In conclusion, then, this is a comprehensive text on the theory of participatory social change for ICTD scholars, but one which provides a broader overview, rather than detailed case-by-case critical analysis. ∎

References

Avgerou, C. (2008). Information systems in developing countries: A critical research review. *Journal of Information Technology, 23*(3), 133–146.

Bakhtin, M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination: Four essays.* Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Carpentier, N. (2007). Participation, access and interaction: Changing perspectives. In V. Nightingale & T. Dwyer (Eds.), *Community media: International perspectives* (pp. 214–230). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Freire, P. (1972). *Pedagogy of the oppressed.* London, UK: Sheed and Ward.

Gumucio Dagron, A. (2009). Playing with fire: Power, participation, and communication for development. *Development in Practice, 19*(4/5), 453–465.

Habermas, J. (1989). *The theory of communicative action.* Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Heeks, R. (2006). Theorising ICTD research. *Information Technologies & International Development, 3*(3), 1–4.

Madon, S., Reinhard, N., Roode, D., & Walsham, G. (2009). Digital inclusion projects in developing countries: Processes of institutionalization. *Information Technology for Development, 15*(2), 95–107.

Mohan, G., & Stokke, K. (2002). Participatory development and empowerment: The dangers of localism. *Third World Quarterly, 21*(2), 247–268.

Pringle, I., & David, M. (2002). Rural community ICT applications: The Kothmale model. *Electronic Journal of Information Systems in Developing Countries, 8*(4), 1–14.

Tacchi, J., Watkins, J., & Keerthirathne, K. (2009). Participatory content creation: Voice, communication, and development. *Development in Practice, 19*(4/5), 573–584.

Walsham, G., & Sahay, S. (2006). Research on information systems in developing countries: Current landscape and future prospects. *Information Technology for Development, 12*(1), 7–24.