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ABSTRACT
        This chapter addresses the role of action research in
projects that link literacy education and cultural action in
peripheral rural areas. These programs aim to improve the living
conditions of a population without destroying its cultural heritage
or way of life. Action research begins with three broad questions: In
what terms do local people pose questions of development, change,
preservation, and revitalization of their cultural heritage? By what
means other than individuals' linguistic competence or school
performance can literacy facts and issues be interpreted? Finally,
what plans have local individuals, groups, and communities formulated
to resist the destructuring of their community? Variables common to
literacy education and the cultural context include the
infrastructure of communication, the written culture, and social
organization and cultural policies (including education). Literacy
education should reflect diversity, complexity, and even conflicting
cultural backgrounds and should demonstrate how differing cultures
can connect, instead of enforcing linguistic unity as a means of
access to "normality." Action research in literacy education centers
on the quest for knowledge, action focused on social change, and
education focused on the development of new relationships. The
process of cultural action research is rooted in the community and is
only possible with the participation of persons who have practical
knowledge of the local culture. The outcome of this action research
is a common cultural capital, a process of collective cultural
development measured not by individuals' instrumental abilities but
by improvement in local living conditions and cultural preservation.
(LP)

Opening Reflections:
LITERACY IN RURAL AREAS — ORIENTATIONS FOR ACTION RESEARCH

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THREE INITIAL QUESTIONS

The theme of this study — literacy in rural areas — immediately suggests an assertion rather than a question. At least three types of arguments immediately militate in favour of educational intervention in rural areas.

The First Argument

The first is spontaneous, even reflexive: the association of rural areas with illiteracy, or its modern version, functional illiteracy, is still a widely-held cliché. *Homo rusticus* is seen as being by his very nature the opposite of *homo academicus*. From the point of view of the tourist or the poet or the ecologist, rural people must be preserved for their picturesqueness, their homely frankness, their simple common sense. But from the "progressive" standpoint, they are an anachronistic minority who need to be retrained. We are told that rural populations must "evolve". Static, burdensome (because heavily subsidized by the rest of society), they would gain in mobility and autonomy if they could be trained "up to standard" as they say in France. They would understand better why the local school and the local post office have to be closed, and the farms, and the co-ops. It seems that the battle against functional illiteracy must be won for the sake of modernity.

A Second Argument

A second argument takes the first further but reaches an analogous conclusion. Its style, however, is more technocratic. Its proponents start from the same premise, the crisis in rural life, but instead of accepting the negative consequences for local populations, as though the disappearance of their

communities were inevitable, they look for local and regional solutions. The politicians and the planners have changed their tune since rural residents started their protests, and since the appearance of a trend toward repopulation of small towns in many regions.

In Europe, reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) would tend to halt the exodus to the cities and lead to specialization of regional economic vocations.[1] One of the key buzzwords is "structural reconversion" of regional economies. This implies a change in outlook, skills and essential services, with retraining required for the entire active population. It would be selective retraining: vocational or professional for the few and reintegration, basic education or "functional literacy education" (to use the North American expression) for the many, to adapt them to new working conditions, new methods of territorial management, even (in some cases) new forms of social assistance.

The objective is no longer simply to teach rural people to read and write, or to improve an obsolete school background. Rather it is to teach them to adapt to plans for making unproductive land productive (at best) or if this is impossible at least the site of subsidized projects. The search for formulas tailored to fit training needs would constitute an acceptable project.

A Third Argument

The third argument is more technical: training in rural areas ought to be tailored to local needs, since we know from experience that monolithic, centralized programs work poorly in the country. Traditional educational services are often difficult of access, decentralization is expensive, qualified personnel are few and far between, "motivation" cannot be taken for granted, programs are not well adapted to local realities.

For marketers of training programs (and training is one of the rare growth sectors in this period of recession), experimenting with training strategies adapted to rural areas carries the promise of both improving supply and finding new ways to stimulate demand. So here again the argument is in favour of educational intervention in rural areas, even though the rural population itself seems to be a marginal concern. The expectation is that this intervention will be an opportunity to test new communication technologies, to observe distance education and independent learning in operation, to produce new training tools.[2] The out-of-date rural life is to be a stimulus to modernity, and vice versa!

These three complementary schools of thought, favourable to educational intervention in rural areas, have at least two things in common: they see rural life very much from the outside, as anomic, or at least problematical, and they have a prejudice in favour of training that amounts to blind faith in its magic ability to solve a wide range of critical, even desperate, problems.

Our Action Research Perspective

Our study of literacy and cultural action in rural areas will take an opposite approach to that of the three positions described above (which fail to conceal a patronizing, authoritarian attitude to rural residents). It will make a clear distinction between its approach and that of "anti-illiteracy campaigns" and training programs externally imposed (which exist primarily to serve the agencies and professionals that provide them). Three broad questions will orient our action research perspective:

1. In what terms do the local people themselves pose the questions of shortfall, development, cultural change, preservation and revitalization of cultural heritage (in the anthropological sense)? Are such questions asked at all? How large does regional "illiteracy" loom in the thinking of rural communities and residents?

    The important thing here is to construct an interpretation of the rural world that takes into account first and foremost its own reading of its own reality, that finds out what it knows, that accepts its word as legitimate, and above all that considers its plans as the shared goal of outside research and local action. If these conditions were met, a joint process of research and action can be constructed, without the parasitical intervention of a questionnaire and a questioner. This is the basis for the study's entirely positive attitude to the facts, questions and practices of "literacy" in rural areas. It will seek to determine in what terms and with what means communities communicate inside their immediate environment but also in a broader context. It will not measure literacy levels or estimate the extent of functional illiteracy in rural populations. Let us leave that to the social sciences and the merchandisers of teaching aids.

2. The second question is implicit in the first. It is heuristic. How are we to apprehend literacy facts and issues in rural areas if not in the specialized terms of individuals' linguistic competence or school performance results?

    The usual handling of literacy questions is normative: it reflects the ideological standards of the school or organization that defines them (a social service, a business, a vocational training program, a charitable organization, etc.). The aim of our study will be to situate literacy questions within a broader cultural environment, to phrase them as problems of communication and social organization rather than a social pathology. We will try to understand them in terms of their social and territorial context, their local history and their cultural/intercultural community. In short, their daily life.

    So the problems facing us are conceptual and methodological. A way must be found to enlarge the scope of the questions (to include cultural and sociocultural factors) without losing sight of their object (literacy) or undermining their ability to generate action (cultural action strategies).

3. The main question concerns action. What plans have local individuals, groups and communities formulated to resist the destructuring of their community? What cultural strategies have they implemented to try to recreate their accustomed environment? What changes in their interactions have they made to transform marginalization (which may be self-imposed), exile, subsistence and even death (or suicide) into new forms of co-operation, education, production, interaction? With what results?

    If we are not to lose sight of practical literacy strategies, we must avoid parcelling them out into self-sufficient activities, unrelated to the context where they appeared and the ends for which they were designed. Political, economic and social organization initiatives are not independent of the cultural dynamics that make them possible, legitimize them or reject them. In the same way, educational initiatives cannot be restricted to segmented training programs.

From a categorized vision of educational or cultural action we move on to a territorial vision, necessarily focused on the community and not the individual or the category. We must define the concept of "rural area" and of "literacy programs": two open, experimental realities that professionals, whether they belong to the community or not, cannot hope to construct by themselves. This is the aim of our study. Once its terms have been defined, we will go on to explain the "method", more appropriately referred to as the "action-research process".

LITERACY

The Meaning of "Literacy"

Usually what is meant by literacy education is the process of giving adults a basic education, which means that at a minimum, "literate" adults can read, write and count. Literacy is evaluated as an individual skill, corresponding to external criteria, generally based on school norms. In many countries the focus on this skill has given rise to universal basic education programs, which are generally unrelated to the sociocultural contexts in which they operate.

Literacy education is also identified as a socio-educational service designed for "problem" individuals or groups. Massive campaigns have been mounted to "fight illiteracy". At a time of growing marginalization of unemployment, illiteracy is the object of training policies designed to reintegrate people both socially and vocationally.

There are many other accepted meanings of this concept,[3] but most often it is defined as an educational intervention aimed at making up psycho-social shortcomings. We want to apprehend the facts of literacy differently. A terminological difficulty in French, which also exists in certain other languages, does create difficulties, however.

In French the word "illettrisme" [functional illiteracy] has been introduced to designate (and create) a fact of modern life in postindustrial areas more accurately than did the older term "analphabétisme" [illiteracy].[4] But there is no word in French that can be considered the positive counterpart in French for "illettrisme": "lettrisme" designates a particular literary school, and "lettré" used to mean someone erudite or cultivated but is now old-fashioned.

To convey the idea of familiarity with the written language and its usages, and more generally the means of communication in this postindustrial era, we have only the English term "literacy", which we translate into French as "alphabétisme". The English word has the advantage of more cultural connotations than the French (which is too narrowly concerned with language) and also of evoking a very abundant corpus of multidisciplinary knowledge, going far beyond the purely pedagogical. Based on a British tradition in the humanities, we model our understanding of the facts of literacy, exemplified by Jack Goody and Richard Hoggart in particular, to name just the best known.[5]

In short, literacy is everything to do with the written word. "Functional" literacy may be understood as the ability to cope solely with the reading and writing demanded in everyday situations or in certain specialized contexts, but it is an expression with so many meanings that in this study it will be avoided. In our computerized society, the concept of literacy must necessarily include the use of communication technologies, but it must also mean access to information and to the means of making use of it. These uses cannot be separated from the sociopolitical context of which they are a part.

Four Important Variables

What major variables are common to the complex facts of literacy education within their social environment? We will examine at least four in this study: the infrastructure of the means of communication, the written culture, the social organization and cultural policies (including education).

Every region has its own unique blend of means of communication that make up its infrastructural and technological environment: roads, telephone service, postal service, radio stations, television stations, newspapers, libraries, schools, cultural industries, theatres, resource centres, etc. Outlying rural areas are the least well equipped in means of communication. When these are present, are they used? What comes into the area? What form does communication take: unidirectional? consumption only? with feedback? How do messages circulate in the small town or village? using what medium? in what language? how often? Who is "out of the loop"?

It is definitely important to know the structures, intensities, directions and subjects of information exchange, the zones of silence, the broken networks, if we are to understand a territory's scope of literacy education, its potential for expression and information, its independence, its risk of isolation. For example, it is significant that the threat of closing a post office in a village can provoke a bigger and louder protest from the residents than the closure of a mine or a fish-processing plant. The establishment of a radio station in the minority language can be decisive in setting a linguistic minority, apparently threatened with assimilation, and on the road to literacy and social organization.[6]

Without adequate means of communication in rural areas, without schools, services or cultural industries, a rural population risks forced emigration or loss of literacy.[7] But a shortage of cultural infrastructures and facilities does not always have destabilizing consequences. Cut off from these resources a community may in fact stiffen its resistance and initiate its own cultural activities, sometimes underground if the context is one of prohibitions and repression: hedge school, clandestine printing press, "bush telegraph", etc.[8]

The need and desire for self-expression, information and human interchange via the written word refer to a written culture. Among individuals (some or all), this culture takes the form not only of technical skill in processing information but above all of a cultural *habitus*[9] of interaction with the written word. This

cultural *habitus* presupposes that the written word is recognized and looked on favourably by the user's society. It also presupposes a need to communicate at a distance in everyday life. Jack Goody would consider distance, as opposed to the immediacy of oral communication, the distinguishing characteristic of the *habitus* of written communication, since it opens the way to the systematic assembling, classifying, analysis and critical review, transformation and controlled transmission of information. In an outlying village the written culture and access to modern means of communication are supposed to open the local territory to the larger world, an essential condition for gaining access to the "supermarket" of goods and messages and for participating in its exchanges.

Is becoming literate (i.e. changing over to a written culture) enough to transform the networks by which information passes between the centre and the periphery? Does it enable the periphery to play an active role in those networks? Most important, does it transform deserted regions into populated, vital, attractive places? Surely not. The inevitable shift that literacy education entails, which is also a shift of subjectivity, presupposes the reversal of that once-powerful tendency (external but also internalized) to wipe clean the slate of oral culture (beliefs, habits, knowledge, heritage), as though a break with the past were the only way to achieve modernity or social mobility.

School and official one-size-fits-all literacy education have long been the vehicle of acculturation for children in rural areas and for minorities. Being unable to read and write has often equalled discreditation, humiliation and exclusion for communities that sought to preserve their cultural heritage and identity.[10]

This written culture, composed of a cultural *habitus* of interaction with the written word and the use of modern means of communication, can be a fact for a minority or for the majority. It fits within a social organization that may facilitate access to the written word or may on the contrary restrict it. It also has an economic value on a market that may be either limited or universal (academic culture, popular culture).

In every community there is a division of labour in which specialized communication roles are attributed to certain individuals and certain groups. The result is that not everyone needs to achieve the same level of skill in communicating. Equally, because of the uneven distribution of intellectual capacity, access to information may be well controlled, though initiation to the written culture often depends more on an individual's place in society than on intelligence or level of formal education.

This means that certain events that affect the social organization of a small town or village can be more decisive for cultural dynamism than the introduction of a literacy program. For example, the departure or arrival of professionals who can change the community's socioprofessional make-up; plans to construct a dam, which provoke widespread opposition, a new community organization, popular education initiatives; the arrival of a large group of outsiders, which

sparks questions of identity and rights and can change communication practices; the taking-root of a theatre company that bases its cultural action on local history and appeals to the local population to participate, and so on.

The last factor in local cultural development involves policy. At the national level, policies supporting local cultural initiatives, decentralization of cultural production and of research centres, enhancement (symbolic/economic) of regional heritage, assistance for local umbrella organizations, etc., can have a stimulating effect on local organizations and the development of sociocultural services and facilities.[11] In a context of liberalism and withdrawal of the central government from local management, local organizations will have no choice but to strengthen their communication, solidarity and co-operation networks to create powerful synergies and transform traditional decision-making methods. In the context of authoritarian regimes where cultural production and dissemination is limited to ideological education, existing local cultural facilities and organizations may be powerless to reach the local population.[12] According to César Birzea, the fall of the totalitarian Communist regimes can be attributed in part to their anomalous policy of literacy. Birzea states that the top priority now must be revitalization of social participation and the promotion of critical thought.[13]

WHAT ABOUT THE ECONOMY?

The state of the economy — local, national, international — will determine the overall context within which the variables listed above take effect. It is ineluctably a factor in the acquisition or loss of literacy, as has been observable over the most recent economic crisis bedeviling the industrialized nations. The increasing dichotomy between society's insiders and society's outcasts underlies policies on education and training, as has often been demonstrated. But an additional consequence of the general pauperization is that governments have cut investment in many areas of culture and education. In certain cases (and rural areas are often the first victims) they have eliminated altogether what used to be considered essential services: school buses, schools, post offices, cultural centres, libraries, etc.[14] This phenomenon has led people to describe many regional economies, and even entire national economies in the case of Eastern Europe, as being "assimilated into the Third World".

Quebec, for example, had at the start of the recession and the disquieting climb of unemployment, a new continuing education act guaranteeing to all adults free access to basic education programs in all regions. Several years later, although the economy had not recovered and the unemployment rose, the government tied these basic education services to guaranteed minimum income social benefits, making them virtually subject to a quota system.

Although an economic crisis favours growth in the training and education sector, it leads to cuts in other cultural services and facilities. This makes it

difficult to define the impact of the economy on the acquisition or loss of literacy among rural populations.

Hence the importance of local studies that explore factors affecting cultural development to find an explanation for the emergence of voluntary cultural actions and their ability to modify the communication practices of individuals within the community. Educational activities must also be situated within this broader context so that their territorial effects, if any, can be taken into account. In educational circles the tendency is quite the reverse: toward separating and isolating the microsystem's various components (program, pedagogy, teacher training, etc.) in order to explain the results, which are themselves defined on the basis of the system's own logic, its "sub-culture".

A Plurality of Codes

In current usage, "literacy education" means learning to decipher a code, and "literacy" means using the code. "Literacy" also includes the approved or forbidden ways in which the code is used, within a single — usually national — cultural corpus whose boundaries are defined by customs, rules and a whole network of cultural institutions. In national enquiries into adult literacy, the assumption is that literacy is part of a single-track progression of skills and can be measured by tests based on a collective, shared context.

The ideological assumption that the one context and one school is the same or appropriate for everybody, camouflages the reality of a strongly heterogeneous cultural environment, where there is a plurality not only of messages and communication strategies but also of codes themselves.

The whole thrust of this study is to pinpoint literacy education practices that reflect diversity, complexity, and even conflicting cultural background to show how bridges may be created between differing cultural entities instead of the enforcement of linguistic unity or presentation as a means of access to "normality".

There are situations where the written code and the oral code (or codes, in situations of bilingualism or multilingualism) bear no resemblance at all. Sometimes the oral code and the written code exist side by side; sometimes each rejects the other; sometimes they mix. Literacy education can be regarded as one possible way of linking the two codes, rather than representing a seamless passage from the oral to the written in the same language. For example, among the aboriginal peoples of Canada, literacy education can aim at transferring the second or third language learned by mandatory attendance at a French or English school into the oral vernacular once the children return to their home community.

But the processes of communication are more complex still. We do not use just two codes, the oral and the written. Visual signs, symbols of status or power, rituals, appeals to paralinguistic codes, all crop up in the messages we

transmit, and in any form of expression psychoanalysts strive to reconstruct hidden language, the unconscious (whether individual or collective), which one can learn to decode through analysis. **Literacy may be considered as the semiotic process of playing with the codes to deconstruct and reconstruct meanings and strategies of communication.** It is a game that is not reserved for specialists. In the pragmatic perspective of everyday communication, each participant learns a certain number of the rules of the game and applies them. Trying to modify the rules or introduce new ones is the objective of cultural intervention.

What we are looking for, then, is evidence of experiments in literacy education that allow for this plurality of codes and media in the facts of communication: the spoken word, of course, theatre, gesture, dance, music, combinations of these. We are interested in these codes and media not as art forms but as channels of communication and interchange in real and open sociocultural contexts, to open, transform and reconstruct.[15]

Ideological Plurality

We have referred to the plurality of media seeking this plurality in both the message and the meaning. If the meaning of a message can be decoded within the same linguistic context with the aid of dictionaries, then the message has a common meaning. There is then, a consensus of meaning based upon a common cultural background from which the individual inherits vocabulary, values, taboos and obligations, and ways of saying, listening and understanding. Literacy education (basic education) is also viewed as the imparting of these collective meanings, blended with the concept of identity or national cultural heritage.[16]

This common meaning is less a reflection of popular wisdom which would result in agreement by atavistic intuition than it is a reflection of a dominant ideology, strengthened by the legitimacy granted to it by the social groups that are its advocates and by the institutions which impart and give value to this ideology (among others national education institutions which more often than not control private education), the mass media and in some countries, the Church or the single governing party. In this kind of unitary system, or in one that has become unitary because of the minimization, integration and outright eradication of different/dissident/antagonistic cultural expressions, there is no other choice but to conform or to be excluded, to be welcomed or to remain/ become illiterate. This is the dual logic of the associative ideology of a common meaning.

Many rural literacy initiatives also tend to embrace these common meanings. They do so for the sake of the local community, source of a unitary territorial ideology; or for the sake of progress, or for the global village of planetary

communications in a universal market. These ideologies share external imposi-
tion of values and meanings and converge on the same emancipatory, mythical
destiny.

Our attention is focused on the search for traces of literacy initiatives which
fall somewhere between the ideological associations. We are looking for link-
ages between cultures and codes, for possible linkages to be explored between
languages, peoples, groups, territories, generations, knowledge and multiple
experiences. Territory, history, identity and local culture are, as we know, hybrid
or crossbreed forms, "chaotic stabilities" intersected by contradictory currents,
by fragments of history.[17]

In our research, we attempt to achieve intercultural contracts aimed at
temporarily restoring order to chaos, while staving off the re-emergence of the
unitary myth or the monopoly of one group.

A CRITICISM OF LITERACY EDUCATION

To conclude these orientations, it is useful to focus again on the critical
function. Awareness and political commitment to cultural action on the part of
those on the fringes remains an integral component of literacy education that
cannot easily be circumvented. The strong impetus given by Paulo Freire
remains current, even though as the end of the century approaches, we have
retreated somewhat from his revolutionary messianisms.

Functional literacy implies a minimum level of initiation, or initiation for
survival purposes, to the ordinary written communication process used in
everyday life. From a technical standpoint, it implies the mastery of a more or
less specialized code of communication. In a neutral, undemanding and well-
meaning way, functional literacy is the ability to manipulate several basic tools
in a familiar context with a view to "functioning at a minimum level".

For a foreigner who is excluded, outclassed or merely rural, making the
transition to a higher level of literacy is not an easy experience. Not everyone
can proceed through these doors, some of which may be closed. Some condi-
tions associated with the process are unacceptable: having to leave one's identity
at the door, or leaning to live elsewhere when what one really wants is to live in
one's own village. Some steps cannot be avoided, such as literacy courses for
eligibility to social welfare.

The ideology associated with literacy education is marked by generous
positivism coupled with redeeming progressivism. This ideology is regularly
embraced by economic liberalism in the quest for manpower training, for
mobility and autonomy in the management of computerized environments. It is
courted by public welfare services contending with the growing burden of
unemployed workers. It is also embraced by public and associative continuing
education networks which need to hold on to their markets.

This ideology is regularly shaken by alarmist reports on the rise of illiteracy,

with the negative consequences this implies in terms of culture and national
language, health, morality and public safety (a characteristically North Ameri-
can problem). It is still embraced by government organizations seeking to
"optimize" communications with the public through an "easy language" and by
private enterprises wishing to market their services more effectively and reduce
their losses.

All of which proves just how diverse and divergent the aims of literacy
education actually are. There appears to be a consensus of public opinion on the
extent of illiteracy and its dangers, on the need for literacy programs and on the
urgent need to ensure minimum literacy training for everyone. We have moved
rapidly from proclamations of universal literacy entitelement to the recognition
of the need for illiteracy eradication and universal literacy training.

This explains our reluctance to associate ourselves with mass communication
mechanisms and our desire to focus on independent actions, on the goals
identified by local communities. This also explains our global view of local
cultural action, quite different from sectoral training activities that target
specific groups quite aside from local/regional cultures.

ACTION RESEARCH

We view our research activities involving literacy education as an integral
part of the literacy and cultural action process, and as continuing education
initiatives. This series of activities and initiatives in which a great many
individuals and agencies are involved can be grouped into three categories:
research focused on the quest for knowledge; action focused on social change;
and education focused on an initiation to new relationships. These functions are
not separate, but rather complementary and integrated.

This is the reason why we speak of literacy education strategies, rather than
of methodology as is done in scientific field. We speak of taking a realistic,
pragmatic approach to action research where the goal, as on the battlefield, is to
win. We must reflect upon and organize cultural action by working with those
involved in the field and by considering all of the parameters, relying on science
as policy, on intuition and on art. The strategies must be reinvented and revised
for each context. The approach to the game is never the same, unlike medieval
tournaments where strict rules were the order of the day, or the traditional
education context which consists of controlling the largest possible number of
parameters in order to apply a method with little variation.

In terms of local action, research becomes another means of communication
and feedback through writings, seminars, publications and distance interac-
tions. Research involves examining, explaining and comparing local prac-
tices, informing others about them and forging a network of exchanges and
solidarity. The aim is to impart to those outside this network the knowledge,
experiences, projects and claims which seem to lack legitimacy and therefore

which obviously includes the need for popular education initiatives. Issues such as rediscovering, expressing, creating and sharing **identities** are fundamental to organizations which provide or facilitate cultural initiatives in rural areas.

The concept of **peripheral societies** (instead of rural environments) was also discussed during this conference. This concept provides a global perspective to rural issues and their connection with the centres (decision-making, production, distribution, attraction...), just as communications and exchanges are also largely associated with literacy education issues.

The advantage of assuming a peripheral position in a geographic, economic, sociopolitical, demographic and cultural perspective is that it furthers our understanding of the rural environment above all as part of a system of relationships or linkages. It also helps to prevent blind adherence to no less important notions of **locality, territory and identity**. The latter are relative, subjective notions, moving cultural realities and ideological forms, differences, subjective notions, moving cultural realities and ideological forms, rather than essential entities that have merged together.

Our understanding of literacy issues in a rural environment is closely linked to the concept of peripheral societies. Rural communities are situated on the fringes of communication processes. They face the threat of exclusion. Very little, if anything, is invested in these rural communities. Communities which not long ago were self-sufficient have become dependent societies, even in matters of religion: churches that have been closed down, televised mass, religious holidays celebrated in the cities instead of in the villages, messianic cults operating by way of disinformation and the withholding of literacy... (it would be useful to assemble monographs on these types of cultural actions which seal the disastrous fate of numerous rural communities).

However, some rural populations have resisted dependency by reinforcing local and regional organizations, utilizing grants for investment purposes and by establishing voluntary policies respecting industrial redeployment, cultural or tourist attractions, etc. Associations set out on a mission to reintegrate and develop rural populations,[23] sometimes working in co-operation with government and the private sector. A great many cultural initiatives are aimed at establishing new exchange networks with the peripheral societies and setting up small cultural production enterprises. One important movement, operating under the ecological banner, is helping to recreate viable, even attractive spaces in areas which not long ago were condemned. An accurate description of this phenomenon is provided in the following excerpt of a paper published not long after the États généraux du monde rural.

> Underlying the coalition and solidarity movement in rural areas in the slow emergence of an innovative spirit with which to counter the forces of marginalization, exclusion and extinction.
> After being deserted for more than a century as industrialization and urbanization took hold, the rural environment is being called upon to play the role of host to the development of a post-industrial, even post-economic society.[25]

The geopolitical aspect of this issue still needs to be examined in order to distinguish more clearly between the peripheral regions. We will attempt to do just this in the following pages.

Why the Rural Areas

Our initial motivation is heuristic. We wanted to examine literacy education within a social context and within a physical/technical environment (this refers to Marx's mode of capitalistic production: the relationship of the technical means of production to the society) according to the concept (borrowed from J. Goody[5]) of communication relations. The rural environment appears to lend itself well to such an approach. Hypothetically, factors such as distance, isolation and lack of equipment are critical; states of crisis and radical social change also justified the interest shown in cultural and educational actions, since the latter were supposed to better represent current history and invent, at least in the mind and in words, collective solutions to these states of anomia.

The rural environment seemed particularly well suited for studying community literacy strategies, using a global or holistic or integrated local development approach. The village, the parish and the local community have relatively independent histories that justify a priori taking a global approach to the local territory. The goal was to discover the local territory through experimentation with new linkages and through the expression of new messages or suggestion of new ways of living life at this rural level, with more autonomy and greater participation and effectiveness.

Our second motivation was to discover the possible utopian dimension to the rural environment. Cultural action, literacy and popular education programs must, if they are to break new ground[26] and blend the old with the new, move from the realm of reality to that of desire, if only to represent more dramatically the desolation felt by many moribund populations.[27] They must seek out with renewed vigour, an all-encompassing alternative to isolation, to programmed waste, to despair and to anthropocentric nihilism as well as to nostalgic ways of restoring original values and glory.[28]

The rural environment can offer better living conditions, housing and creative work for the post-modern era, given its isolation from the periphery of major movements and the general hubbub. To do this, the rural environment must be recreated. It is not enough to pretend to resuscitate them. Old identities will have to come to terms with ideas, issues and newly arrived people in order to invent new territories, ones that are far more fluid and adaptable than the old ones that died off because they were closed to the outside world.

This undertaking will involve radical changes to the old order, to foundations, to social organizations, and to power structures. Above all, it will involve a mental metamorphosis (which will be accomplished with the help of technologies, of course, and which will generate a new pedagogy). These changes can be perceived as literacy education action which today we identify with local cultural/intercultural action. This vision of literacy education is not

are not well communicated.

The act of writing about experiences is preferably carried out by the person or community involved. The research function is situated within the general timeframe of cultural action. If an outsider takes on the task of analyzing, evaluating and serving as a historiographer, he or she will have to be receptive to the participation of the community and of other actors.

Dialogue, not scientific isolation or "safe" education, is critical to building knowledge that can be reinvested into daily action by local practitioners. It involves experimental know-how, clarifying, evaluating, criticizing and fine-tuning it, in keeping with a process of a democratic exchange of ideas. By popular education, we mean the "maieutic" (the teasing out of ideas through questions and reflection) practice of engaging in discourse. The role of the "midwife" philosopher is not assigned to a sage or outside expert, it is shared and developed by the community.

What is sought is not recognized ability and strict adherence to a code of ethics associated with a discipline and a professional association, but rather a range of disciplines, writings, positions and experiences. That which partners have in common are the problems experienced within the same community and within similar regions, and the search for solutions through effective strategies for action.

We have said that this process of cultural action research is rooted in the communities and is based on voluntary association. We have also said that research is possible only with the participation of persons who have some practical knowledge of the local cultural action. Continuing education must rely on action taken in response to specific situations and on dialogue between the various partners who are seeking a solution to common problems. The outcome of this effort is a common "cultural capital" which can be called "literacy education", a process of collective cultural development where the important things are not measured according to each individual's instrumental ability, but rather according to their participation in the process and the results obtained: an improvement in local living conditions.

This then is the primary objective of action research initiatives conducted on an international scale with a view to strengthening solidarity networks, universalizing investigations, searches and resulting in local victories.

THE RURAL CONCEPT

To conclude this paper on the directions and focus of this research process, we would like to define what is meant by "rural" and why we wish to concentrate on the rural environment. To start with, we can adopt a socio-cultural understanding of the 'rurality' as it is currently defined, for example, by Bruno in Quebec. Instead of defining the rural world negatively by what it lacks in comparison to the urban world, Bruno provides a positive view: "the rural space as a particular

use of space and social life..." And further:

"More than a distinct bio-physical environment, the contemporary rurality presents three specific attributes. First, a human, ecological, cultural and historical patrimony of high value, which is also a certain way of life. Second, an intimate knowledge of the land, the territory, which creates an identity. Lastly, a strong community spirit or solidarity which builds a society of mutual knowledge."[19]

UNDERSTANDING THE MEANING OF "RURAL"

The rural environment is often perceived as a series of bucolic images set against a backdrop of economic crisis, conservation projects and ecological disasters, an idyllic place to take a vacation in contrast to the urban environment. The image is also one of regional cultures and languages threatened by the culture of the masses, by the aging of the population, or by a cultural drain". The old cliché of the illiterate, rural peasant invariably springs to mind.

In my research on earlier literacy education initiatives in rural areas,[20] I discovered almost invariably that these peripheral areas presented many problems when it came to implementing literacy programs.

On the one hand, research showed that the population was generally under-educated and read very little (with the exception of regional or local newspapers.[21] On the other hand, expanding cultural and continuing education services in rural areas was found to be a difficult and costly process. The rural environment was often described as a barrier to the extension of basic education services. Consequently, it was also an environment in which services better geared to local needs could be tested. The goal, however, remained the provision of educational programs. And in order to import specialized services, the application methods or mechanisms had to be developed at the local level.

My next encounter with the issue of literacy education in rural areas was my participation in an international conference on this subject.[22] The main conclusions drawn from this conference included that literacy education and the rural environment had become separate entities, and a so-called global approach to various local issues helped to recreate a kind of unity in rural development actions. Moreover, literacy education and the rural environment had joined together once again (at least ideologically) in the will to launch a rural, quasi-corporate rural literacy movement, with technologies forming part of the overall package.

This conference enriched my understanding of the rural environment by introducing me to concepts such as multi and intercultural, local community-based development and an holistic approach to literary issues dissociated from educational systems. It confirmed the need to set aside any kind of sectarian or corporate vision of literacy education and to focus on local development (or the resistance to under-development) in terms of **cultural/intercultural action,**[2]

"functional", but necessarily creative.

A third reason for the search for alternate but current literacy education practices in rural areas, is of a moral nature. Once we would have called it "progressive", or "socialist" or even political. Now, we speak of technological and cultural literacy education geared to national heritage. Or we speak of remedial education, of qualifying training, of standardization, of minority integration, etc. This is the discourse of public agencies and of promoters of massive literacy campaigns.

> Of all living creatures, is there anything so dangerous today, as an example of his peers and to the whole world, than the arrogant adult male who has, as they say, succeeded in the competitive world? We sometimes catch a glimpse of this terrifying creature, briefcase in hand, in airports.
>
> Michelle Serres[29]

We have chosen peripheral areas as the focus of our action research because they are perceived as "obstacles" to cultural standardization, because they present "alarming rate of illiteracy" and unemployment, because at times, the majority of people residing in these areas rely permanently on social assistance, because increasingly they attract similar people excluded from the cities as a result of irreversible "structural mutations", as well as similar people from the South, who not so long ago were for the most part rural people.

> Clearly, the most philosophically essential, if not urgent, questions are as follows: which language do the most disadvantaged speak? How will the weakest escape certain death?
>
> When I speak of weakest, I am also referring to intellectual weakness. How is it that in this era when science has triumphed, technology prevails and truths are widely proclaimed by the media, education has been allowed to decline to such an extent, that cultures have collapsed and ignorance and illiteracy have been allowed to flourish?
>
> Once again, we are left to deal with pain and sorrow on a broad scale..."
>
> Michel Serres[29]

The search for solutions to the most important questions falls to the peripheries, the gathering point for hybrid researchers on a quest to find an "environment" that no longer exists, one which they will necessarily have to invent using their different languages and broad knowledge. That is what we hope to achieve through action research in the Third World of northern countries. Changes will only occur under the banner of resistance, solidarity, imagination and creativity.

Notes & References

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8.   Birzea, César, "Literacy and Development in Eastern European Countries: the Case of Romania", International Conference: Attaining Functional Literacy, Tilburg University, October 10-12, 1991.

9.   Bourdieu, Pierre. Ce que parler veut dire, Paris Fayard, 1982.

10. Wagner, Serge. Analphabétisme de minorité et alphabétisation d'affirmation nationale, Ministry of Education, Toronto, 1990.

11   Bihr, Alain. "Le mirage des politiques de développement local"; Carraud, Michel. "Décentralisation du pouvoir sans contrôle des citoyens"; Le Monde diplomatique, November 1992.

12. CIRAT, "Chartre pour un projet associatif", Alpha 92, op. cit.

13. Birzea, César, op. cit. See also: Kunst-Gnamus, Olga. "Literacy at the Threshold of the 21st Century", Literacy and Basic Education on the Eve of the 21st Century, Council of Europe, Strasbourg, 1992.

14. In the United States, some bankrupt rural municipalies are obliged to stop transporting children to school by bus for several months a year. In Quebec, the residents of the village of Saint-Clément in the Lower Saint Lawrence region fought off the closure of their post office for 60 days, until an injunction forced them to stop their demonstrations.

15. A member of an intercultural theatre group described the experience this way: "Now I can talk, I can hold a conversation. Before I used to go off in all directions, now I'm in control, I can stand back... Apart from being part of the working world again, I regained my dignity, because I was doing something without failing, I moved beyond the initial misery and agitated rebellion." Bellet, Alain. "La riposte des exclus", Le Monde diplomatique, December 1991.

16. Ferdman. Bernardo. "Literacy and cultural identity", Harvard Educational Review, Vol. 60, no. 2, 1980.

17. Serres, Michel. Eclaircissements - Entretiens avec Bruno Latour, Paris, François Bourin, 1992.

18   The Future of Literacy and the Literacy of the Future, Report of the Seminar on Adult Literacy in Industrialized Countries. UNESCO Institute for Education, Hamburg, 4-7 December 1991 (UIE Reports, no. 9, 1992)

19. Bruno, Jean. Déclin ou renaissance. l'agriculture et la ruralite au Canada a la croises des chemins, Federation canadienne de l'agriculture, Ottawa, 1994. (a free and shortened translation by Jean-Paul Hautecoeur)

20. In particular, several British experiments have been the focus of ALBSU reports, namely: Mendip project, Dorset Adult Literacy and Numeracy Scheme, Adult Education in Powys, Somerset Report. For example, here is the conclusion of the Powys report: "The provision of an effective basic education service to adults in rural areas present[s] considerable difficulties and the experience of the special development project in Powys would suggest that there is no one method to overcome the difficulties. However, by a considerable investment of time and resources; adopting a variety of approaches; establishing personal contracts [sic] and developing an accessible support system, it is possible to provide an effective provision" (p. 40), Adult Basic Education in Powys, ALBSU, Kingsbourne House, 229-231, High Holborn, London WC1C7DA, U.K. 1985.

21   Les pratiques culturelles individuelles et collectives en milieu rural, Fédération nationale des associations familiales rurales, Paris, 1989;

     Pompougnac, Jean-Claude. La lecture en milieu rural, Bibliothèque publique d'information,

Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 1992.

22. *Literacy in Rural Communities* — proceedings of the international conference held in Ottawa, May 10-13, 1991. Alpha-Consultants, Toronto, 1992.

23. "Awareness of the cultural dimension becomes a determining component of rural integration and development policies... Rural local missions participate in this general movement in various ways: by giving a voice to people in trouble, by providing support to local radio stations or to the written press, or by organizing formal consultation initiatives with young people." *Solidarité et développement rural*, Union nationale des missions locales rurales, 71 rue Saint-Dominique, 75007 Paris, France, 1991.

24. For example, the Fédération nationale des foyers ruraux de France, Caritas in Spain, Solidarité rurale in Québec, etc.

25. Vachon, Bernard. *Le Québec rural dans tous ses états*, under the direction of B. Vachon, Boréal, Montréal, 1991 (Introduction, p. 14).

26. In France, the Fédédation des foyers ruraux du Vaucluse, working in co-operation with children of immigrants living in several villages, produced a play on the theme of crossing borders: *Passages-Suds en Luberon*, Fédération des foyers ruraux du Vaucluse, BP 15, 84141, Mont Favet, Cedex, France, 1992.

27. Perrier, Olivier. This dramatic author and popular theatre producer in a small village in central France described his work in Hérisson in the following words: "If we want to think about Hérisson's future, we should consider opening a national cemetery here, because we have the space for it. We would build a nice romantic cemetery, easily accessible from the highway, better even than Père Lachaise! Moreover, it would mean work for all the unemployed people in the area. Work building coffins, doing maintenance... We could even develop the aesthetic quality of death. The only business currently making a go of it in Hérisson is the hospice... What we need to do is consider the best possible way of experiencing grief and making it our purpose in life". Scène de deuil — Conversation with Olivier Perrier, *Le Monde des débats*, November 1992.

28. Felix Gattari calls this kind of research "ecosophy". "*Danger does have the power to genuinely fascinate... Above all, the emphasis should be on rediscovering collective co-operation with a view to developing innovative practices. If we do not change our way of thinking and enter a postmedia era, there will be no durable effect on the environment. However, if we do not change the material and social environment, there will be no change in our way of thinking. We are faced with a circular argument, which brings us to postulate the need for "ecosophy", an approach that blends environmental ecology with social ecology and mental ecology.*" "Pour une refondation des pratiques sociales", *Le Monde diplomatique*, October 1992.

29. Serres, Michel. *Éclaircissements*, op. cit., (p. 273).