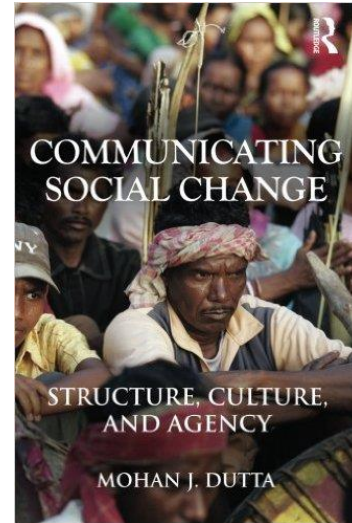


Mohan J. Dutta, **Communicating Social Change: Structure, Culture, and Agency**, New York, NY: Taylor & Francis, 2011, 360 pp., \$50.25 (paperback).

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Communicating Social Change: Structure, Culture, and Agency was written prior to the wave of grassroots social movements that spread across the globe in the wake of the Arab Spring. In the twilight of this period of widespread collective action, commentators and scholars hotly debated the meaning and impact of radically bottom-up responses to authoritarianism, capitalism, and the reality of growing inequality. Work across disciplines has emerged to address the economic, technological, and political dimensions of these movements (e.g., Hussain & Howard, 2012; Malleson, 2014; Piketty, 2014), but the field of communication studies continues to grapple with the theoretical significance of the discursive spaces that flowered in public squares, plazas, and parks worldwide. In important ways, *Communicating Social Change* anticipated this emerging communicative style of global resistance and now offers us a unique theoretical lens through which to understand these awakenings and the awakenings still needed to create lasting structural change.



Mohan J. Dutta has been one of the most consistent and compelling voices in communication studies advocating for a culture-centered approach to social change. *Communicating Social Change* is the most comprehensive manifestation of his theoretical model of social change, which connects the cultural agency of communities at the margin with the creation of discursive practices that challenge the neoliberal structures undergirding global inequality. This task involves drawing upon a postcolonial critique of histories of power and a subaltern studies emphasis on discourses of resistance. In the process, Dutta documents the material and symbolic casualties of neoliberal hegemony and offers culture-centered responses to global inequality that take such forms as street performances, indigenous YouTube channels, and academic activism.

Research involving social change communication has historically focused either on the strategic message features most likely to lead to attitude and behavior change or on the media practices of activists and organizations (Wilkins, 2014). Instead, Dutta works from a culture-centered approach, which aims to create structural transformation through participatory communication with people at the margins. On the one hand, this viewpoint regards strategic communication as a tool for neoliberalism; on the other, it finds cultural studies lacking in attention to material oppression. Whereas message-based approaches to communication seek to effectively persuade marginalized populations to adopt modern behaviors, process-based approaches emphasize the role of culture and agency in creating “resistance from below” (p. 60). The result is a model of social change communication (Figure 1) visualized as a two-dimensional spectrum with agent of change (top-down vs. grassroots) on one axis and objective of change (status quo vs. social

change) on the other. These dialectics produce four approaches to communication for social change: development campaigns, participatory development, Marxist, and culture-centered.

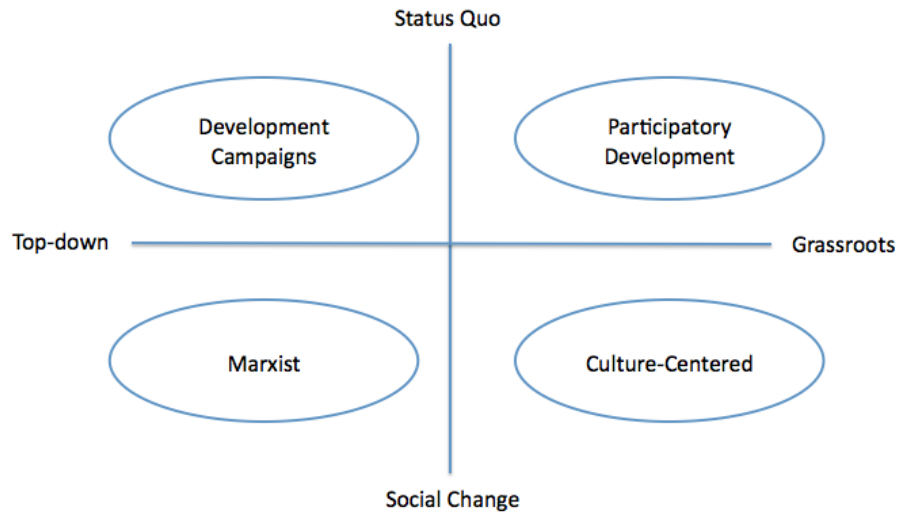


Figure 1. Theoretical framework for social change communication.
(Reproduced from p. 33.)

Using this theoretical framework, Dutta joins a chorus of communication scholars whose work challenges the project of modernity and the privileging of top-down discourses of social change (see Wilkins, Tufte, & Obregon, 2014). This book presents a critical review of the effects of neoliberalism across a variety of contexts including poverty, health, food, agriculture, and gender. Throughout, the dominant discourse of international development is shown to reinforce the structures of power responsible for global inequality. Simultaneously, the poor are erased from communicative spaces of change, where they are reduced to targets of interventions, lacking knowledge or agency. The empirical evidence provided may be redundant for those already convinced of the role of neoliberalism in fueling global inequality, but for scholars outside of this subdiscipline, the communicative consequences of capitalist hegemony are vital to understanding the necessity of culture-centered research. It is against the neoliberal structure that Dutta hopes to mobilize the transformative potential of the narratives of the poor.

Communicating Social Change offers an analysis of how those at the margins can leverage local networks, knowledge, and meanings to organize and participate in collective resistance. Foundational social change concepts such as resources mobilization and social capital are problematized and reappraised from the vantage point of local communities organizing outside the boundaries of normative Western social movement structures. Dutta provides examples of symbolic resistance throughout and is careful not only to critique existing theoretical models but also to offer an alternative vision of how a culture-centered approach might help communication scholars retheorize social change.

The final section of the book is dedicated to proposing a new agenda for social change communication research. Dutta notes that a message-based approach focused on individual behavior change not only maintains the status quo, but also robs people at the margins of their symbolic and material agency. He challenges researchers to approach their work with a “deconstructive lens,” posing questions such as: Who defines development? For what purposes? and Who benefits from development? Authenticity, commitment, and reflexivity are central to the practice of culture-centered research.

The diversity of the discipline of communication studies makes the reception of the arguments posed in this work simultaneously complicated and vital. It is unclear, for example, if quantitative social science has any role in the culture-centered approach or if cultural studies for that matter can engage in conversations of radical transformation with the oppressed. Similarly, Dutta’s focus on a singular path to structural change may be less useful in an interdisciplinary field, where conversation between paradigms is often the site of the most interesting scholarship. Yet this confrontation of taken-for-granted ways of understanding structural change is precisely why *Communicating Social Change* is such an important contribution. Dutta challenges the assumption that experts should shape public health campaigns and that transnational corporations have the right to advertise free-market solutions to poverty. This work is a response to the reality that much of the literature in prosocial communication has focused on mechanism over meaning and has therefore obfuscated the perpetuation of unjust power structures and the possibility that the voices of the poor matter.

A broader goal of *Communicating Social Change* is to aid in what Dutta terms “unlearning privilege.” His call is to move beyond simply “listening,” toward dialogic encounters with oppressed communities that force the academic gaze inward. It is this concept of “unlearning” that may be of greatest use to readers of all epistemological orientations. With the rise of big data and other powerful new methodologies, our picture of a global aggregate may sharpen, but the lived experience of the poor is in danger of falling out of focus. Fortunately, scholars like Dutta, many of whom are from the global south, continue to produce work that returns to the voices of the oppressed as the site of social change.

Social movements have always relied on communicative action for relaying demands and building public support (Cammaerts, Mattoni, & McCurdy, 2013). What has become clear is that attempting to apply public relations theory to the activism of Tahrir Square, Zuccotti Park, and Central Hong Kong misses the real evolution in the role of communication in processes of social change. Dutta is prescient in his emphasis of the power of performative protest in public spaces, arguing that the occupation of public space is not only instrumental in creating a locus of public attention, but also essential for establishing zones of communicative resistance. A culture-centered approach may help explain the popular confusion over what these movements hope to “accomplish” (Kristof, 2011; “What’s Occupying Wall Street?” 2011). As Dutta argues, neoliberal forces will always attempt to delegitimize the discourses that threaten them. As inequality becomes a focal point of the struggle against neoliberalism, the true success of future social movements lies in the subaltern publics that they create, where narratives of lived experience and resistance are given space. *Communicating Social Change* argues that structural change can be found in the symbolic language of the many colored umbrellas in Hong Kong or in radically egalitarian decision

making in New York. The role of communication scholars is to use their knowledge of communicative processes and structural power to help sustain and expand culture-centered spaces for social change.

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