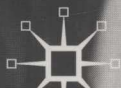


Marjorie Mayo

# CULTURES, COMMUNITIES, IDENTITIES

Cultural Strategies for  
Participation and Empowerment



# Cultures, Communities, Identities

## Cultural Strategies for Participation and Empowerment

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*To my sisters and brothers*

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MARJORIE MAYO

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# Introduction

Cultures, communities and identities; each of these concepts has emerged to the fore in contemporary academic debates, just as each has become the focus of current debates on policy and practice. Each has fundamentally contested meanings, and these, in turn, relate to alternative and competing perspectives within these debates. So why have these contested concepts come to the fore in contemporary academic debates, and why might it matter, in relation to debates on policy and practice for participation and empowerment?

Cultural Studies emerged as a significant influence on academic debates in the humanities and social sciences in the last two decades of the twentieth century. Questions of culture and ideology came to the fore, in contrast with the preoccupation with political economy, more characteristic of debates in the previous decade. The influence of postmodernist thinking has been a key factor too. Advocates and critics of postmodernism have both, in their different ways, been centrally concerned with questions of cultures and identities. The influence of discourses of the postmodern, across a range of academic disciplines has been profound. From whichever perspective you approach the issues, then, these are concerns that need to be addressed.

Cultures, communities and identities have also featured within debates on politics, both in theory and in practice. There has been increasing focus upon communities in the context of 'communitarianism'. Debates on the significance of 'community' have emerged – alongside debates on the family and family values – in the context of anxieties about increasing fragmentation, social dislocation and excessive individualism. There is a need to reassert the values of community, it has been argued, to redress the balance following

decades of economic and social policies based upon the view that there is no such thing as society, but only individuals and their families (Kymlicka, 1990, Etzioni, 1993, Atkinson, 1994, Atkinson, 1995).

From the communitarian perspective, it has been suggested, 'two scenarios beckon us. The one suggests a grasping, individualistic, rapidly changing future in which the gap between those who have "made it" and those who "fall by the wayside" widens in divisive ways. The other scenario is less clearly defined, but indicates the need to find more responsible ways of caring for children and finding ways in which all can contribute to a more caring society' (Atkinson, 1995, p. 3). What the communitarian approach implies in practice has been the subject of further debate. Individuals, communitarians emphasise, have social responsibilities as well as rights in society – an emphasis which has implications for agendas of social control as well as for agendas of social care. This raises further issues in turn, questions about the communitarian perspective and questions about the 'Third Way' with which this has been associated.

More fundamentally, the definition of the concept of community itself continues to be contested along with the definitions of culture and identity. The notion of community in terms of shared locality or neighbourhood is problematic already, and increasingly so in urban industrialised societies, characterised by high rates of mobility and complex social networks (Crow and Allan, 1994). The notion of community in terms of 'common identity' is scarcely less problematic. 'Race', ethnicity, and sexual orientation have each been considered, for example, as markers of 'communities of identity'. The gay community's experiences of organising in San Francisco, for instance, have been analysed in these terms (Castells, 1983). But the notion of communities of identity raises further questions in its turn. What, if anything, do such 'identities' actually mean, and how might these meanings differ, from one cultural context to another? Is it really meaningful, for instance, to refer to 'black identity' as a fixed given, without taking account of the dynamics of change in differing contexts (Gilroy, 1987, Gilroy, 1993)? How are these identities acquired, in any case, by nature and/ or by nurture? (Weeks, 1987, Caplan, 1987). How do individuals and groups become conscious or fail to become conscious of themselves, in relation to these identities? By what processes do they define themselves, and how do they address the issues of overlapping and potentially competing identities – as black women, for example, or older people who have disabilities or young people who are gay or lesbian?

However problematic, the notion of 'communities of identity' has been central to the discussion of New Social Movements such as those campaigning for Black Liberation, Women's Liberation, and Gay and Lesbian Liberation, together with movements of older people and movements of people with disabilities.<sup>1</sup> These movements have been concerned with contesting the negative identities which have been associated with the prejudices of racist, sexist, homophobic, ageist and ableist societies – aiming to promote positive identities, alternative communities based upon shared cultures and values. The celebration of diversity and difference has been a central theme in debates about community politics, and indeed in debates about alternative approaches to politics more generally (Harvey, 1990, Harvey, 1993).

Increasingly critical of orthodox left politics in the 1960s – rooted in previous assumptions about the leading role of the working class, led by centralised left political parties, and focusing upon the sphere of political economy – critics such as Gortz and Touraine had already been exploring alternative approaches. From the 1970s, these critics were according greater prominence to the roles of the New Social Movements, based upon the politics of identity and difference, with greater emphasis upon the sphere of culture and ideology (Gortz, 1982; Touraine, 1974).

From the 1980s, postmodernist critics had already been challenging the notion that history could be meaningfully interpreted in terms of emancipatory class politics – or indeed in terms of any 'grand narrative' at all. The meta-theories of the past, the very notion of historical progress and the underlying assumptions of the 'Enlightenment' were to be subjected to fundamental reappraisal. In place of these previous approaches, in contrast, there was an increasing emphasis upon diversity and difference, and the significance of space and place, rather than the significance of time and the notion of development (Keith and Pile, 1993).

The collapse of 'actually existing socialist' states in the former Soviet Union and Eastern and Central Europe, at the end of the 1980s, seemed to provide confirmation of such criticisms. This was the period when the 'End of History' (that is, history as grand emancipatory narratives) was a significant topic for debate (Fukuyama, 1992). Capitalism was established globally, it was argued, in a postmodern

1 New Social Movements have not only been concerned with issues of identity of course. Environmental movements have also been key, along with urban social movements.

era, a postindustrial information-based society. Questions of culture, diversity and difference were centrally important, that is, subjectivity and desires rather than the uniformity and the over-emphasis upon rationality and materialism which had been associated with the era of modern mass production.

From alternative perspectives on the left, meanwhile, the celebration of diversity and difference was also being explored as part of attempts to reappraise the assumptions of the past – but without throwing out the baby with the bathwater. How could the agendas of the New Social Movements be understood in relation to the agendas of traditional class politics, and what might be the scope for developing alliances between them? How could the celebration of diverse identities and cultural differences be related to agendas for challenging the underlying causes of oppression and exploitation, rooted in the relations of production? And how could one develop an enhanced understanding of cultural, community and identity politics without abandoning a structural analysis which was rooted in political economy (Harvey, 1990).

But was this possible? Some critics of the political economy approach concluded that this was fundamentally incompatible with the politics of cultures and identities (Smart, 1992). Aronowitz and Giroux, for example, argued that the Marxist tradition was centrally concerned with the primacy of the economic sphere; this had resulted in the devaluing of ‘politics, ideology and culture’. What needed to be stressed, they continued, was that any approach to developing a critical theory of emancipation demanded that ‘the Marxist theory of class and history be discarded and that the theoretical terrains of culture and ideology be given primary importance as a constitutive force in the shaping of consciousness and historical agency’ (Aronowitz and Giroux, 1986, p. 117).

Or alternatively, did questions of culture need to be reformulated in relation to analyses rooted in political economy – a matter not so much of whether these were to be addressed but how? And similarly with identity politics, was the issue to be reformulated – to focus upon *how* rather than *whether* these debates needed to be related to community politics and the mainstream of class politics? This was the starting point for this book.

My initial rationale for addressing these questions about cultures, communities, identities and cultural strategies tended to be somewhat defensive. It was clearly important to engage with these preoccupying debates. But I suspected that I might ultimately conclude that the

significance of cultural issues was being somewhat overestimated. Might this emphasis upon cultural questions prove to be something of a diversion from the material issues affecting communities in an increasingly polarised scenario of growing poverty and deprivation? Could this represent some contemporary version of 'Bread and Circuses', I suspected (even if the bread seemed to be in somewhat short supply, too, in the context of contemporary welfare spending restrictions)?

As I began to reflect further, I became increasingly convinced that such defensiveness was quite unnecessary. Far from being peripheral, these questions were leading into some of the most central theoretical debates for community development, and for community practice more generally. Questions of culture and identity (however each of these is defined) relate to some of the most fundamental issues for communities, how they see themselves, how they analyse their situations and whether and how they come to envisage the possibilities for change. 'Culture' in the anthropological usage, as Worsley has demonstrated, tells us not only who we are, and what is what, but what is to be done. 'It supplies a project, a design for living' (Worsley, 1984, p. 43). Community development agendas have actually been and continue to be focused upon precisely these types of questions – with varying answers depending upon participants' underlying theoretical perspectives as to who was who, what was what, and what was to be done.

At one end of the theoretical spectrum, as Chapter 4 explains, the community development programmes which were developed in the Third World, in the post-Second World War period have been criticised for their underlying assumptions – that the task was essentially to diffuse 'modernising', that is, Western attitudes and values, to get communities of 'backward people in the right frame of mind' for development as defined by other interests on their behalf (Manghezi, 1976). There are a number of subsequent examples of community development programmes which have started from such questionable assumptions – that the poor need to be rescued from their 'culture of poverty' (ideas which lurked behind community programmes in both Britain and the USA in the 1960s and early 1970s, for example (Loney, 1983). There are some uncomfortable echoes, too, in more recent reflections on the supposedly problematic values and attitudes of the 'underclass' in deprived communities (Morris, 1994).

Alternatively, though, towards the other end of the theoretical spectrum, critics of such approaches to community development have also been concerned with questions of culture and identity, albeit from

fundamentally different assumptions. While recognising that peoples' cultures and identities can be expected to have roots in their material circumstances, in summary, such critics have argued that the world of ideas cannot simply be reduced to such material roots in economic ways. Drawing upon the work of writers such as Gramsci, they have emphasised the key importance of ideology and culture as continuing sites of struggle in their own right. The dominant culture is constantly being reproduced, it is argued, and alternative cultures and identities are continually faced with the problem of how to present effective challenges (Popple, 1995). In such a scenario, existing – and unequal – social relationships appear normal, legitimate even, or at least as way beyond current agendas for social change. This is the logic of the view that at the end of the day 'there is no alternative' to market-led economies, societies in which the requirements of private profitability represent the ultimate bottom line. And this is precisely the type of view which is to be challenged, if alternative agendas are to be developed for community empowerment and social transformation.

There are parallels here, with the challenges posed by the New Social Movements. The Women's Liberation Movement, for example, set out to question a set of assumptions about gender roles in society, and the supposed natures of women and men, which effectively reinforced existing gender relations, male dominance and female subordination. Deeply ingrained cultural assumptions about women's roles as wives, mothers and daughters were challenged as women both collectively and individually explored alternative definitions of their identities. Similar points could be made about other social movements empowering oppressed groups to imagine alternatives, as Chapter 2 considers in more detail.

Community development workers, youth workers and community education workers concerned with participation, empowerment and social transformation have seen their role in terms of social and political education, in this broad sense. Drawing upon the work of Freire, in particular, professionals informed by such approaches have set out to empower the communities they work with to question dominant assumptions – in Freire's terms to get the oppressor out of their own heads. Social and political education of this type aims to empower people to analyse the sources of their problems for themselves, to explore their own needs and develop their own strategies. 'Cultural action for freedom' as Freire has expressed this type of approach, has been central to debates on social transformation, both in Britain and beyond, informing a range of practice from adult education and social

education with young people to participatory action research in both the First and Third Worlds. More specifically, too, these debates have informed a range of community programmes and projects involving the arts and media, including programmes and projects which are discussed in more detail subsequently in this book.

For professionals working with communities, whether communities based upon locality or communities of identity, or both, these are central issues. Whatever perspective the worker finds most relevant, in fact, one of the most basic issues which they need to address (and which is typically addressed in their professional training) is the issue of their own identity as a worker – having a critical awareness of self, in order to work effectively and professionally with others, whether this is on a one-to-one basis with individuals, or whether this is with groups and communities. Without such an awareness of self, workers risk distorting their professional interventions with their own cultural assumptions. In societies which are culturally laden with racism, sexism, homophobia, ageism and ableism, not to mention class prejudice, such awareness is central to empowering practice.

Practice has, in any case, been moving ahead, whether or not this was being mirrored at the theoretical level, or reflected in education and training for professionals in the community. There are numerous examples of creative practice both in relation to issues of culture and identity in general, and more specifically, in relation to community arts and media projects, both in the First and Third Worlds. As I began to read on and to visit more community arts and media projects, I became increasingly aware of the extent to which this has actually been the case for some very considerable time.

Community arts such as drama, mime, song and dance have been used in a variety of contexts as part of community development programmes – to put across development messages. Educational plays of this type include didactic points – about health education, the benefits of particular hygiene measures or the value of participating in literacy programmes, for example. It has been argued that, at least until relatively recently, community media have been predominantly used as vehicles for top-down persuasion or as channels to convey information from ‘experts’/authorities to ‘the people’ (Melkote, 1991).

But there are also a range of examples to illustrate alternative approaches, based upon more active participation and dialogue. Such examples illustrate more fully empowering ways of working for social transformation. Freire’s work on the development of critical consciousness through active participation and dialogue influenced the thinking

of Boal, for example, as he developed the Theatre of the Oppressed from the 1960s in Latin America (Boal, 1979). Ngugi's work in Kenya provides another example of the use of drama for community education and for the development of critical consciousness and social change (Epskamp, 1989). This book focuses particularly on examples of this type of approach to the uses of arts and media to promote community empowerment for social change, building towards the ultimate transformation of exploitative and oppressive social relations.

Meanwhile, the arts and cultural activity have also become an increasingly important part of urban regeneration in Britain. Cultural industries have been increasingly identified as a dynamic, growing sector, both in Britain and beyond. While some of the claims may have been somewhat exaggerated (with some apparently inflated claims about the numbers employed in the industries) by the 1990s there was increasing recognition of the potential contribution which cultural policies could make to urban regeneration, and growing interest amongst local authorities concerned to promote local economic development (Landry *et al.*, 1996).

Once again, the issues were not so much whether but how cultural policies were to be developed. Policies which put the interests of upmarket tourism before the needs of local communities were potentially diminishing the quality of life for local people. At their crudest, such policies could be used to justify programmes to remove beggars and 'squeegy merchants' from the streets of city centres, in case they offend the sensibilities of the tourists they seek to proposition for alms. But alternative, participatory approaches to the cultural industries can be and have been developed too, as part of programmes to promote urban regeneration. There are a range of examples of such alternative approaches, both in Britain and beyond.

Subsequent British policy reports, such as the Social Exclusion Unit's Policy Action Team Report 10, have reaffirmed this growing recognition of the potential significance of the contribution of the arts, sport, cultural and recreational activity, as part of wider strategies, including strategies to promote regeneration and to combat social exclusion in Britain:

Art and sport, cultural and recreational activity, can contribute to neighbourhood renewal and make a real difference to health, crime, employment and education in deprived communities ... The principles of the community development approach in this report should underpin and build on the ways in which local



authority culture/leisure strategies and services are developed and provided (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 1999, pp. 8, 11).

Arts activities and cultural initiatives were also being identified by local authorities and their organisations as contributing to regeneration in a number of important ways. 'The arts can not only improve the quality of life for a few, but transform the social contexts, self-confidence and imaginative capacity of whole urban districts' (Chelliah, 1999, p. 11).

As subsequent chapters illustrate, there has been a wealth of examples which have pointed to such outcomes over a long period, both in relation to cultural issues in general, and in relation to community arts and media, more specifically. As the Local Government Information Unit report *Arts and Regeneration* pointed out, '(T)he use of arts activity to achieve social objectives is not new' (Chelliah, 1999, p. 5). On the contrary, in fact, the creative arts have been linked to social purposes, in the past, both by official agencies and by local people themselves. The history of working-class adult learning, for example, demonstrates the significance of reading, including the reading of works of fiction, as a way into further study and further activism. Kean's study of working-class reading, for instance, demonstrated the ways in which socialists and feminists saw reading, including the reading of fiction and poetry, as mechanisms for the development of the self, and self-identity, in a community of like-minded individuals. As Kean argued 'The emphasis on the study of literature and poetry was not an aberration from economic texts but a continuation of ... mental growth and increased awareness ...' (Kean, 1995, pp. 59–60). More recent adult learning programmes have led to similar conclusions. As a participant on a programme for the unemployed at Ruskin College, Oxford, reflected, however useful it was to address practical issues, the cultural aspects of the programme were crucial too, because:

for our own self-respect and self-help we need drama and discussion, poetry and literature to learn about ourselves, about what we can offer society and about the best way forward (quoted in Hughes, 1995, p. 106).

There are numerous contemporary examples too, illustrating ways in which the arts, leisure and sport are being used, creatively, to reach