

Thinking critically, speaking critically

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Introduction²

Throughout history, there has been an interest in getting people to use critical thinking to change their social circumstances. The idea seems to be that people should in theory have the ability to pull themselves out of enslavement to others, but, because it is apparent that they mostly do not use this power, they should be stimulated to do so. Rousseau summed this up with the epigram "Man is born free, and everywhere is in chains".³ This idea has continued in the 'development' world of today, where a number of processes dependent on such thinking have been promoted in programmes which aim to reduce inequalities, poverty or marginalisation or to impact on unfair social dynamics of a variety of types. Such processes include consciousness-raising (conscientization), social transformation, facilitation and advocacy. A variety of 'participatory' tools are often used in order to facilitate these processes.⁴

Why is it that there has in fact been very little success when outsiders try to use these processes and tools for long-term change in terms of equality, power or rights in any society?

This paper looks at:

- some of the confusions that have led to this type of thinking;
- some of the problems and paradoxes of using these processes;
- why so many attempts at using them have been unsuccessful (or at least successful only in the short term with small numbers of people);
- the factors that influence whether people can use their critical thinking to alter their own social environment;
- challenges facing development agencies that wish to change social environments;
- some ways in which the problems and paradoxes can either be overcome or can be managed with reasonable compromise.

Can we emulate Baron von Munchausen?

There are many ancient tales of people doing the impossible, such as lifting themselves out of the water by pulling on their own hair.⁵ The debate about people using their critical faculties to pull themselves out of what appear to be bad social situations demonstrates a similar flaw.



Baron von Munchausen tries to pull himself and his horse from the sea by his hair

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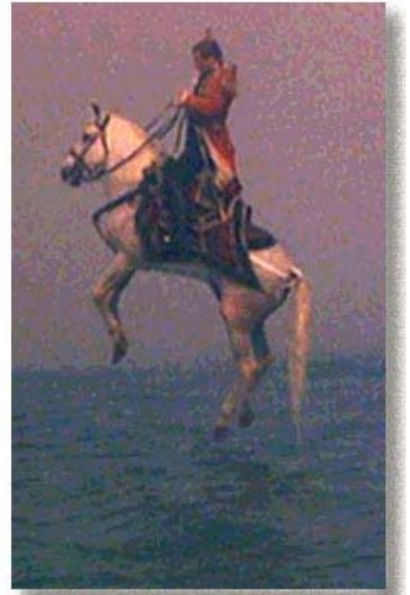
³ "L'homme est né libre, et partout il est dans les fers". *Du Contrat Social Ou Principes Du Droit Politique*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 1762

⁴ This has often led to some confusion in field staff – who may think that the participatory tools are somehow ends in themselves.

⁵ Repeated, for example in one of the stories of Baron von Munchausen (in the German version by Bürger of 1786, two years after Kant's essay referred to below). The stills are from the 1988 film by Terry Gilliam.

The problem with the argument is that it conflates two types of critical thinking and action. Those who have presented the argument seem to have jumped from the fairly innocuous premise that because people do criticise others in a wide variety of ways, they should have a similar facility in criticising their own social environments.

This paper argues that the two types of use of criticism are vastly different from each other, and that it is extremely difficult for people (if not impossible for most) to criticise their own social environments. This is because if you try to criticise your own social environment you are essentially criticising yourself for whom you are: your identity, your aspirations to be with a particular group, the need you have for moral and other support from others. It is not that you *are* a social construct: most people *actively seek* to be social constructs; and if they question that, it is almost akin to destroying themselves. Criticising others just destroys *others* and not themselves – in whom they can continue to believe.



He succeeds against all expectation!

“Having courage to use your thoughts”

[This section is really for those interested in the history of ideas about critical thinking. If you want to cut to more practical thinking, skip to the next section].

There is a really interesting phrase, possibly coined by Horace in the 1st Century B.C. in a letter to his friend Lollius, which reflects the ideology behind many of these processes. The phrase is “*sapere aude*”, which has had a variety of translations, but in the context of the letter (which talks of the ways in which Ulysses when returning from Troy used all his cunning to overcome very tough challenges) it might be summed up as “Have the courage to use your thinking power”. The key word here is, of course, ‘courage’ (it is key for reasons that will be explored later in this paper) but Horace does not examine why it might need courage to do this. For him the important point is that this is a courage that has to be tempered with an understanding of the limitations of power. Thus the letter goes on to deal with the desire people have for wealth: “I must have money and a bride to bear me children, who is also rich and well allied: those uncleared lands want tilling.” Horace says yes, it’s ok to desire wealth and to use your thinking power to achieve it, but beware of wanting too much – you have to draw a boundary around your wishes because going further begins to get into the area of exploiting others for your own needs, being envious, and abusing your power.

So, for Horace, the path to development rests very much on the capability of individuals to extricate themselves, and then to set their own boundaries so that no one exceeds their power and starts to exploit others.

Naturally, this begs two very difficult questions:

- Why, if people really are capable of doing this, don’t they do it more often?
- Why, when people do change their social situations, do so many perpetuate inequalities?

Horace’s approach, which skips these questions, has rather surprisingly not been altered in any fundamental way through the ages. Rousseau, as has been noted, took it pretty much entirely, and in 1784, Immanuel Kant took up it up again in an essay which tried to answer the question “What is Enlightenment?”:

“Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one’s own understanding without the guidance of another. This immaturity is self-incurred if its cause is not lack of understanding, but lack of resolution and courage to use it without the guidance of another. The motto of enlightenment is therefore: *Sapere aude!* Have courage to use your own understanding!

“Laziness and cowardice are the reasons why such a large proportion of men, even when nature has long emancipated them from alien guidance, nevertheless gladly remain immature for life. For the same reasons, it is all too easy for others to set themselves up as their guardians. It is so convenient to be immature! If I have a book to have understanding in place of me, a spiritual adviser to have a conscience for me, a doctor to judge my diet for me, and so on, I need not make any efforts at all. I need not think, so long as I can pay; others will soon enough take the tiresome job over for me. The guardians who have kindly taken upon themselves the work of supervision will soon see to it that by far the largest part of mankind (including the entire fair sex) should consider the step forward to maturity not only as difficult but also as highly dangerous. Having first infatuated their domesticated animals, and carefully prevented the docile creatures from daring to take a single step without the leading-strings to which they are tied, they next show them the danger which threatens them if they try to walk unaided.

“Thus it is difficult for each separate individual to work his way out of the immaturity which has become almost second nature to him. He has even grown fond of it and is really incapable for the time being of using his own understanding, because he was never allowed to make the attempt. Dogmas and formulas, those mechanical instruments for rational use (or rather misuse) of his natural endowments, are the ball and chain of his permanent immaturity. ... Thus only a few, by cultivating their own minds, have succeeded in freeing themselves from immaturity and in continuing boldly on their way.”

However, Kant⁶ goes on to argue that, although some manage to extricate themselves, the remainder require a political environment that will allow them to do this. So for Kant, people do have the power to extricate themselves but only within particular boundaries managed by the powers that be. He explains why people don't on the basis of their 'laziness' and 'comfort'.

In the 1960s Paolo Freire continued this paternalist⁷ vision but didn't refer at all to '*sapere aude*' – he simply dumped the 'courage' side and vested the power for liberation in bands of researchers who sat with people and prodded them into action by asking them to delve deep into their existing thinking so that they could replace their 'false' consciousness with a brand new consciousness brought to them by courtesy of the enlighteners. So no involvement of the powers that be, and a partial regression to Horace's position in placing responsibility for development firmly in the hands of people themselves – albeit with the help of gifted thinkers who somehow knew better.

In 1978 Michel Foucault⁸ took Kant's essay and mused on it as posing “a question that modern philosophy has not been capable of answering, but that it has never managed to get rid of, either”. He reviewed the idea of the tension between the capabilities of people and the environments that restricted their capacity, and pointed to the central difficulty in his usual elegant way:

“We can readily see how the universal use of reason (apart from any private end) is the business of the subject himself as an individual; we can readily see, too, how the freedom of this use may be assured in a purely negative manner through the absence of any challenge to it; but how is a public use of that reason to be assured? Enlightenment, as we see, must not be conceived simply as a general process affecting all humanity; it must not be conceived only as an obligation prescribed to individuals: it now appears as a political problem. The question, in any event, is that of knowing how the use of reason can take the public form that it requires, how the audacity to know can be exercised in broad daylight, while individuals are obeying as scrupulously as possible. And Kant, in conclusion, proposes to Frederick II, in scarcely veiled terms, a sort of contract -- what might be called the contract of rational despotism with free reason: the public and free use of autonomous reason will be the best guarantee of obedience, on condition, however, that the political principle that must be obeyed itself be in conformity with universal reason.”

⁶ In an argument that follows Rousseau to some extent.

⁷ Paternalist because it implies that some superior beings looking from the outside believe that those who appear to be oppressed need some kind of stimulation from these outsiders to see the truth and take action.

⁸ In an essay called 'What is Enlightenment?' – the same title as Kant's.

Foucault, in this essay, tries to say that critics of the Enlightenment (the followers of a brand of humanism who say the desire for logical thought overlooks ordinary human practise) have set up a false dichotomy. He wants to be more practical “both to grasp the points where change is possible and desirable, and to determine the precise form this change should take”.⁹

Unfortunately, Foucault decided to leave the argument there, concentrating instead on the feature of the essay that was more interesting for him – namely Kant’s extraordinary ability to look at modernity (all the things that make up being ‘modern’) in objectivity. The only other thing that Foucault says in this essay about power is tantalising in its suggestiveness:

“What is at stake, then, is this: How can the growth of capabilities be disconnected from the intensification of power relations? ... Here we are taking as a homogeneous domain of reference not the representations that men give of themselves, not the conditions that determine them without their knowledge, but rather what they do and the way they do it. That is, the forms of rationality that organize their ways of doing things (this might be called the technological aspect) and the freedom with which they act within these practical systems, reacting to what others do, modifying the rules of the game. ... These practical systems stem from three broad areas: relations of control over things, relations of action upon others, relations with oneself.”¹⁰

So, after 2000 years, Foucault gets to ask the questions that matter for development, makes some very useful distinctions, but, instead of pursuing them, he simply says at the end “I do not know whether we will ever reach mature adulthood”¹¹. He thus leaves hanging, tantalisingly, the two questions we continue to face if development agencies are truly going to take on the issues of inequality, rights and power:

- Why, if people really are capable of using their thinking power to extricate themselves, don’t they do it more often?
- Why, when people do change their social situations, do so many perpetuate inequalities?

What is it that development programmes expect of people?

It was suggested in the last section that Horace had reflected the ideology behind much of today’s development practice: the idea that people should be prodded into taking action for themselves if something or somebody is thought to be impeding their ‘development’. Such a paternalist idea may influence the following kinds of process which are in common use:

- Stimulation¹² of people to review their political and social environments so that they will take action to remedy them and improve their own personal positions in terms of power and equality;
- Encouraging staff to think critically and to explore situations with the people they are to support so that the outcomes of projects will be better, and the projects will be more relevant for the poorest or least powerful.
- Encouraging iterative cycles of reflective practise so that people and staff can learn from their experience and make the next cycle of project work even more effective.

⁹ « à la fois pour saisir les points où le changement est possible et souhaitable et pour déterminer la forme précise à donner à ce changement »

¹⁰ « L'enjeu est donc : comment déconnecter la croissance des capacités et l'intensification des relations de pouvoir. ... Il s'agit de prendre comme domaine homogène de référence non pas les représentations que les hommes se donnent d'eux-mêmes, non pas les conditions qui les déterminent sans qu'ils le sachent. Mais ce qu'ils font et la façon dont ils le font. C'est-à-dire les formes de rationalité qui organisent les manières de faire (ce qu'on pourrait appeler leur aspect technologique); et la liberté avec laquelle ils agissent dans ces systèmes pratiques, réagissant à ce que font les autres, modifiant jusqu'à un certain point les règles du jeu. ... Ces ensembles pratiques relèvent de trois grands domaines : celui des rapports de maîtrise sur les choses, celui des rapports d'action sur les autres, celui des rapports à soi-même. »

¹¹ « Je ne sais pas si jamais nous deviendrons majeurs. »

¹² It is unfortunate that, even though these processes are supposed to work on stimulating existing consciousness of the situation, they mostly depend on externally-derived concepts of power, oppression and freedom. This was clearly seen in Freire’s writings, for example, in which simplistic ideas of power are used in attempts to mould people’s thinking – which is very odd since his writing clearly states that imposition should not take place.

These processes all include a recognition of the fact that people can think for themselves, and an idea that they should be able to take action for themselves. It is the transition from one to the other that is left in deep mystery.

What really happens?

Sometimes change does occur

In some cases, such processes have achieved change – but rarely as a result of outside intervention. They seem to work best when someone who is close to (but not necessarily a member of) a particular group and who is trusted by them stimulates some form of action on the basis of their shared strong dislike of that situation. Quite often this leads to prolonged periods of conflict whose resolution is variable. They also work when there is already some form of support for change amongst people who are in positions of power or influence.

Examples

Many revolts, revolutions and movements for political change are based on such a mechanism. There are many examples also of people affected by one particular problem ganging together, taking joint action and changing the situation in their favour. Labour unions have had success in this way. A variety of farmers' movements in India and Latin America have achieved much in establishing cooperatives. For an older example, the women in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* come together to agree that every wife and mistress is to refuse all sexual favours whatsoever until the men stop the Peloponnesian War. In other words, such methods for change are very well known by all societies, and outsiders rarely have much say in the initial stimulus to act together. If outsiders *do* provide the initial stimulus, very often those who are so 'stimulated' use the opportunity to change things in ways unforeseen by the outsiders (alas, the poor aristocrats, who never quite got it right!).

Partial change occurs

More frequently, processes initiated by outsiders lead to partial change. This means that the processes may work for some individuals or groups in a population, whilst leaving those who are poorest or least powerful unhelped.

Examples

As has been pointed out, a large number of revolutions and rebellions end up merely by changing the particular power holders. In development terms, the tendency for agencies to work with those who have the capacity and who are willing to participate in their schemes or projects has been well noted in numerous publications. A simple example from Tanzania was the provision of ox-carts to several villages in a district to allow farmers to market their produce more easily. The carts merely allowed those that received them to lease them out at extortionate rates. There are several examples of water projects that allow the powerful to have a closer strangle-hold on access to water. A number of projects aimed at improving the power of women have led to the re-establishment of women already in power and the continuing suppression of other women by them. Peer education programmes are very well known for the improvements they provide for the educators themselves, with a remarkable lack of effect on their peers.

Change occurs for a limited time for some people

Most often processes initiated by outsiders achieve some kind of change only for a limited time (for as long as the project personnel provide an input), for a particular segment of the population: again leaving those who are poorest or least powerful in the same condition as before.

Examples

Many organisations have been able to involve the poorest sections of a community in some kind of change as long as the organisations maintained a presence. Many of the power holders in fact collude with the agencies in order to benefit as much as possible from the

increased resources agencies bring. Often volunteers are committed to a project with the idea of increasing such resources or even getting paid. Once an agency leaves, however, most of the time the project work is not maintained and the poorest sections continue to be exploited as before.

So changes do occur when outsiders intervene – with limits

There is no denying that changes occur, and that in some cases these changes will be appreciated by the people that benefit – people who may have previously been in very difficult circumstances. But for many people in development programming this may not be enough. How best to look at this problem?

One way is to look a bit harder at what is happening and what goes wrong.

What goes wrong?

All the ‘participatory’ approaches depend on the idea that, once individuals in a group agree to and internalise a set of thoughts, they will take action in relation to the problem in the way agreed.¹³ There may also be some belief by the outsiders that, because they got people to sit in a group, that group would ensure the action.

Whilst such thinking may do for relatively neutral actions, such as improving health services or their use, or adopting a particular agricultural practice, or challenging *others* who are outside of your group, there is nothing particularly hard about understanding the difficulties to this idea if people are being asked to challenge their own social structures or the ways in which people interact in their own group. To understand them merely requires thinking about why most people dislike any form of challenge to themselves as individuals or to the group with which they form some identity – just put yourself in the position of people when they return to their own social environments after being involved in such discussions. Think for a moment what happens to your own behaviour after you have been involved in facilitated discussions about, for example, the right things to do in relation to interactions with others in areas such as teaching, or management, or gender, or communication. How often have you thought “Oh yes, that was very interesting, illuminating even, but I can’t see how to relate that to the realities I face for myself in my own group/ family/ community”? How often have such sessions changed in any fundamental way your own actions to alter your particular position in society or the identity you try to hold to?

The fact is that your actions and decisions relating to your own social environment are vastly more influenced by your perceptions of your place in the society or group to which you belong than by anything you learn. If you are already in the luxurious position of not having to depend on the group for social or financial support, then it is possible that you may transform some of the thoughts into workable actions that are useful for you to change your social status with regard to that particular group. But if, like the vast majority of people, you feel more tied to normal social processes or to the need for money in order to maintain your membership of a group, then you are less likely to do this. That is why for most people it takes courage to use your thoughts in criticism of others about their social interactions with you – you are placing your membership of the group at risk. Many programmes have tried to overcome this with ‘assertiveness training’¹⁴, but of course the same psychological rules apply when one returns to the real world.

There is of course a vast literature on the social psychology of group thinking processes and their links to personal identity, social identity, self-esteem and socialisation. It is common to find criticisms of ‘group think’ and how that prevents effective functioning of a group (recent intelligence failures in the United States and the United Kingdom provide one example of the problem). Discussions of ‘political correctness’ hinge on the understanding of group psychology. However, it is astonishing that the understanding derived from this area of knowledge has not yet been applied to communication theory in development, and that the basic confusion about abilities to challenge remains.

¹³ This is not the place to discuss all the other types of problem with such processes – notably (a) the bias introduced by the selection of the members of the group; (b) the fact that the people who turn up to the group are neither representative of others nor interested in helping others through difficulty; or (c) they self-select for the group because of their particular situation, and deliberately or by default exclude others who may in fact be in worse situations. This paper is only concerned with the problems inherent in the process itself.

¹⁴ See, for example, the ‘Stepping Stones’ manual for sexual interactions published by ActionAid.

Not everyone is interested in challenging

Thus even a very brief glimpse of this area provides a valuable insight into what goes wrong. The key is the realisation that people vary in their ability to stand apart from a group when it comes to challenging the identity and norms of a group – they vary in their courage to stand up to a group – most would prefer to keep the situation as it is in order to continue with the benefits of being part of the group.

Despite these important differences between people, which naturally also reflect social standing, the majority of development programmes lump people into ‘groups’. They talk of ‘target groups’, or ‘beneficiaries’, or ‘the marginalised’ or ‘the poorest’. Yet this lumping of people overlooks the very important spectrum of attitudes that exist in any grouping of people. Simply: some people are more independent than others because, as the word ‘in-dependent’ implies, they are less dependent on the group and may be more dependent on another group.

Such is the position, for example, of many development workers who are not dependent on local communities for their survival but on the vast resources of the development organisation that pays them. Such workers can freely vent their feelings about liberty on the local population, but when it comes to being critical of their parent organisation they are far more cautious.

Why change has occurred

It can now be seen why the changes that have occurred using such processes (referred to above) have been possible. They depend on large numbers of people forming identities as part of a new group which provides the varieties of support that are necessary for their self-esteem, identity and survival, and which also provide an attractive (if not viable) alternative to their old identities.

Normal social practise

“You cannot be a prophet in your own land”¹⁵

The above proverb is interesting not because it relates to the particular problems facing those who would wish to be prophets, but because of its insight into the social conditions that surround those who wish to stimulate others to take action about the social situations in which they struggle for survival.

Probably everybody thinks, has critical thoughts about what they hear or see¹⁶, so the problem does **not** lie with getting people to think critically. Yet there is a mountain of literature providing supposed guidance on how to think critically. No: as Foucault pointed out, the real difficulty lies in making some of these critical thoughts public. Although Foucault did not expressly make the distinction between different levels of critical speech, the implicit meaning of his text is that it relates to social processes. This means the difficulty lies in challenging others– or being challenged by someone else (even perhaps themselves) – about the social identity of the group or individual. Foucault saw this as a political problem. Of course, that is one aspect. Far more important is that for most people it is a very ordinary social problem that relates to their own identities and aspirations.

It is easy to see the differences of dependence mentioned in the previous section when people get support from different groups. However, what is more interesting is why there are differences between people within any society who wish to achieve social change and to bring others along with them to achieve that social change, and the vast bulk of people who seem to prefer to stay as they are. This is the problem that was not discussed at all by Horace, Kant, Foucault or Freire – except to suggest that failure to act was because of their own stupidity or their own ‘distorted view of history’¹⁷.

¹⁵ For those interested in where this phrase originated, one version is quoted in the Book of Matthew (composed in Greek some time after 70 AD), Chapter 13:57: “And they took offence at him. But Jesus said to them, ‘Only in his hometown and in his own house is a prophet without honour.’”

¹⁶ Some people disagree with this point of view. See the section below on ‘The total absence of critical or any other thinking’.

¹⁷ This latter being Freire’s type of formulation.

The total absence of critical or any other thinking

One point of view is that, in the tradition of Rousseau and Kant, a large number of people simply exist and do not feel the need to reflect on their social environment – that it is not even a matter of accepting it or rejecting it, that it is just there, that that is how life is, they are who they are and they feel allegiance to their group. Such points of view have been elaborated by Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens.¹⁸ But they still have great difficulty in explaining why in the same society some people take it upon themselves to challenge what goes on and the majority of others do not. Bourdieu explains the differences by suggesting that those who drive social transformation have somehow placed themselves outside of their own society, seen the principles that drive the social interactions, and hold their vision up to others to see. This type of analysis still leaves the explanation of the difference in the realm of the magical. For many people, even if the structures of social interaction are demonstrated in a variety of imaginative ways, they still will not want to take action, and may even regard the process as silly – probably with good reason because any analysis of society is never going to be able to reveal its full dimensions: there will always be selection of the bits that interest those who want to drive others to change.

The dislike of critical thinking

Another point of entry into this is to ask the question of how we can expect others to be open with their critical thoughts when all normal social discourse **suppresses** overt critical thinking about your own place in relation to others – especially when it means challenging others with thoughts you may believe the others do not hold, and which therefore carries with any challenge the possibility of rejection by the group.

Think about your last group meeting at work, or a recent discussion in your family or with colleagues or friends. How often have you suppressed what you really thought or what you really wanted to say? Most people will answer this by saying that for some areas of debate they often suppress what they really think – although for other areas of debate they may feel confident in intervening. There is nothing at all odd about this. There are many dangers in asserting your point of view in relation to some areas of thought that are deemed ‘sensitive’ by the group – the areas that most closely define the group’s identity. Principally, as has been suggested, these dangers are to do with your being accepted as a member of that group. If you disagree with the group identity, you shouldn’t really be a member of the group. Similarly, your *own* identity is intimately linked to the groups with which you choose, or want, to belong. But this still leaves the question of why some do criticise the identity of a group and others in the same apparent social environment do not.

How can we expect others to liberate themselves from their social settings by mounting challenges whilst at the same time most of them want to continue to be part of a particular society or group?

The tension of challenge

Most people who voice or publicise independent critical thoughts are often distanced by others. Such people realise that in order to be open about their thoughts it is better to be relatively independent of groups and much of the practise of society around them¹⁹. In this way, when they raise challenges, the group feels more at liberty to discard the observations or to think about them. The critics, in turn, often want to be able to distance themselves from a group of which they are partly critical, although they might also want to retain a certain level of identity with the group for a variety of reasons.²⁰

This dynamic allows us to understand the **tension** behind challenging a group. In order to set out a challenge, it is most often important that you are seen as not belonging entirely to the group: but, in order to set out a challenge that is meaningful, the outsider has to have a considerable knowledge of and empathy with the group’s beliefs, norms, and values. Freire at least appreciated this aspect in his

¹⁸ I am grateful to Andrea Cornwall of the Institute of Development Studies in Sussex, England, for bringing to my attention this aspect of current sociological thought.

¹⁹ Of course all people (and their identities) are defined by their social environments, and people who are more ready to voice criticism do so in full knowledge of the extent to which they can be critical of those social environments. To analyse this in greater depth would require a considerably longer article. The point will only be made here that the distancing is relative, but is nevertheless a feature of open criticism.

²⁰ It is interesting that many revolutions have been fuelled as a result of prodding from middle-class or upper-class comfortable, ‘educated’ people (The aristocrats in the French Revolution, the aristocrats of 1850s Russia, Che Guevara in Cuba, Lenin in Russia, and, of course, Marx).

exhortation to researchers to spend considerable time understanding the dynamics of their communities.

This is why many guides to the process of facilitation concentrate on establishing confidence, trust, opening discussion so that all members of a group take part. This is not to put the group at ease with itself. It is to help the group see the facilitator as a person they might come to believe in, to trust. It is to help the facilitator understand and empathise with the situation of the people involved.

Unfortunately, what most facilitators in development do is, after going through this kind of dialogue, they start pushing the group towards a particular type of analysis of the problem seen by the facilitator or the agency funding the activity. This tends to destroy all forms of trust very quickly. A very high proportion of poorer urban and rural communities in the world have been through several generations of such processes, watching promises of various kinds being held out to them by an assortment of 'facilitators' and this has naturally increased the weariness and wariness of the process. Few, if any, have seen fundamental change occurring as a result.

Challenge versus facilitation

If organisations truly do want to get into the arena of rights and social change, it may be useful to distinguish between the processes of challenge and of facilitation. Many practitioners of development have become so disillusioned with the techniques of participatory development they are encouraged to use, that it has been a joke for several decades that they are involved in 'facipulation' – implying that what they do is more manipulation than facilitation. This of course is arrogance – the belief that somehow they are in a position of sufficient importance to manipulate people. What really happens is that for the duration of the activity or project people comply with the obvious intentions of the project in order to get from it as much benefit as possible while it lasts. Nevertheless, the point is that the 'facilitators' are not doing what they claim to be doing – notably allowing people to consider an argument for themselves and then either dismiss it or accept it.

Although there are still a number of people who wish to pursue the reduction of inequality and promotion of rights using, as was said at the beginning of this article, the processes of critical thinking, advocacy and consciousness-raising, such approaches should be set against the grist of the majority of development workers who use participatory tools for other purposes. Much of current participatory development stems from the early 1980s' desire to make projects work more effectively for the people who are poorest. There was never any real question that the projects themselves might be useless in the promotion of development. As a result, it did not matter very much whether people agreed with the project. They were not really allowed to disagree. The aim was to find as painless a way of ensuring as many people as possible participated and complied with the wishes of the external agents – whether it was for attending health services or achieving gender equity. Hence the disquiet with the process of facilitation as it is often practised is a bit misplaced – this process was designed precisely to achieve the most efficient compliance with projects and hence was always manipulative. It has very little to do with consciousness-raising and therefore is of little interest for the purposes of this article.

This article is concerned chiefly with the desire by some agencies to stimulate people to take action to redress inequalities and difficulties that stand in the way of their development and capacity for change. It may be that a different set of tools is needed in these latter contexts: the tools used for 'participatory development' as discussed in the paragraph above serve an entirely different set of purposes – that of making projects work better. Perhaps the most appropriate word to use in the context of consciousness-raising and critical thinking is '*challenge*' rather than '*facilitation*'. The very words imply some awareness of this, and the use of the word 'courage' in the phrase 'having the courage to use your own thoughts' brings the need for *challenge* to the fore.

Two senses of 'challenge'

There is another reason to use the word '*challenge*'. Many organisations that proclaim to use 'rights-based approaches' are in fact offering their own vision about rights to people for contemplation and for their agreement that, if others accept this particular vision of rights, some action should be taken to ensure the rights are established. They are in effect challenging people about their vision of rights and equalities in their communities. However, because the organisations are so often convinced that everyone should agree with their own vision, they probably don't see it as a challenge which may or may not be correct: they probably see themselves more as saviours who come to liberate the poor

from abuse and exploitation by helping them understand the world a bit better – albeit with a bit of reflection stimulated by the ‘experts’ who proclaim to understand it already.

Therefore a process involving ‘challenge’ in the two senses ((a) challenging to have the courage to look at your own identity and society critically; (b) challenging to accept a particular vision of rights) carries with it several implications for procedure if a challenge is to be accepted for contemplation in any society or community. Guidelines for challengers might include:

- That challengers talk not only with the people they believe dispossessed, poor, vulnerable, marginalised, oppressed or suffering; they also include a wide variety of stakeholders including the leaders and those in positions of power so that they can understand the dynamics of the situation in a more holistic way.
- That challengers state very clearly their own beliefs, biases and prejudices, and try to define their own cultural and social contexts and the extents to which they can truly challenge their own social environments.
- That challengers state very clearly why they have come, and see if they can achieve agreement that they should remain to pose the particular challenge they have brought with them.
- That challengers show willingness to modify their own beliefs as a result of better learning from the people being challenged.
- That challengers leave it open to people to decide the type of action they want if they do choose action: preventive, palliative or curative. Thus although palliation (e.g. improving support systems) may not remove a problem, it may be the most feasible way of dealing with it.
- That challengers are clear that the challenge can be rejected after sufficient exploration.

Challenge is more appropriate to the exploration with a group of how they will relate to social issues that affect poverty, marginalisation, inequality and suffering.²¹

Facilitation is more of a process for jolly along projects until they end (‘facilitation’ = ‘making easy’).

‘Facilitation’ or ‘making discussion easy’ is the exact opposite of the effect required from challenge. Challenge can never be easy, and has no end.

But who will meet the challenge?

The process of challenge described above is of course insufficient if we are to move beyond the thinking of Horace, Rousseau, Kant, Freire and Foucault. If we rested with the above process, we would again be working in the belief that anyone should be capable of and interested in raising criticism of others in relation to their own social environment. The previous discussion will have made clear that this is unlikely to be the case.

The logical place to start with challenge is with those people in a community or society that have already demonstrated their capacity to convert concern for social justice into action. Mostly these will be leaders of various types or people in places of social responsibility – although clearly only a minority of such people will have this capacity or interest. So any work with a community would entail the identification and support of such people.

²¹ Jo Decosas points out that this looks like a dialectical development theory based on dialectical social theory. In his words “Facilitation and challenge is, in my understanding, not much different from an application of the thesis and antithesis approach to social development. You are even making allusions to the excesses of dialectical social theory, unchecked challenge, as for instance in the mandatory auto-critique sessions of the Chinese Red Guards”. Whether this is so may depend on the extent to which one views a challenge as a thesis and the extent to which people may believe there is a counter-thesis to propose. My own position is that it is not so much thesis versus counter-thesis, but the bringing together of people who may have two entirely different frameworks of thought (the term ‘thesis’ seems to imply there is a level of commonality around which both sides can argue a case), neither of which may necessarily modify the other. If one understands ‘dialectic’ simply as discussion and reasoning by dialogue to establish some point of agreement, then clearly this is dialectical development. However, if one uses ‘dialectic’ in its Hegelian sense of a process of change in which a concept passes over to another and is fulfilled by its opposite, then the word ‘dialectic’ may be a little too grand for what I have in mind. Thus for me the challenge is “I think this way about your situation. Do you also think the same way? If so, I would like to help you. If not, I will go away.” No doubt many will think this approach facile, but we’re still left with the problem of the failure of development organisations in this area.

The questions for the development agency interested in social change would therefore include: Are such people interested in furthering social change or development? Do they require support or further skills? Will the act of challenge in relation to a particular problem be sufficient stimulus? How can we partner with such people to make their own challenges more effective?

Challenge and Facilitation

In fact most projects and programmes have a place for both types of approach. Projects that are pre-determined in their focus and objectives nearly always have to be carried out as specified by the donor. There is little harm in this. Occasionally such projects do benefit some of the population – though generally those who benefit are not amongst those who are poorest or least powerful. The process of facilitation might, sometimes, improve the relevance of projects for the poorest.

However, all projects can provide wonderful opportunities for local staff to use the project as a platform for a challenge concerning rights, inequities or neglect of injustice. This can be done simultaneously to the undertaking of project work. The process of challenge does not have to be bound by the end points desired by the project – it can be open-ended. Success would be measured by any change at all that changed the social situations of those with the most difficulties. Processes for community competence, improved governance, improved justice would all be covered under this rubric.

Helping staff to voice criticism

The considerations about challenge equally apply to the desire to promote critical thinking by staff about their work. Many staff at all levels in an organisation will not readily be able to make a distinction between a logical challenge concerning the effectiveness or relevance of the work that they do on the one hand, and, on the other, any implied challenge to the identity and culture of the organisation itself. Indeed, the level of ownership of ideas in many development organisations inextricably intertwines logic and values. Thus many agencies now have 'core values' that really muddy the waters when it comes to intellectual challenge: they almost imply that if people have the core values then the logic of the work is unassailable.

Just as we have to recognise that not all people in a community are interested in or feel unable to challenge social situation, so not all staff have the predisposition to be critical either of their social environments – especially if it means assessing the value and relevance of the work they do for others and to challenge their colleagues or senior staff to improve it. Some will be concerned about their job security, some will be intimidated by other members of staff, some will be quite happy with the level of work that they do and their competence, some will be known and supported for their critical attitudes, and some will be known and disliked for their critical attitudes. Some will be frightened of biting the donor hands that feed them. A small minority will accept that they cannot achieve change while wearing the uniforms of the organisation for which they work, and will stimulate change on their own, in their 'own community' context.

Therefore, in order to help bring out voices of criticism it will take more than just identifying those individuals with the capacity to voice criticism, there has to be a deep understanding of the rules that bind criticism, that make it effective. This therefore needs much greater clarity of the boundaries of the value system on the one hand, and of the logic of interventions on the other. It may be impossible to separate them, and this will inevitably prolong the confusion and reticence of staff.

The limits of criticism – the Second Question

The second of the questions we face relates to the fact that as people take power they perpetuate inequality. As Horace pointed out, and as Kant and Foucault agreed, the expression of critical thought can only work within a variety of boundaries. How are those boundaries defined?

One way into this is to understand when criticism and challenge lead to change, and when they are simply ignored.

There are a number of social conventions for the ordinary types of challenge that do not question the identity or vision of a society. Similarly, when it comes to challenging social position or interaction, all societies are based on thousands of years of experience with social interactions and the management

of the voicing of critical thoughts. In general, all such forms of social criticism are severely suppressed by any group.

The efficacy of criticism is highly dependent on social context. Because of this, there are a variety of conventions of communication used to achieve change: demonstrating a listening ability, focusing on the logic of the case rather than on the character of those with whom you discuss, demonstrating empathy for a situation and understanding of the history that has led to that situation, speaking calmly, encouraging others to voice their opinions, showing you are trying to find a way out that will help everyone – all the qualities, in fact, necessary for the establishment of trust which were listed in the earlier section on challenge.

The action that is taken when criticism and challenge have failed has also to be considered. In such a case, the challenger has to take a decision: to continue with the group, accepting that the challenge has failed, or to start a conflict with the group with the dangers of loss of the argument, expulsion, or even violence.

Each person probably defines their own limits according to: their capacities of communication; their level of commitment to others or their degree of selfishness; the level of security they feel in their current situation; the level of personal risk they are prepared to accept or take in order to achieve change; their trust in others to work alongside them for change or to support them in other ways; the cost of securing change; the assessment of whether they will truly be better off in the new situation envisaged.

As has been suggested, many of these feelings link strongly to the degree to which a person wishes to be identified with a particular group – or wishes their identity to be expressed by membership of that group.

Thus, as hinted at by Foucault, the boundaries are defined by the particular situation of the group, and the extent to which negotiation will allow the group to change without losing its identity as a group. This will allow the continuation of the support mechanisms and therefore of the definition of the rights and responsibilities of the members to one another.

When the new boundaries that are being sought are no longer acceptable, people have the difficult decision of staying, leaving or entering into direct conflict.

Are our development agencies ready for these different outcomes?

Conclusions and implications

It is not critical thinking or even consciousness of reality that is the issue: it is the ability to speak out and act for change in relation to one's own social situation that poses the difficulty. The difficulty is there precisely because an individual has to make an assessment of the level of risk involved in making that challenge – they will have to accept that the risk includes expulsion from the rights of protection provided by that group, and, indeed a challenge to their own identity in that they have linked their identity to that group.

Current development practice does not address this problem area, but instead makes the broad assumptions that people need to be led to awareness and that with such awareness they will take action. The paper has pointed to the flaws behind such thinking and to the diverse factors that lead both to people's ability to raise their critical voices (have the courage to speak out) and to listen to or accept challenge for change to the social environment.

The factors that mark out those who can stimulate change are strongly linked to their strength of identity with a group, the confidence or trust of the group in the challenger, and the level of security desired by the challenger. However these factors alone do not explain the differences between those who do raise challenges in their own communities and those who do not – something more is needed to explain the difference, and this may lie in the realm of having a social conscience, an interest in the welfare of others that overcomes your own personal desire for comfort or security. In some cases it will result from outrage after being so cruelly abused that no alternative is left, that even death is not seen as something terrible. Sometimes, as with the aristocrats who have so often fuelled revolutions, they have wealth and other resources or alliances to lean back on.

The differences between the process of facilitation in development, and the role of challenge in relation to social change have been reviewed. It was seen that these often serve very different ends.

Facilitation tries to make development easy, challenge recognises that change of identity is a difficult process and requires complex engagement.

The paper has attacked the notion that challenge simply involves standard participatory development tools aimed at undifferentiated bodies of people. The implicit criticism of development practise in this regard is not only that it fails to take into account the differences between people with regard to their interest in voicing their criticisms of others and taking action – it also misses entirely the point that for many people the prospect of attempting change is fraught with too much difficulty and risk, or, more simply, that people feel sufficiently valued by others to continue in the lives they currently lead.

The difficulties inherent in all forms of challenge that are aimed at getting people to be critical of others and taking action to change their own immediate social situations were analysed – those raising challenges have to have the interest, aptitude, self-confidence and skills to raise challenges; those being challenged have to be able to respond positively to the challenge and have an equal interest in doing so.

In order for social change to occur, the process of challenge therefore carries with it the need for particular skills which are not commonly found amongst current development programmes whose goals are fixed in relation to the end of current project contracts. Developing such skills requires not only recognising the workers and the members of communities being supported that are likely to have the communicative skills to raise challenges effectively, but there must also be management processes available in organisations that provide support to such workers and reward them for raising challenges which may at times be deeply challenging of the organisation itself.

In addition, development agencies should be thinking carefully about whether it is the agencies that should be striving to bring change (in which case they should be defining their own hypocrisies), or whether they should be in more humble mode, and, through challenge, asking the question of whether they can be helpful in supporting change whilst defining the limits of the new power relationships that will result.

Taking it to another level

There is another level of concern with current development interest in rights and social change: quite often the interest is pitched at too high, too generalised or too theoretical a level. If development agencies are truly interested in eradicating inequalities, there are two types of difficulty up to which they have to face.

The first main difficulty is that people hate variations from the norm when it comes to societal structure and social practise or interaction. Norms represent the fabric of society against which membership of society is measured. Yet many organisations speak blithely of changing norms.

The second major difficulty, which is strongly related to the first, is that many inequalities between people can be traced not to abuses of rights but more simply to interpersonal difficulties – long-standing family feuds, failures to meet one's obligations to others, greed, selfishness or corruption, fear of retaliation, fear of being different. Such is the stock of day-to-day life and the variations in support and exclusion that so many of the rights-based programmes try to address.

Such are the interactions that prevent people from speaking out. Yet such situations cannot simply be dealt with by waving the flags of various rights. Society itself has to decide the extent to which it will intervene in such issues – determining whether some action that might be felt to be wrong is in fact justified or is, on the other hand, in the realm of in-justice. No society has answered such a question satisfactorily.