

CREATING A WORLD SYSTEM CONDUCTIVE TO THE FLOURISHING OF CULTURE AND SPIRITUALITY

Culture is the philosophy or cultivation of the soul
Cicero

One of the most fascinating things about the world we are living in is that many of the most powerful activities in the world are thousands of years old. This is certainly true for religion, philosophy, politics, and the arts. But it is also true for economics and culture.

Interestingly, the origins of both economics and culture can be traced back to classical times. Whereas economics was deemed to be “household management” by the Greeks, culture was deemed to be “cultivation” by the Romans.

Both activities have changed considerably since that time. However, they still retain vestiges of their original meanings. Economics is still concerned with management, although this means management of municipal, regional, and national economies and the global economy rather than household management today. Culture also retains some of its original meaning, especially cultivation of all the diverse cultures and civilizations of the world and the dynamic processes that are required to achieve this.

Over the course of my life, I have had the good fortune to get deeply immersed in economics and culture. This has helped me in myriad ways, especially given the importance of economics and culture for the world of the present and the future. This is particularly true with respect to how economics and culture function, as well as why they are such powerful forces in the world.

When I was young, I studied economics and then taught economics for a number of years. While I have always maintained a keen interest in economics, I entered the cultural field more than fifty years ago and am still working in this field today.

One of the things that attracted me to economics was my belief that economics could change the world and change it for the better. In many ways, it has done this. Not only has it improved living standards and the quality of life for billions of people throughout the world since Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* was published in 1776 to usher in the present economic age, but also it continues to make countless contributions to the state and functioning of the world today.

While there is still a great deal to be accomplished in this area - particularly

with respect to eliminating poverty, improving living standards and the quality of life for billions more people throughout the world, fostering more equitable distributions of income and wealth, and reducing the demands we are making on the natural environment - there is no doubt that economics has made a phenomenal contribution to the world and people and countries in all parts of the world over the last few centuries.

In order to achieve this, two developments were imperative. The first was to make economics the centrepiece of society and principal preoccupation of municipal, regional, national, and international development. The second was to create a world system that situated everything in an economic context and provided an economic justification for it. Starting in the western world and then fanning out to encompass the entire world, this system has evolved progressively over the last two and a half centuries in theoretical and practical terms to the point where it is the most powerful force in the world today. There is no other activity or force in the world that can compare with it.

The basic contours and mode of operation of this system are well known. In order to function effectively, people must produce and consume as much as possible, corporations must maximize their profits and compete as vigorously as possible, governments must perform an economic function in society, countries must increase their rate of economic growth as quickly as possible, and the natural environment must provide the resources that are necessary to keep the system operating at peak efficiency and effectiveness.

Elaborate forms of measurement have been devised over the last fifty years to ensure that these goals and objectives are met. Particularly important in this regard are such indicators as gross national product and net national product, disposable income, income per capita, and the level and rate of economic growth. While other indicators have been developed more recently to assess specific aspects of the world system, such as the level of education and health care, the highest priority by far is placed on consumption, investment, economic growth, materialism, and the marketplace. As long as these requirements are expanding and the marketplace is performing its functions effectively, the goals and objectives of the present world system are being realized and maintained.

While this is well understood in all parts of the world today, what is not well understood is just how deeply and totally people, institutions, governments, and countries are immersed in the present world system and how incredibly powerful and pervasive it is. Not only are the vast majority of people, institutions, governments, and countries utterly dependent on this system, but also it determines everything in life, from values, lifestyles, and individual and group behaviour to ways of life and virtually everything else. So powerful and pervasive has the prevailing world system

become that it is the axiom of the age. It is to people and the world what water is to fish. It so completely envelopes everybody and everything that it is taken for granted and ignored.

What makes this system so powerful is the fact that it is a *system*. There is a place, *raison d'être*, and mode of operations for everything. Karl Marx found out how powerful *systems* can be - and how deeply and completely people and countries can get entrenched in them - when he set out to change the capitalist system in the late nineteenth century. While he was successful in changing certain aspects of this system - largely through the profundity of his ideas and the power of his rhetoric - this was only possible for certain aspects of the capitalist system and only for a limited period of time. It is a well-known fact in the world that the capitalist system prevailed over the communist system, much as the present world system prevails today.

Nevertheless, there is mounting evidence in all parts of the world that the present world system may not be viable for much longer because the costs, consequences, and dangers are too great. This is especially true for the impact this system is having on the natural environment, climate change, the world's scarce resources, and people's lives. As this happens, there is an active search for a viable alternative to the present world system and especially the costs, shortcomings, and disadvantages associated with it.

Signs of this are everywhere. More and more people are looking for modes of behaviour and ways of life that are not dominated by economics, materialism, and the marketplace. This is manifesting itself in many different types of developments and movements. For some, it is the search for spirituality in life. For others, it is the quest to establish a "new world order." And for still others, it is the desire to "return to nature," or live happier, healthier, and more fulfilling lives. What makes these developments and movements so important is how many there are, and how many people are involved in them.

Activities like tai chi, qi gong, yoga, and meditation have become extremely popular in recent years because many people are searching for ways to get relief from the stresses and strains of modern life, turn off their minds, heal their bodies, and learn to relax. To this must be added the rapidly escalating interest in what spiritual leaders have to say about these matters, especially leaders like the Dalai Lama, Pope Francis, Eckard Tolle, Oprah Winfrey, Deepak Chopra, Louise L. Hay, Paulo Coelho, Sri Sri Ravi Shanker, and many others. New religions and religious groups have also been springing up around the world, such as the Falan Gong in China and new evangelist sects in the United States. Moreover, more and more people are getting involved in the environmental movement and expressing concern about the state of nature, the way other species are treated, and prospects for the future.

What lies at the heart of many of these developments and movements and drives them is the need to achieve a more effective balance between the material and non-material dimensions in life, reduce the huge ecological footprint we are making on the natural environment, and achieve more happiness, fulfillment, and meaning in life.

While all these developments are valuable and timely, the problem is that most people, institutions, countries, governments, and so forth are so caught up in the present world system that their aspirations and desires in this area can only be attended to on a part-time and piecemeal basis. This is because their individual and collective behaviour, values, and ways of life are still determined by the present world system.

This is why it is so essential to create a *new* world system in the future. As long as the present world system exists and reigns supreme, these problems will not be solved and people's hopes, dreams, aspirations, and needs will only be attended to on a partial and periodic basis. As a result, it is necessary to create a new world system that flows from different foundations, principles, practices, behaviours, and values than the ones that govern the vast majority of people and countries in the world today.

Where do we commence the search for the clues, insights, and ideas that are needed to create this new world system? While many options are available, culture possesses more than its fair share of possibilities. This is because culture possesses the breath of vision and depth of understanding that is necessary to shed light on the way forward in the new millennium.

This is important because it is not possible to wipe the slate clean and start again. In consequence, the only way a new world system can be created is to build on what is already there. This can only be realized through *transformation* and *transcendence*: transformation of the present world system into something else; and transcendence above and beyond what already exists.

Although culture possesses the potential to achieve this, we must be very careful about the way "culture" is used in this context. This is because there is an enormous amount of confusion and controversy throughout the world today over the nature and meaning of culture. Just how difficult this problem is was revealed more than half a century ago when two very distinguished American anthropologists, Alfred Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn, set out to clarify the meaning of the evocative but elusive term culture. What they discovered was that there were more than a hundred and fifty concepts and definitions of culture in use throughout the world, which they documented fully in their book *Culture - A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*.(1) While many of these concepts and definitions turned out to be

variations on a far smaller number of basic themes, this still poses a very difficult problem. This is likely why Raymond Williams, one of Britain's leading cultural scholars, said that culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language to pin down and define. And what is true for the English language is probably true for most other languages in the world as well.

While all the different concepts and definitions of culture are helpful in explaining the nature and character of the world we are living in today, the word culture will be used here in its all-encompassing holistic sense to mean "*the complex whole*" or the "*total way of life of people.*" This is consistent with the way Sir Edward Burnett Tylor, the renowned British anthropologist, defined culture formally for the first time in history in the late nineteenth century when he said culture is "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." (2) Visualized and defined in this way, culture is "a dynamic and organic whole" that is concerned with the entire way people "visualize and interpret the world, organize themselves, conduct their affairs, elevate and enrich life, and position themselves in the world." (3)

One of the great advantages of this comprehensive definition of culture is that it makes it possible to see the big picture and visualize things in holistic rather than partial or specialized terms. It does so by focusing attention on the whole, as well as the relationships that exist - or do not exist - between the component parts of the whole.

This is essential not only for theoretical and practical reasons. It is also essential because it is consistent with many key developments that have taken place in the world over the last few decades. One of these developments was the declaration by the United Nations and UNESCO that the period from 1988 to 1997 would be officially designated the World Decade for Cultural Development. A far more recent development, but a particularly noteworthy one, was the decision by Merriam-Webster, the dictionary people, to make "culture" its "*Word of the Year*" for 2014. This was due to the dramatic increase in the use of the word culture in public and private discourse over the last few years. It results from the fact that culture explains many things about the world that can't be explained in any other way or with the use of any other term, as well as a growing realization throughout the world that many of the globe's most difficult, demanding, and debilitating problems can only be addressed through the many diverse capabilities of culture.

When the world system is viewed from a cultural rather than economic perspective, things change and change dramatically. This is particularly true for our understanding of the meaning of "the whole." The whole is no longer deemed to be economics, as it is in the prevailing world system. Rather, it is deemed to be culture, which provides the foundation for the world system of the future. Not only is this

consistent with the definition of culture proposed by Tylor and embraced by countless other anthropologists and cultural scholars, but also it is consistent with Ruth Benedict's belief that "the whole determines its parts, not only their relation but their very nature."⁽⁴⁾ In other words, if we change the whole, everything else changes. Change the context and we change the contents.

When culture is seen and dealt with as the whole, it is no longer part of economics, which is the case for most people, institutions, and countries today. Rather, economics is part of culture. This is because economic is a part - albeit an extremely important part - of something much larger as well as more fundamental and profound.

Viewed from a cultural perspective, the focus in the world system would no longer be on production, consumption, materialism, the marketplace, and economic growth, important as these are and will always be. On the contrary, it is on people, caring, sharing, cooperation, and achieving balanced and harmonious relationships between the component parts of the world system and the world system as a whole. This is especially important with respect to such fundamental relationships as the relationship between materialism and spiritualism, consumption and conservation, the arts and the sciences, men and women, rich and poor, and especially human beings and the natural environment.

The point of departure for this final and most essential relationship lies in recognizing and accepting the fact that the word culture derives from the Latin verb "*colo*" meaning to plant, grow, nurture, and especially "*cultivate*." This means that culture is "*rooted in nature*" first and foremost, and therefore possesses the potential to provide the centrepiece that is needed for the world system of the future. This is because culture is concerned with nature rather than materialism at its very core and in its very fundamental essence.

Let us explore some of the major implications of this new world system based on culture and rooted in nature.

Such a system would make the development and cultivation of culture in general - and all the diverse cultures of the world in the holistic sense in particular • the principal objective of global development and human affairs. The goal would be situate all activities - from economics, science, and technology to the arts, education, and recreation - in a comprehensive cultural context and inculcate them with many of culture's highest, wisest, and most cherished values and ideals, most notably creativity, excellence, sustainability, harmony, and the search for the sublime.

It is unlikely that this new world system will be brought into existence by private sector initiatives. As a result, public sector initiatives will be imperative,

particularly initiatives from governments, educational institutions, civil society associations, and international organizations like the United Nations, UNESCO, and many others. They will have to play a seminal role in initiating the process of transformation and transcendence that is required to make the transition from a world system based on economics, materialism, and the marketplace to a world system based on culture and rooted in nature.

Governments and international organizations have an especially important role to play in this regard. They must make the development of culture and cultures in the holistic sense their overriding goal and basic objective, as well as accord cultural development and policy the highest priority in public affairs and governmental and political policy and decision-making.

At the centre of this requirement is the need to foster and fashion a new perception of the human personality and especially citizens and citizenship. Rather than relying on the prevailing perception of the human personality, citizens, and citizenship which are based largely on the production and consumption of goods and services and creation of material and monetary wealth - that is to say on an economic understanding of the human personality and “economic man” - governments and international organizations will have to take an approach to the development of the human personality, citizens, and citizenship that is based on culture and what is best called “the cultural personality.”(5)

This raises one of the biggest problems of all as it relates to citizens and citizenship. It is the present preoccupation with citizens’ rights while simultaneously downplaying or ignoring their responsibilities. While the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* has achieved an enormous amount in terms of attending to citizens’ rights in many different areas of life and giving citizens the assurance they need that their rights will not be violated - at least in principle if not always in practice - it is time to combine citizens’ rights with citizens’ responsibilities in the creation and enactment of a *Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Responsibilities*.

Of what do these responsibilities consist? Surely they consist, among countless other things, of revering nature, the natural environment, and other species and doing as little damage to them as possible; respecting other people’s worldviews, values, beliefs, and overall ways of life; acting in a cooperative and conciliatory rather than aggressive and confrontational manner; learning as much as possible about all the diverse cultures and civilizations of the world; getting actively involved in the development of one’s own culture; pursuing peace, unity, and harmony rather than war, disunity, and conflict; and giving help to the less fortunate and needy people and countries of the world. While these are not the only responsibilities citizens must accept and carry out, they are consistent with the need to achieve balance and harmony between citizen’s rights and responsibilities as one of the most necessary

and worthwhile aspirations and assets of culture. This has a great deal to do with giving as well as taking, being concerned with “the other” and not just “the self,” and treating people with dignity, compassion, and respect.

In order to do this, it is necessary to get in touch with other people and learn as much as possible from them about *their* cultures, customs, traditions, values, and beliefs, or, as John Keats said in his wonderful poem *On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer*, “Much have I travelled in the realms of gold/And many goodly states and kingdoms seen.” For cultures give us “roots” as well as “wings,” as the renowned cultural practitioner and trainer, George Simons, contends. They give us roots in the sense that they ground us in reality and give us a sense of collective identity and belonging. They give us wings in the sense that they provide us with the freedom and independence that is needed to fly high and far and explore other cultures in breadth and in depth.

While we must be careful not to get so immersed in one culture that we downplay or undermine others - as Mahatma Gandhi warned us about many years ago - there is no doubt that there is an incredible amount to be learned from other cultures that is relevant to solving our problems and enriching our lives.(6) This is true for everything that exists in other cultures, from their arts, crafts, cuisines, philosophies, and outlooks on life to their traditions, values, beliefs, ideas, preferences, and possibilities.

In much the same way that we should get in touch with our own culture and the cultures of others, so we should be in tune with nature and work with nature rather than against it as advocates of permaculture propose. More than anything else, this necessitates reducing the huge ecological footprint we are making on the natural environment and bringing about a seismic shift - transformation and transcendence were the terms used earlier - from activities that tend to consume resources to activities that tend to conserve resources.

The best way to do this is to place a high priority on activities like the arts, humanities, heritage of history, education, life long learning, spirituality, and so forth that are low in material inputs and outputs because they are largely labour intensive rather than capital intensive in nature and consequently don't make as many demands on the world's scarce resources as many other types of activities.

But getting in tune with nature requires much more than reducing the demands we are making on the natural environment and shifting to activities that tend to conserve rather than consume resources. It also requires studying nature very carefully and learning an incredible amount from it and about it. I discovered this many years ago and must confess that my life has been much more fluid, flexible, creative, and spiritual ever since, largely because I have established rhythms, patterns,

and cycles in my own life that correspond to those of nature.

Not only is nature full of all sorts of elements that have been immortalized for their medicinal properties and healing and soothing qualities, but also it dances to the tune of its own drummer and has a life and character all its own. It is simply a matter of getting in sync with nature and paying close attention to its moods, methods, melodies, and mysteries. So much is revealed when we study nature, examine its elements, understand how it cleans, cleanses, renews, heals, and invigorates itself, and sings, dances, and has music and voices all its own.

What is slowly but surely emerging here is a perception of the human personality - and with it citizens and citizenship - that is profoundly different than the one that is in vogue and dominates the world at present. It is a perception that benefits from deeper and deeper forays into the realms of culture, cultures, and nature, thereby enabling us to understand what the distinguished Roman orator and statesman, Cicero, had in mind when he said “*cultura anima philosophia est,*” which is usually translated as “*culture is the philosophy or cultivation of the soul.*”

While governments, educational institutions, civil society associations, and international organizations can do a great deal to put us on the right road to cultivating spirituality and the soul, it is culture, cultures, nature, and some of culture’s most cherished activities and ideals - as well as the world’s many diverse religions and religious and spiritual organizations and leaders - that can propel us down the road to cultivation of spirituality and the soul as one of most fundamental and foremost needs of people, culture, and the world today.

This would make it possible for all people in the world to experience spirituality and cultivation of the soul and experience it all the time, not just some people and for only some of the time. We cultivate many things in life - skills, abilities, relationships, interests, identities, plants, gardens, and ways of life. Surely it is time to turn our attention to the cultivation of culture, spirituality, and the soul and do it on a full-time and systematic rather than part-time and piecemeal basis. Did Cicero not understand something quintessential about culture, nature, cultivation, spirituality, and the soul some two thousand years ago that is desperately needed in the world of today and tomorrow?

ENDNOTES

1. Alfred Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhuhn, *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963).

2. Edward Burnett Tylor, *The Origins of Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), p. 1.
3. D. Paul Schafer, *Culture - Beacon of the Future* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1998), p. 40.
4. Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), p. 36.
5. D. Paul Schafer, *The Cultural Personality* (Markham: World Culture Project, 1991).
6. D. Paul Schafer, *Feasting on Cultures to Solve Our Problems and Enrich Our Lives* (Markham, World Culture Project, 2006). This article is reproduced in the Hot Topics section of the World Culture Project website at www3.sympatico.ca/dpaulschafer and can be downloaded if required.