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Politics of Indexation: Beyond the Fingering & Figuring of Knowledge

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Abstract

The present essay traces the history of indexation, and discusses the challenge for indexing Africa in the 21st century. It then examines the possibilities and promises of indexing newer sources of knowledge drawing from the experiences of Afro-Asian relations through the journal, *Identity, Culture and Politics: An Afro-Asian Dialogue*.

Key terms: Politics of indexation, indexation, criminality and racism, science of indexing, googlization of knowledge, deterritorialization, cyberindexing

Résumé

L'étude fait l'historique de l'indexation et traite du défi que pose l'indexation africaine au 21^e siècle. Elle passe ensuite en revue les possibilités et espoirs d'indexation des nouvelles sources de connaissance en s'inspirant de l'expérience des relations afro-asiatiques par le biais de la revue *Identité, culture et politique: un dialogue afro-asiatique*.

Mots clés : Politique d'indexation, indexation, criminalité et racisme, technique de l'indexation, googlisation des connaissances, déterritorialisation, cyber indexation

Introduction

An international traveller now comes across a familiar request at all American airports: 'Could you please press here your right index finger? Yes, and now the left one?' Evidently, this is not a request coming from

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a jailor to the condemned, although arguments could be made towards thinking or even justifying precisely that. The index finger has certainly attained prominence in the aftermath of 9/11 and individuals, particularly in the case of the United States, could now be barred or prohibited from entering the country on the basis of the profile not of the person (as it is found in the passport) but of the index finger. The practice otherwise signalled the creative indexation of the human flesh or should we say, the Orwellian of the body!

The relationship between indexation and prohibition or even criminality is an old one. There are two, albeit somewhat similar, facets to this. The first one relates to the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* or the 'Index of Forbidden Books' by the Roman Catholic Church. The practice of banning and burning books has been carried out in different cultures and civilizations probably from the time books first began to be published for public consumption. In the Christian world the first burning of books takes place with the new converts of St. Paul, who were eager to burn all superstitious books. In fact, in 496, following the decree of Pope Gelasius I, a list in the form of an index was made for all recommended and banned books. But it was only in 1559 that the Sacred Congregation of the Roman Inquisition published the first catalogue of forbidden books with the word 'index' in its title. The periodic publication of such an index was finally discontinued in 1966.

No less telling has been the modern birth and practice of indexing fingerprints. There is a precise colonial legacy to this. One year after the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 William James Herschel was made the Assistant Joint Magistrate and Collector of a district near Calcutta in Bengal. His responsibility stretched from collecting the district's tax to building roads. Faced with the hatred and non-cooperation of the natives Herschel found that the former, including the contractors, got into the habit of breaking their contracts, even denying their own signatures. To ensure that Raj Konai, a contractor, abide by his agreement to deliver materials for road-building Herschel tried 'an experiment by taking the stamp of his hand...to frighten Konai out of all thought of repudiating his signature.'¹ The printing of Konai's hand made Herschel the first in British history to regularly use fingerprints officially.²

Aided no less by the innovation in the techniques in France and elsewhere in Europe, fingerprints soon began to be used for the purpose of indexing criminals and no less interestingly, for racial and hereditary purpose. In 1891 Sir Francis Galton, the English explorer, anthropologist, and eugenicist, frankly stated:

In the present memoir I shall explain the way in which fingerprints may be indexed and referred to after the fashion of a dictionary, and on the same general principle as that devised by A. Bertillon with respect to anthropometric measures, whose ingenious method is now in regular use on a very large scale in the criminal administration of France and elsewhere.

It must not, however, be supposed that the use of indexing finger marks is limited to the above purpose, the purpose of doing so being equally needed for racial and hereditary inquiries.³

Indexing, therefore, from its birth and early practices began to be associated with prohibition, criminality and racism. There is otherwise a structural limitation to its inclusiveness, for in trying to 'index' one must select, hierarchize and empower one over the other. The science of indexing has only made the method more hegemonic and few now tend to realize and accept the divisiveness if not the political quest that is so central to indexation.

The Science of Indexing

In an interview with Barbara Vega in 2001 Lori Lathrop, the former President of the *American Society of Indexers* and a Senior Member of the *Society for Technical Communication*, systematically and in some details identified the techniques of indexing.⁴ Four or five key features could easily be identified. Firstly, and no less surprisingly, the selection criteria. 'How do I select index entries?' Lathrop has no problem in responding to this query:

Fortunately, I have a simple answer: Create index entries that meet the 'Happy to be here!' criteria. In other words, create entries that point to information that either tells readers how to do something or provides important details.... Your index entries should be both specific and concise. As you gain more experience in indexing, you will find it easier to create entries that balance being specific with being concise.

'Happy to be here!' criteria? What word would not crave for it? But there is also the problem of not raising the flag and being instantly indexed. In fact, this could make many believe in the 'unhappiness' of the word if not in the marginalization and alienation of the subject. Lathrop does have an answer to this, to which we will return shortly.

Secondly, quality. Indexing must be 'accurate and complete, free from errors, and consistent in style and terminology.' But who is going to ensure this? Lathrop comes up with a quick answer: The writer should take 'just a little more time to edit the index before submitting it for production.' She then reiterates the suggestion made by one of her clients: 'the writers

should plan to spend as much time creating an index as they would spend developing a major chapter.' But a quick answer, although honest, is often beset with contradictions. If the task of indexing falls on the writer, what would Lathrop or even the professional indexers do? Lathrop does have an answer to this but let me save it for the moment.

Thirdly, quantity. There are some precise quantifiable measurements pertaining to indexing. According to Lathrop:

A good rule of thumb is that you should have one double-column page of index for every twenty pages of text. That equates to approximately 5% of the text. Most writers can index 10-12 pages per hour. Of course, they may be able to index more pages if the text is not dense with indexable terms and concepts, and they will index fewer pages per hour if the text is quite dense. That estimate does not include editing time, which should take at least 25% as much time as the indexing process takes.

This certainly sounds more 'scientific' than science, paralleling the figuring of knowledge that has come to inform and define some of the disciplines in post-positivist social sciences now. And as with any figuring of knowledge there is the instant cropping up of professionals and experts, solidly skilful not in the creative reproduction of concepts or even knowledge but in the art of repetitive knowledge ingeniously referred to as the science of quantification. In the back of the mind there is no doubt the assumption of a linear relationship between the writer and the reader, with the former directing and determining the latter. And this brings us to the most critical feature.

Finally, the satisfaction of the customer. Lathrop now comes up wholly dressed as a salesperson:

Good indexers have a 'crystal ball' in their heads that helps them apply audience analysis skills to their indexes, creating entries that end users are likely to use in searching for information. You need to know how novices, experienced users, and everyone in between will look for information – and provide appropriate entries for them.

Novice users will look for main entries that point them to broad terms and concepts, and your subentries will provide them with 'topic analysis' that helps them understand the finer points. More experienced users will look for main headings that take them directly to those finer points. Therefore, when you 'double post' subentries as main headings, you are making your index usable for advanced users....

The moral of the story is simple: A well-written, comprehensive index increases customer satisfaction and reduces costly product support time because it makes your products easier to learn and use.

Apart from pre-judging or determining what novice or advanced users would be looking for, Lathrop transforms indexing, and even knowledge, into a political economy with indexing becoming merely a part and parcel of ‘audience analysis skills’ and critically, rational cost-analysis. Indexing otherwise becomes a commodity, the saleability of which is crucial in giving birth to the book and the author! More importantly, as a commodity, could indexing remain devoid of social and political compulsions? Gramsci, if I am to recollect correctly, once noted that ‘Everything is political, even philosophy or philosophies. And the only philosophy is history in action, that is, life itself.’²⁵ There is no reason for the science or rather the political economy of indexing (if we were to agree with Lathrop) to be any different. I will have more to say about this shortly.

Lathrop makes two other assertions that are equally noteworthy. The first one relates to the items that need not be indexed. Documentation fewer than ‘twenty pages’ or documentation with only ‘lists or tables and very little text’ may be omitted. Secondly, when choosing between online and printed documentation, the former ought to be given preference, indeed, for no other reason than speed, impatience and marketability. As Lathrop explains with some excitement:

Something happens to most people when they get online. It’s similar to what happens to me when I get behind the wheel of my little Mazda Miata convertible: I want to get there now, and I don’t want anything to get in my way! Similarly, most people become more impatient when they are online. They want instant gratification, and they become impatient if they do not get it.

Readers want index entries that take them directly to the information they need in just split seconds so they can get back to work. They do not want to go on a ‘fishing expedition’, which is what they are forced to do if all they have is full text search that yields a gazillion irrelevant hits, does not provide them with any real ‘topic analysis’ and, most importantly, cannot distinguish between significant information and passing references.

But then, once we are ‘online’, are we not entering into the hegemonic/hierarchical domain of patented knowledge? Does indexing then become a function of the developed economies, while the less developed economies not unlike the classical relationship of dependence must continue to remain at the mercy of the former? What about the question of accessibility? Or, for that matter, who ensures the quality of indexing over the quantity of indexing?

The Googlization of Knowledge

Few can deny the contribution of www.google.com in the birth of virtual indexing or even virtual library. In many respect it has become the starting point of information and knowledge not only for the novice but also for the serious researchers. But then with constant entries each day with no barrier to space the google has suffered from what can be best referred to as a knowledge boom. To provide one instance, a search on 'Terrorism' produced over 21 million entries on 15 January 2005 at 13.30 hours. Bringing the search to 'Terrorism South Asia' and 'Terrorism Africa' proved no different either, over 2.5 million and 3.6 million entries respectively. And the number in each of these subjects is rising at an astronomic speed every day. While the sea of information may certainly delight the browser, making them all useful however is out of the question. The collection of information merely becomes a theoretical abstract with limited practical significance. Such collection simply joins, as John Ralston Saul once suggested albeit in a different context, the rank of the ludicrousness of numbers, which after a point becomes impractical and meaningless.⁶ But there is more to the googlization of knowledge.

Lest one be charged for being a novice in browsing, particularly with respect to the above outcome, an attempt was made to be more specific in the use of cyberindexing. A search was carried out on the website www.educationindex.com to get some specific information on education related to politics. The website instantly showed a topic-by-topic breakdown of 56 subjects from 'Agriculture' to 'Women's Studies' with the message 'the best sites on the World Wide Web.' Clicking on the subject 'Political Science' revealed a list of further websites, altogether 82, this time with the message 'Government and Political Science Resources.' But then, more than 45 of the total 82 websites were directly related to the United States, beginning with the 'American Planning Association' and ending interestingly with the 'Welcome to the White House' website. The education/political science index also included the 'CIA', 'DefenseLINK', the 'Department of the State', and the 'FBI' with the 'Most Wanted List'!

Two outcomes are certain from the googlization of knowledge. Firstly, the parcellization of knowledge, incidentally for reasons that are partly structural and partly deliberate. The lack of monographic treatment to any of the issues covered by cyberindexing is bound to make a browser half-read if not ill read. Indeed, knowledge in the form of cryptic notes is likely to reproduce cryptic scholars with a methodological biased towards naïve positivism. This could only limit, and even cancel, the healthy debate between and amongst the various methodological and theoretical discourses.

The deliberate part is no less critical either. Thoroughly schooled and disciplined in locational (read here Western) politics there is a well-founded belief in the authenticity of Western or more specifically American sources of knowledge and conversely a general distrust of non-Western sources of knowledge. Mainstream cyberindexing cannot help but reproduce the pride and prejudices of Western hegemonic powers.

Secondly, and this is largely the result of the first, knowledge dissemination transforming into knowledge discrimination. The location of the websites and the persons or the institutes feeding them does make a difference to the design, substance and the final product of cyberindexing. In this context, there is a clear rupture when it comes to the globalization of technology with the developed economies having the resources (and this in real financial terms) to outwit and de-educate the rest of the relatively have-nots of the world. Accessibility to libraries, including major publication houses and journals, becomes conditional on the availability of funds, even credit cards. Moreover, a uniformed charging of fees, coupled with currency regulations, privileges the members of developed economies compared to those located in less developed economies. The googlization of knowledge has otherwise resulted in a cyberclass that readily prides on its privilege of accessibility to knowledge. The limitations, if not the envy, of the have-nots are understandable. The challenge for indexing in the twenty-first century therefore is both virtual and real.

Indexing 'Afro-Asia' in the Age of Deterritorialization

This mainly refers to the possibilities of indexing newer sources of knowledge arising from the journal, *Identity, Culture and Politics: An Afro-Asian Dialogue* (from hence ICP), published jointly by the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), Dakar, and the International Centre for Ethnic Studies (ICES), Colombo. The journal ICP in terms of its conception, production and dissemination defies the classical or geopolitical understanding of territoriality. Instead, it can claim itself to be a product of deterritorialization or what is more commonly referred to as globalization. Deterritorialization captures better the essence of the matter for, as Deleuze and Guattari maintains,⁷ there is newer forms of territoriality or reterritorialization with the advent of deterritorialization, and that is precisely what is taking place with the publication of ICP as part of a joint collaboration between the members and institutes of two continents. This is markedly different from the Afro-Asian collaboration of earlier eras. Let me explain.

The most notable collaboration between Asia and Africa was the state-sponsored 'Afro-Asian solidarity', with key figures like Gamal Abdel Nasser, Kwame Nkrumah, Jawaharlal Nehru and Bung Sukarno collectively building and policing the forum to distance themselves and their respective states and regions from the menace of Cold War confrontations. The solidarity, more pronounced following the Bandung Conference of 1955, was mainly premised on the rivalry of the Superpowers albeit with an element of anti-Americanism in it. In many ways the solidarity also ended up being dependent on the continuation of the Cold War, and therefore with the end of the Cold War it practically lost its charm. Apart from a few non-state interactions, and that again largely restricted to government-sponsored academic and cultural exchanges, the solidarity remained wholly committed to the international policymaking of the state. Even the non-governmental initiative under the banner of Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organization, founded in 1955, remained state-centric with ideological leanings interestingly towards the Soviet Union and communist China!⁸ In fact, in many respects it proved detrimental to the growth and nurturing of the age-old spirit of Afro-Asianism, which often found its creative expressions not in governmental initiatives but in the works of political and literary personalities like Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, Frantz Fanon, Iqbal Ahmad, Leopold Senghor, Samir Amin, Edward Said and Wole Soyinka. When ICP was conceptualised with the moral support of the martyr Neelan Tiruchelvan, the former Director of ICES, the idea was largely to revive the age-old spirit of Afro-Asianism, something that matched with the core objectives of both CODESRIA and ICES.

However, in the age of deterritorialization the spirit of Afro-Asianism has come to hold newer (and I dare say, following Deleuze and Guattari, reterritorialized) meanings. One critical aspect of this has been to *de-center* the earlier reference points of state and Western discourses and initiate wholly non-state, non-Western, deterritorialized discourse. The ICP journal, in fact, comes up with a very conscious sub-title called 'Afro-Asian Dialogue'. There are three sets of meanings to this. Firstly, Africa and Asia are treated in a non-hierarchized manner. Intellectual discourses emerging from this is immense since structures of domination do not impinge upon the relationship and distort the nature of the discourse beforehand. Secondly, the dialogue is as much external as it is within. This is critical for both Asia and Africa since both have immensely been informed and shaped, more particularly because of the colonial legacy, by the Western modernist discourse. The attempt to fall back on the indigenous is

genuine, indispensable and urgent. Indeed, nurturing the indigenous on a continental basis and having them exchanged and discoursed creates the possibility of overcoming the tyrannical power of modernity, including some of the demonic consequences of it.⁹ And thirdly, as part of the deterritorialized discourse, the dialogue cancels the notion of singularity. Instead, it is both multilayered and multiversed, in fact, it can very well be referred to as a *multilogue* to remove the duality suggested by the prefix 'di' in the word 'dialogue'. A spontaneous and passionate nurturing of this would not only challenge the conformity that has so far made little sense to the social realities in both the continents but also mainstream pluralities and multiplicities, the very essence of the age-old spirit of Afro-Asianism.

Conclusion: A Plea for an Alternative Indexation

The following two processes must be overcome for one to start even contemplating an alternative indexation. Firstly, the recognition sought from the Western indexing houses for the dissemination of books and journals of Asia and Africa must be reoriented. In fact, the latter ought to continue publishing qualitative materials so that the former keeps looking for them. A modest beginning in this respect ought to be for the scholars and researchers of Afro-Asia (and this evidently in deterritorialized sense) desist the temptation of publishing singularly in the West. There have indeed been instances where books and articles dealing with Asia and Africa have remained unknown within the respective continents for lack of accessibility as well as high cost. This kills the very purpose for which they have been written unless the goal was to enrich the author's curriculum vitae and ensure a job in the West! It may be worthwhile to point out that Gandhi had his *Hind Swaraj* first published in Gujarat and that again by a pretty unknown publisher, but the book did not fail to ignite the imagination of millions of people around the world.

Secondly, like the case of publishing books, there has been a constant 'journal drain' (that is, the good ones) from the non-West to the West. One good example would be the journal, *Alternatives*, which had its birth at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), Delhi, but is now published in the West, and more ironically now caters mainly to the scholars and researchers of Western academic institutions than of India or the non-West. In fact, the latter is now re-taught the wisdom of 'alternatives', paralleling very much the modernity that the scholars of CSDS wanted to overcome. Unless both these processes are effectively managed no amount of indexation would do justice to Afro-Asian scholarship.

The alternative indexation could be made more precise. This could be packaged in terms of four key features. Firstly, the non-hierarchical element is a critical prerequisite. This ought to be understood not only with respect to themes but also with respect to the authorship. In the traditional indexation when it comes to themes there is a two-pronged emphasis on the universals and empowered individuals. If the former consists of state power, rationality, national security, modernity, globalization and the like, the latter limits its reach mainly to the national and governmental elites. In the case of authorship, the hierarchy is more pronounced, often related to the attention given by the visual and print media. The introduction of non-hierarchy in the indexation is not to suggest doing away with themes and authorship. On the contrary, to be more comprehensive, aggressive, even radical, in the inclusion of themes and authorship.

Secondly, the alternative indexation must overcome the rigidity of disciplinary boundaries. Apart from making the indexation multi-disciplinary, there has to be more creative formulation of the latter so that the multiplicities and pluralities of life and living get an instant voice and a proper representation. On a technical note, much of this can be done by way of adding 'abstract' of the text to the indexing.

Thirdly, accessibility. This should be understood in the broadest possible terms, from the contents to the dissemination of the text. We have already identified some of the problems related to accessibility, many of which could be handled by prioritising accessibility and making funds available for it. But there is a need for a longer-term investment on this. Unless ownership of the books and journals are assured by housing them in an affordable location there will always be a case of inaccessibility or a rising cost connected to it. Public and private institutes, including Universities, of different countries could join resources to form regional libraries or documentation centres, with accessibility guaranteed to the members of those countries. Similarly, on matters related to Asia and Africa, a network of collaboration could be developed amongst academic and research institutes of these two continents under the rubric of 'Afro-Asian University' and scholarly resources could be housed accordingly. Any indexation on topics related to Africa or Afro-Asia would have the option of being promised by accessibility.

Finally, the question of intent. Apart from the noble intellectual exercise, the spirit of Africanism as embodied in the foundation of CODESRIA or the spirit of Afro-Asianism as nurtured by the ICP journal ought to come alive in the indexation. This would make the latter stand apart from

the mainstream indexation with the objective of putting knowledge into a just, almost counter-hegemonic, cause.

Notes

1. Cited in Colin Beavan, *Fingerprints: Murder and the Race to Uncover the Science of Identity* (London: Fourth Estate, 2002), p.40.
2. The Chinese and Japanese were the first to make use of fingerprints as signatures, and that again as early as 600 A.D. Interestingly, many critics claimed that Herschel probably got the idea from the practices in Calcutta's Chinatown, but Herschel always maintained that 'the fingerprint conception had come in a sudden flash of his own inspiration.' See, Colin Beavan, *Ibid.*, pp.42-43.
3. Francis Galton, 'Method of Indexing Finger Marks', *Nature*, June 11, 1891.
4. For all reference to Lori Lathrop, see, *Inkspot*, 2001. See also, <http://www.barbaravega.com/>.
5. See, Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International Publishers, 1971).
6. John Ralston Saul, *Voltaire's Bastards: The Dictatorship of Reason in the West* (London: Penguin Books, 1993), p. 142.
7. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Continuum [1972] 2004).
8. There seems to be a renewed interest in the Bandung Conference, now that it has reached 50 years. In fact, in May 2005 there is an international conference in Palo Alto, California on 'Bandung and Beyond: Rethinking Afro-Asian Connections during the Twentieth Century.' Ironically, this is being done in a location faraway from both the continents! However, there have been other initiatives on the above theme organized mainly by the members of Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organization. See, Daily News, Colombo, 4 September 2002. See also, Hasan Mujtaba, 'Afro-Asia in Pakistan: Historic, political and intellectual linkages between Africa & Pakistan', *Samar*, Volume 13, Winter/Spring 2000, and Laura Bier, 'Our Sisters in Struggle: Non-Alignment, Afro-Asian Solidarity and National Identity in the Egyptian Women's Press: 1952-1967', *Working Paper # 4*, International Centre for Advanced Studies, New York University, April 2002.
9. For a detailed exposition of this theme, see Imtiaz Ahmed, 'Futures Beyond Nationalism', *Futures: the journal of policy, planning and futures studies*, Elsevier Science, Exeter, UK, Volume 37, Number 9, November 2005.