

The Bonds that Shape, the Bonds that Bind, the Bonds that Break: Undigitalised bodies in a Globalising Economy

[In memoriam: Pierre Bourdieu [1930-2002]]

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The following pages offer a critique of recent sociological theory about our present: the historical conjuncture that is defined as the era of "globalisation". The paper argues instead for the "re-grounding" of sociology in the concrete materiality of non-digitalised social bonds and their repertoires of action. Secondly, it provides an understanding of materiality through already "encultured" bodies operating in four analytically distinguishable planes of interaction: of gendering, livelihoods-creating, oralising and valuing systems that constitute the core capacities of practice. [1]

Thirdly, it postulates that their cultural formations [2], bounded as they are by macro-structures and institutions come to constitute fields of practice [3] and trajectories for the production of life [4]. Fourthly, it situates both practices and their fields through examples from case studies of livelihood strategies in poor urban communities in KwaZulu Natal. [5] It therefore demonstrates how institutions and organisations shape but are also shaped by trans-local social processes and pressures. It finally, demonstrates how collective and group-based agencies mobilise and get mobilised over "ills", vulnerabilities, disasters and needs. In doing all this, over and above its polemic against the elitism and West-centrism of current, progressive sociology, it also takes issue with its obverse: the ever recurrent romantic juxtaposition of local communities as the always pre-given alternative.

I

Recent sociological work, involving some of the most critical and engaging work in the dominant capitalist formations of the world economy, has become unwittingly a new elite theory of the current conjuncture. By an act of remarkable theoretical bravado these theorists have "absented" any capacities residing in "ordinary" people the world over, people outside the digitality of networks to have any part in any dialectic of change. In elaborating grand theoretical innovations to address the phenomenon of globalisation, even sociologists of the stature of Anthony Giddens, Manuel Castells, Ulrich Beck [and even Zygmunt Bauman] among many others [6] have unwittingly helped the disappearing act. In addressing the institutional reconfiguration of late modernity, they have done so in a way that helped hundreds of their admirers to remove agency from the terrain of possibility for subaltern [7] communities everywhere.

Their ideas of "disembedding", of "time-space distantiation", of "time-space compression" or even as Castells' claims of "timeless time" or post-modern ideas of "spatial intensities", of networks, connectivities and exclusions have become complicit in the new drama of "absenting" and the buttressing of a neo-modernisation theory to boot. [8]

As any good piece of theorising their work offers an understanding of the dominant milieu of late modernity, of "turbo capitalism" and how the "new" world system defines the conditions of life for the world's majority. It is at the same time a rueful sociological abstraction, even in the case of Manuel Castells who at least attempts to understand social movements at a global scale.[9] It is so, because even in this case, the social movements are seen to be constituted by the reconfiguration of relations of power in a global network society, without the capacity to explain how is it that these movements sustain and reproduce themselves among people whose access to these media are insignificant. In short, their constitutive agency disappears.

For sociologists who work in the "south", whose central concern is the undigitalised, subaltern body that subsists in locales where time and space are neither dismantled nor compressed; where networks of action are not digital and, where "exclusion" from, means very little; where in short, the body still weighed by the laws of gravity has, to paraphrase Roy Bhaskar its own "rhythmics" [10] tied to its [sometimes] dwindling energies and capacities, continues to generate practices and action. To be a "non-essential" node or territory for the world economy and therefore to be "switched-off" as Manuel Castells indicated in his trilogy, is bad for economic growth or downright rotten for modernising projects, but it begs the question of agency in social relations.

II

This "body" or "bodies" cannot remain a figure of abstraction- neither the product of a medical model, i.e. the immune-system of the south [11], nor the subjects of a post-structuralist muse: the flexible body , the eco-centre [12] or the backdrop for native informants [13]- a body that needs saving from its perceived social bondage that only provides meaning for discordant voices in the West. What we have here are bodies, distributed, channeled and constrained by institutions and structures. But their existence and their own "rhythmics" are part of a time-bound struggle for survival.

Here South Africa provides for an exemplary study of distribution, channeling and constraint. The country's spatial fixing of "Native Reserves" and "White Areas", of taxation-systems that forced bodies to move to earn a livelihood, the administrative Moloch to bureaucratically regulate its "pass laws", its hostels, its compounds and townships; the class and race ducts it opened and closed, the fences it erected, made the idea of location, space and movement constricting and limiting. But to assume that the majority was therefore outside a dialectic of change and outside its socio-historical shaping would have been preposterous. [14]

With the transformation of these "channellings" in the late-and post-Apartheid period, bodies move in a different way as new freedoms co-exist with old and novel constraints. The distributional logic has been altered and the barriers, boundaries and fences have been shifted; institutions too, have been transfigured, creating a new milieu for movement and settlement. A materialism sensitive to that will instantly be able to pre-suppose that subsistence, survival and settlement are closely related.

The ways bodies move to dispose and expose themselves or distribute themselves despite distributional decrees, open them out to new opportunities, vulnerabilities and hazards. We are describing after all, a natural body that for a bare minimum needs water ; it will therefore be found to settle no matter what, closer to rivers or water pipes. And it will do so at night when it

is not allowed to do so by day.

III

The body though is already "encultured" around four planes of sociality- around gendering, livelihoods-creating, oralising and valuing systems, each with their own historicities and "memory pads." In agreement with Pierre Bourdieu, the way we walk, move, cluster, cohabit, make love or even rape, are part of a socialised embodied habitus, within locations or "habitats". He argues for example in his synthetic essay on the body in Pascalian Meditations that the "habitus"- "restores to the agent a generating, unifying, constructing, classifying power...investing in its practice socially constructed organising principles that are acquired in the course of a situated and dated social experience" [15]

Notwithstanding the crucial insight enunciated here, I feel that Bourdieu tends to overemphasize the "coincidence between habitus and habitat." and the adjustment of "dispositions to positions", which generate "somatic compliance" a fact that can only generate a logic of adjustment. [16] Research and practice have taught us rather, that the subaltern body always lives in dissonance, alterity or sometimes resistance to the "roles" or "functions" ascribed to it. [17]

The point is simple: distributed as they are in social contexts, encultured bodies create defensive combinations to refract their daily pressures which, on most occasions, move from instrumental or utilitarian bonds to become cultural formations [18] Aware as we have become of these cultural formations, their positional and cultural modalities, their social activity and the social action they generate, we have always argued for a structural asymmetry between ideologies and discourses that attempt to socialise people into norms and what indeed takes place: a negotiation through them and despite them. [19]

So we can never assume a spasmodic response to a situation or to a structural or institutional pressure. Rather, defensive combinations and cultural formations deploy refractive and adaptive systems embedded in their sociality. How autonomous these systems are varies through time and place. And within that process, what also varies is whether dissonance, alterity or resistance governs the relationship. [20]

III

Furthermore, capitalism as a social system restricts the possibility of livelihoods to the sale of labour power and this reliance on a wage or on money, forces and enforces the primacy of livelihood strategies. Here the economic is "determinant in the first instance": But in turn, there is no understanding of these livelihood patterns without an understanding of the other three planes of sociality- the bonds they create and the social relations that inform them- the gendering, oralising and valuing systems.

Thus those still committed to forms of easy class-reductionism, more often than not, there is a constant surprise at the seeming false consciousness displayed by the actions of the poor; similarly, an easy race-reductionism suffers shocks from the people's misrecognition of obvious collective interests. To cope with complexities on the ground what follows usually is a combinatory theoreticism and its imperative to deal with complexity: combine class and race;

add gender and culture; elements that function as analytical metanarratives which all the time absent what should be obvious: the presence of all these life-forms and their logic of action.

The alternative is a community focus that attempts to be sensitive to locality [21]- yet, however sensitive it is to the voices from below, it usually errs the other way: it assumes a horizontal experience among subaltern people absencing what is ever-present: the forms of power and inequality within the planes of sociality that constitute their cultural formations and the "powers" [both "powers1" and "powers2" as defined by Bhaksar] that authorise action.[22]

To assume horizontal or vertical patterns of differentiation and difference as an "existent" *suis generis* needs also to be "reined in". Attractive as they are, many such post-modern assumptions make for bad sociology. Yes there is variety and variation, but always within the parameters of solidarity within in turn, ensembles of practice. Such varieties, always a product of historical struggles and accommodations, of practical activity are there, but cannot be assumed a priori, they have to be carefully and responsibly delineated. [23]

These ensembles of practice generated by cultural formations, what Bourdieu has called "fields" of social practice are crucial for the exploration of meaning and how meaning translates into social action. The fields constitute so many instances of formal and informal co-ordination, participation and contestation and exist both as part of the steering mechanisms of social life and as markers of belonging. They are also a most vital component of consciousness and a site of struggle through which classes, elites or power-blocs attempt the consolidation of their manifold hegemonies. That these fields do not coincide with the "local" or with residential space is an obvious but disregarded point.

The fields of such meaningful social action could be both intensively "local" but also extensively, "far-flung", "distantiated" [to use Giddens' concept]- they could traverse an entire city, province, country or countries. What they have in common are gatherings through which all the planes of sociality interact. For working-class or subaltern people in KwaZulu Natal they would or could involve first fruit ceremonies in the countryside, isicathamya choir competitions, carnivals, the Easter festivals in the north, Shembe-church gatherings, weddings, funerals as well as trade union gatherings or political rallies.

Furthermore, through a process of popular "trans-location" performance cultures from the one type of gathering insert themselves into each other with fascinating and innovative vigour. [24] In these fields of practice and in the gatherings that reinforce their co-ordination, it is rare to find one spatial community, spread univocally within them. Within such fields finally, temporal and spatial organisation occurs and develops its own logic even within the boundaries and the "rhythmic" of the powerful. Even the clock-time of industrial capitalism had to find forms of accommodation for them.

V

It is around these "bonds" and within "locales" and "fields" that livelihoods strategies emerged both in "uni-local" and "multi-local" nuclei. The usual developmentalist discourse tries to trap them around "household strategies". [24] Yet its core fallacy is to identify households with locally demarcated space- a dwelling, a shack, a township house. From there, we arrive at survival mechanisms, reproduction and as work is outsourced or finds its only place of execution, sometimes production. This spatialisation drive, with its categories rooted in town

planning and control, and the construction of service and cost-recovery digits, conflates power mapping with the understanding of social relations and their reproduction. Its sharing of the originary discourse's core assumptions shackles its progressive variant.

A serious sociological account has to accede that such livelihoods strategies are both embedded in the local but at the same time accede that in most cases they are disembedded from it. If disembedded, their multi-locationalism, is integrated "elsewhere". Or perhaps, the identified location and household might be the integrative point of many "elsewheres." A sense of balance in these dynamics is vital if the politics of actual locality can be understood. Through these webs of sociality, money, obligations, ideas and resources circulate, flow and proliferate.

The point, although simple, hides a lot of complexity: for example, on the livelihoods plane, a local household strategy might be a subordinate node co-ordinated from somewhere else. In this case, local unity, i.e. unity in a specific geographic community, will be instrumental, practical. Or the local strategy might be part of an aggregative integration of "equals" who have come together somewhere, somehow in some gathering- let us say the CBO Network in the province; or it might be the integrative point with all the cultural weight that it might imply.

To think that the connecting ligaments are provided only through kinship as most anthropologists would tend to do, is limiting- to assume that, would deny cultural formations historicity and presence. In a province like KwaZulu Natal, which has experienced a vicious civil war, many such ligaments were torn or have been atrophied. At the same time, the high incidence of women-headed households might mean a breaking of such bonds [of kinship and patriarchy] at the local level, but it might also signify a local phenomenon of women's autonomy but it might also hide the household's subordination to a broader multi-locational project where gendering and patriarchal authority still predominate and are hegemonic.

In urban locales, as Asef Bayat [25] has pointed out, livelihoods take on an instrumental and tentative logic of action based on a "persistent" and "pervasive" politics of "encroachment." Such locales are tentative because street traders', casual labourers', the informal sellers' encroachment and accumulation strategies have a delicate threshold. A successful accumulation of resources, of capacities, of money or entitlements is accompanied with migration to other, socio-economically structured better locales. This as we have found in Durban for example, keeps poor locales poor unless a collective effort beyond the diffuse household strategies takes root, which lifts the ground for everyone.

Within such spatially grounded "encroachment" politics we have to distinguish between five organisational forms that are animating South Africa at present: those based on patronage systems; those based on "kinship networks"; those based on "democratic ensembles"; those based on "gangs" and those based on "ubuntu formations" and their combinations which complicate and exacerbate conflicts and solidarity. The first network is based on clientelist relationships, the second on familial obligations, the third on pre-existing accountable reciprocities, the fourth on disciplinary orders and the last on self-reliance through others. An individual may be embedded in all of the above organisational forms or in a selected few. Breakthroughs in one area in terms of encroachment, reconfigure the others.

Peri-urban areas around Durban, the settlement patterns, life-chances, incomes and attitudes of the local population have been studied ad nauseum. From arial photography to troops of young researchers each dwelling and concentration has been mapped. What has been missing

is a a real sociology of practice sensitive to the social dynamics and aspirations of the local population. We know that the income of people is R3000 per ten heads of the population. We know that most of it is earned through the wages of two people and the rest combine an impressive array of informalised, casual and subcasual effort. We know where this is spent. We also know why any current programme of development, under current institutional and macro-economic conditions will fail. What is absent is agency, struggle and an understanding of empowered and encultured bodies in action.

In listening to the multiple narratives in a local area, it becomes obvious that there are a variety of sites of struggle which bring people together and disperse them in terms of local organisational efforts: we find wage-earners who have abandoned their concern about the local, surrendering the initiative to gangs and patronage systems- closing themselves up in their household and concentrating on accumulating enough to leave the area. We find youths whose meaning is gained by participating in provincial and national projects, frustrated in their local area by the predominance of "dagga networks." But we find the latter, supporting their initiatives in order to show good "citizenship." We find, active cultural groups and corrupt local politicians; we find women who carry out a variety of initiatives and others, cowering in the face of adversity. We find a variety of broader projects entering and leaving the area, and people carrying out activities at cross-locational nodes. We find people constituting themselves as business-people because the local council favours SMMEs and people constituting themselves as a moral police to kill or punish an offender.

VII

From these narratives we can observe how a consciousness-constituting, and practice-centered dialectic emerges: how the "out there" is "in here"- that is, anything from globalised market behaviour to the exigencies of industrial life; and, how the "in here"- the forms of social solidarity are informing resistances on for example, the shop-floor and the market-place. Then, and only then can we be accurate about the interface between local people, formal and informal institutions. But there too, we can identify the crucial bearers of collectivity and identification, the bearers who postulate the many "we's" that define a negotiation over identity and consciousness.

There, the shop-steward, the activist of the African Renaissance initiatives, the Communist Party youth, the Neo-Gandhian community worker or the ANC branch activist, mobilise people for further trans-local initiatives. Although they too have a formative role to play in the negotiations of consciousness and practice and help constitute dissonance around power-elites and dispositions about their instrumental participation in the institutions of power and profit, they themselves get constituted and formed through this negotiation. After a careful analysis of what these dynamics entail, we will understand how undigitalised bodies have a role in shaping change, what their repertoires of action are and how people have continued making history, despite their putative irrelevance to global macro-structures.

Footnotes

1. These four planes of "sociality" have been tentatively elaborated in attempt to theorise cultural practices and struggles among migrant workers on the East Rand. [Sitas:1992] For further elaboration see Sitas [1995/6, 2001]
2. The concept of "cultural formation" as opposed to "culture" is elaborated in Sitas, [1984, 1996]
3. For "fields" or "champs" see Pierre Bourdieu's work [1977, 1984, 1990]
4. Although the word "trajectory" is one of my most hated ones, after its usage by Gillian Hart in her forthcoming book "Disabling Globalisation" its heuristic value has allayed my doubts.
5. See the summary of the case studies in Sitas [1999]-Inanda, Mpumalanga, Claremont and Durban's inner city.
6. Although "agency" features prominently in Giddens' theoretical work [1982] in a way that demonstrates its constitutive powers it becomes something that has been transformed in his later work [1990, 1999]. It leaves no constitutive trace on the institutional parameters of late modernity. This is shared by Beck's work on the emergence of "Risk Society" [1992, 1999] which, even if it were correct about "trust" and the institutions of modernity in social democratic Germany, it would need a gigantic effort to gain global salience. Castells' trilogy [1996, 1998, 1999] constituting his remarkable Information Age, is more sensitive to a more global understanding of "agentive" powers. His definition of identity in his second volume [1998] allows for an asymmetry between institutions and lived experience, which in turn allows for divergence in popular and collective responses. Yet these lack historicity; any historicity is the Net's and responses are organised through its impact. [Admittedly his latest collection of Oxford lectures [2001] corrects that.] Finally, Bauman's [1992] slim volume on "globalisation" has surprisingly elides his own insistence on its importance, e.g. in his tragic work on the Holocaust.
7. I use the concept of the "subaltern" in a rather idiosyncratic way: although its pedigree has been established by the Subaltern Studies [see Guha and Spivak, 1988] I use it following Roy Bhaskar's [1993] definition of "powers 1 and powers 2" [for a brief distinction: see his p. 402] within the four planes of sociality I have defined in the texts referred to in footnote 1.
8. The neo-modernisation narrative is particularly strident in for example, Hutton's and Giddens' [2000] latest co-edited book
9. Castells' remarkable discussion of social movements in the Power of Identity has few parallels in the last decade- yet a suspicion remains: their historical evolution predates the intensification of the global flows he describes.
10. See Bhaskar's discussion in op cit. p.155-203
11. See for example the annual reports on this in the UNDP's "Human Development Index" and

the "World Health Organisation's" annual reports.

12. See Mies and Shiva [1993] and Baker [1993]

13. See Spivak [1999] p6-7.

14. For a quick overview see the historical summary of the unfolding policy see Beinhart and Dubow [1999]

15. See Bourdieu [1999]: p. 136-7

16. Ibid. On my thoughts on "resistance-as-adjustment" see Sitas [1984]- "Introduction."

17. Sitas [1995/6]

18. Sitas [1988]

19. Ibid.

20. ibid. [1995/6]

21. For an overview see Bell [1971] ; for recent departures in rural community work see R. Chambers [1992]

22. See Bhaskar op cit. pp. 348-354.

23. See for example the latest libertarian injunction of once again a "people without a history" in M. Hardt and A. Negri's [2000] pre- and post-Seattle "hit" where "they" are invoked as the "multitude" [e.g. p. 393 ff.] For theoretical work that pre-figures such "subjectivities" and their de-territorialising energies, see Deleuze and Guattari, [1987].

24. For the most useful overview see J Beal and N.Kanji [1999]

25. See A. Bayat [1997]

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