MINDSHIFT 1 Remember 'paradigm shifts'? Don't groan!

THE BACK STORY

Some 40 years ago, I had just entered my graduate school programme in developmental anthropology. (Now– quickly forget that you just heard me say that). At that point, the world of development theory was still abuzz about a slim volume of work that had been contributed to the social sciences by an interloper from the scientific community. Thomas Kuhn may not be a name that strikes a chord of recognition, but his treatise on The Structure of Scientific Revolution would completely transform our understanding of how change occurs and go on to become one of the most subtly influential books of the century.

Before Kuhn, the accepted wisdom was that humanity was simply on a long march to acquiring a greater understanding of how the world around us worked. As each new insight or scientific discovery materialised, it was logical that we would simply apply that new knowledge to solving whatever quality of life issues the world might be currently grappling with. The assumption is that life for the human race would simply get better and better.

At some level there might be an argument for that point. But a slightly more problematic aspect of this thinking was that it had a decided bias. Those who had the most advanced technology or research record were best positioned to dictate the terms of how the development process should manifest itself elsewhere. The bias was clearly towards a Western, developed market world view.

Where Kuhn shifted our thinking was in recognising that the 'structure of scientific revolution' did not actually reflect this neat linear relationship between acquisition of new insights and their broader acceptance by the academic or practitioner world.

Instead, acceptance of new ideas appeared to be lumpy and decidedly lagged. One of Kuhn's more contentious suggestions was that the so-called quest for new solutions to the complex issues that society faced tended to be **more focused on bolstering our initial conclusions or recommendations than they were on questioning whether our initial assumptions were still valid.**

As Kuhn described the process, the status quo or conventional wisdom would hold sway until the bubble of anomalies produced by that line of thinking could no longer be contained. Only then would the questioning of conventional wisdom gain traction. Only then would we begin to see (to use Kuhn's overwrought terminology) a 'paradigm shift'.

While Kuhn's focus was on scientific thought, it actually challenged entrenched (Western) philosophical assumptions about how science, society and the evolution of less developed economies would and should work. Consider the degree to which assumptions about the building blocks of exponential economic growth that have held sway for nearly 50 years are now being challenged.

Can we still argue that a free market economy, capitalism without government interference, a democratic political system and an economic policy that is underpinned by supporting low-skill, low-cost manufacturing, all constitute the best avenue for success?

Currently, each one of those assumptions is coming under scrutiny – particularly in reference to African development. The question is – **does this mean we now require a new paradigm shift?**

In some sense we are already seeing it. Instead of relying on economic or developmental theory to guide us on these crucial decisions, academics like Thomas Piketty and the latest winners of the Nobel Prize in Economics, Abhijit Banerjee, Esther Duflo and Michael Kremer have suggested that better decisions can be made with analysing data.

But what really goaded the scientific world most, though, was Kuhn's suggestion that competing paradigms are really 'incommensurable'. In plain English that simply meant that there was no objective way to measure the relative merits of one framework for solving a problem against another. That means that even the recent interest in shifting towards more evidence-based solutions may be a long way off given the quality of data problems that beset Africa.

This effectively unmasked the reality that scientific revolutions – and by extension, revolutions in our thinking about the best economic, social, judicial, political, philosophical or religious model – are less about divining great new rational insights and more about understanding what could almost be termed as the current 'mob psychology'.[1] Through one brilliant tract, Kuhn managed to put scientific thought, economic and political thought, concepts of justice and fairness and godliness all on the same slippery slope of 'it's all relative to our interpretive lens'.

The implication here is that our real focus of attention should be on the social and psychological investments that a community of thinkers would have in their current 'accepted wisdom'.

How important would maintaining the status quo be to them, both from an economic and from a psycho-social perspective?

This may seem patently obvious to us now – although we've presented here a gross oversimplification of what were a set of particularly complex ideas. But at the time, the shift in focus was absolutely fundamental to allowing us to expand our thinking about the so-called developmental absolutes.

For a developmental anthropologist like myself, this was exactly the kind of revelation that allowed one to break through the straightjacket of assumptions that there existed somewhere an absolute truth about how societies should evolve. On the contrary, it suggested that change was more about a psychological realignment of our beliefs about how things could function better. For Kuhn, that meant that the real focus should be placed on **how to get 'communities' of stakeholders (in Kuhn's case, scientists) to buy into the new paradigm.**

Paradigm shifts in thinking have less to do with new breakthroughs in knowledge and understanding and more to do with getting clusters of thinkers to break with the status quo.

[1] Naughton, J. Thomas Kuhn: the man who changed the way the world looked at science. *Manchester Guardian*, 19 August 2012 (online).

NEXT ARTICLE