

Prahalad and Polak versus Roy: A Case Study in Deconstructing Actors and Spaces for Contemporary Technological Development for the Poor

The movements of technological development in the international development structure have been recently manifested in two vaguely familiar arguments about how best to alleviate the concerns of the poor. On one side, a strong community argues for local technological empowerment. Bolstered by movements such as E.F. Schumacher's appropriate technology movement expressed in 'Small is Beautiful,' and with the aversion against arguably incompetent international systems of aid, organizations focus their efforts on making technology which focuses upon community design and empowerment. Examples include the Barefoot College, which was designed and developed by Bunker Roy; a revolutionary program run in Tilonia, India which teaches the poorest villagers to become adept engineers, doctors, architects, and much more to most effectively impact their own community.

On the other side of the structure, certain influential thinkers aim to develop mass produced solutions to impacting poverty. Because the massive concerns of these poor communities seem solvable with a technical and entrepreneurial methods, these influential actors aim to solve the concerns of the poor as a whole. Coimbatore Krishnarao Prahalad (C.K. Prahalad), for example, is a proponent of multinational corporate intervention through 'Bottom of the Pyramid' philosophies, which argue that large corporate entities that effectively cater to the poor as consumers are promised new fortunes. Another influential development scholar, Paul Polak, argues for framing the poor not just as consumers, but as entrepreneurs as well. He states that multinational corporations fail to create design metrics centered upon 'radical affordability', and will be upended by those who ascribe to its needs (TEDxMileHigh).

Both of these philosophies have their advantages and disadvantages, but what makes them familiar is a topic hinted upon through the entire history of the international project of development: the presence of a dichotomy. This dichotomy is a textbook manifestation of the local versus global, manifested in technological development for the poor. With dichotomy, however, comes the opportunity for deconstruction. These hegemonic constructs of the Local and the Global, are not the main powers at work in these case studies. In the vein of Doreen Massey, an extremely important part is not just the structures in places, but who has power in these structures; in a sense, the 'power geometry' of it all (Massey 149). There are particular actors at work: people, organizations, institutions, which act in concert to make these philosophies work at these nodes of the international development system. At the same time, there are actors and methods which disprove the presence of solely 'global' or 'local' actors, and show opportunity for a deeper, more dynamic connections. By using C.K. Prahalad's "Bottom of the Pyramid" argument and Paul Polak's argument for radical affordability and Bunker Roy's 'Barefoot College' as case studies, I intend to link current technological development to either the 'local' or the 'global', by isolating certain powerful actors in Doreen Massey's 'power geometry' framework, I intend to unpack each study to explore the complexity, and lack of dichotomy, of each case.

Proponents of tapping into the market of the poor include C. K. Prahalad, the scholar who introduced the concept of the "Bottom of the Pyramid." Originally printed in 2002, Prahalad uses the relative benchmark of the poor who live upon \$2 a day in purchasing power parity values, and argues that although each person individually is poor, altogether communities have a much larger potential exploitable capital. Such radical developments like the use of cell phones and the

Internet, and the shrinking of the globe for certain actors, means the world - and new consumers - are all the more accessible (Prahalad).

There are people who argue against the validity of his points, the math behind his promised fortune and the power of the multinational corporate community, but few can argue that his words have little influence. The information and community technology for development community definitely feels the impact of the Bottom of the Pyramid model. For example, "...Substantial investment is being channeled into ICT4D by multilateral organizations, corporations, and governments of developing countries (Kuriyan 94). The work is lauded by American Secretaries of State Madeline Albright to charity powerhouse Bill Gates (Profits and Poverty). It also comes from world economic forums, where large companies like Adidas, BP, and Procter and Gamble resolved to work towards serving the world's poor (New Business-NGO Partnerships). The argument is elegant and enticing, and it creates a theoretical environment where everyone seems to get what they want: the companies find new revenue and a new market, and the poor receive goods and service never before possible from the companies the West has produced. It seems a golden opportunity to 'make good and do good' simultaneously.

However, many entrepreneurial development practitioners understand behind much of the newly developed generalizations hide deeper obstacles to overcome. Two of the larger barriers is the actual design of goods and services that the poor can purchase, and developing mechanisms where the poor actually obtain the products. Paul Polak, a physician turned development entrepreneur, has worked and developed his thoughts on the projects for the past three decades. His gospels of radical affordability aim to develop the poor as consumers and as entrepreneurs of their own (Polak 9). His own technology, the treadle pump, has created affordable irrigation technologies for millions of impoverished people, while working to bring them out of poverty

(Polak 21). In his many organizations, the most famous being International Development Enterprises (IDE) the focus of his work is for-profit social enterprises which cater services, goods, and technologies to the poorest consumers, by way of his and other large companies.

These two influential actors represent one side of the global vs. local movement I have developed. Although their intention is to assist the individuals who suffer from deprived situations without money, clean water, sanitation, and other ills, their answer to the world's woes comes from above. In his argument, Prahalad's audiences, and admittedly, most critical actors are the multinational corporations and the complicit powers of the community. Entities with the largest global reach and amassed capital, contain the largest responsibility, to design technologies, business models, and distribution infrastructures. The argument has its largest influences on global corporations, actors, and institutions enticed by the philosophy. Alongside Prahalad's theory is Polak's practice, which has assisted millions of users from Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, and Cambodia, among many other locales. The prime actors in his organization, however, are mostly from influential academic and business institutions. Most of the board of directors and team of his first NGO, International Development Enterprises (IDE), are wholly American-trained, and the board of directors is mostly a collection of U.S., Canadian, and U.K. top business professionals, entrepreneurs, and professors (IDE).

In Polak's case, although the poor are using the innovations, the goods, and the business models at the bottom, they are still only using what is given to them by other communities. They are left out of the initial process of idea creation, of problem solving, which then could help lift themselves out of poverty. The trend is clear; individuals in this vein of thought which currently have the power to train, innovate, business model, and develop technologies in radical economic development are globally minded from a Western perspective. The theories of change are also

evident in these practices and arguments: to lift the poor out of poverty, powerful foreign entities with altruistic values and Western-guided visions develop technologies, systems, and techniques to assist the poor.

This framework, however, breaks its mold of 'globalized' development thought at an extremely critical juncture. Prahalad's theory is honed in Polak's practice, and what Polak understands is the importance of effectively delivering the good to the 'last mile'. Many multinational corporations which aim to help the most poor understand that advertising, manufacturing, and distribution systems in impoverished communities are drastically different than the centralized, connected Western world. Thus, finding solutions which cater to their served communities is very necessary. In Bangladesh, Polak recruited 3,000 village dealers to sell the pumps at a 12% margin, and recruited village troubadours to perform with treadle pumps in their acts to advertise to the community (Paul Polak). The knowledge of the current community and the buy-in which occurs by using communication the village understands is a prime example of the type of local powers which are necessary to make such 'global' organizations thrive. This critical juncture is Polak's seminal relationship with the local, and without it, Polak's programs would fail.

On the other side of the fence, however, an influential member of the global society has dedicated his life to approach the issues of international development using a different philosophy. Bunker Roy, founder of the influential 'Barefoot College', accuses the current international system, and their approach towards helping the poor, as

"... patronizing, top-down, insensitive, and expensive. It excludes the marginalized, the exploited, and the very poor and keeps them from making decisions on their own. Thus it disempowers them, leaving them dependent and hopelessly ill prepared to improve their lives. Moreover, these "patrons," however well intentioned, have refused to learn from their mistakes. They are stuck in a rut that wastes money on a process that simply has not worked." (Roy 67)

Frustrated with contemporary plans development plans, Roy started the college in 1971. The topics the college currently focuses on are drinking water, alternative energy, environment and climate change mitigation, traditional communication, and empowering rural women. The college is best known for taking illiterate women from impoverished communities across the globe, and turning them into photovoltaic and water experts for their communities. The model he espouses does whatever it can to bar the aspects of the development structure he deems restrictive to a community's development. For example, the college does not give out paper credentials, or let anyone with paper credentials work in the college; he has seen credentialed indigenous members selfishly leave their communities in search of better lives, and credentialed expats fail to fix simple issues. His organization has minimal hierarchy and stresses transparency of its actions, income, and processes (Roy 104).

Bunker Roy's theory of change can be summed up as such: to help the world's poor and give them dignity, rid the communities of all vestiges of oppressive western structures, and give those most willing to sustainably develop and maintain the interventions the solutions to solve their own problems. Although Roy is evidently the most powerful actor in his school, it is evident that the villagers and the communities which work in Tilonia have a strong say in the creation, innovation, and shaping of the College as a whole. Roy's emphasis upon local knowledge, and participatory development means the communities ideally enact agency upon their own space, and can mold their own solutions at will.

However, local activists such as Roy are not solely in local spaces; its international success is owed to particular international actors and structures as well. One powerful impact of his decades-long stint from local agency and work is that his college, the structure, and its system become global sponsors for the possibilities of local knowledge, decentralization, and local

development. His recent Schwab, Skoll, and Time 100 awards for his work in the College are evident examples of his recent global influence (Roy 67, Mortenson). What's more, the work of the community has enacted demonstrable change in the community infrastructure. When the chief ministers and engineers of Sikkim saw the Barefoot College architects and builders created a rainwater harvesting station originally deemed technically impossible, he changed the entire State's water policy (Roy 80).

An novel, yet new way, to think about globalization, is also being developed by the Barefoot College: the globalization of the poor. Many critics of Thomas Friedman's globalization argue that the impacts of globalization conceal the negative externalities of the free-trade centered globalized world, where poor, colored, female, and otherwise maligned communities are exploited or otherwise left out of the equation (Shiva). However, the Barefoot College has developed a system which globalizes the very communities they draw upon. Women from Mali, Afghanistan, The Gambia, and many other regions of the world are flown to develop interventionist skills in Tilonia, creating environments seldom seen on the world stage. Women of all ages, whom speak all types of languages and whom have likely have never left their villages before, become the least likely contributors to a newly developed space of interconnection (Barefoot College - Solar Technology, 2010). develop themselves, their stories, their experience through the Barefoot College, and then return to their communities to share their new expertise to develop their communities. Although it does not fall in the same categories of the previous examples, the global impact of the Barefoot College cannot be denied (Roy 85).

It seems, that the point of dichotomization is so workers, communities, actors, and organizations can pick a side. There are particular truths which reverberate to any individuals who integrates themselves in the aspirationally selfless system of international development, and

finding the truths with reverberate with yours is part of this experience. For those who live their lives in a system of Western educated belief systems, which develops stark guilt for the unexplained poverty in a continually more connected world than ever before, it makes sense to apply the structure of said community to the problem. Conversely, individuals who come from a community consistently inundated with new NGOs, 'development experts' and expatriate donors while poverty swallows communities, understandably would want to exercise their own agency. What I argue for, however, is that the world we actually live in extends beyond those boundaries. The local requires the global to exist, and vice versa. The examples of Prahalad, Polak, and Roy are only a single example of this opportunity; many others are likely to be found in other case studies which define themselves by such dichotomies. Possibly, by breaking such dichotomies, we can move towards a more complex, and yet a more equal, solution for our global ills.

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