CULTURE: BEACON OF THE FUTURE

by

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Profound changes are taking place in the cultural complexion of the world. Not only is the cultural complexion of the world changing drastically as a result of countless political, economic, environmental, technological, demographic and social changes, but also culture is rapidly becoming a potent force in municipal, national and international affairs.

If we are to be successful in coming to grips with these changes and understanding the role that culture can play in the world of the future, much will depend on our ability to size up the present situation and interpret it correctly. A misreading of the present situation could have disastrous consequences for the future.

The Changing Cultural Landscape

There can be little doubt that contemporary political developments are having a profound impact on the world situation. Not only are the forces of liberalism, democracy, conservatism, and independence blowing more and more freely in the world, but also they are having a powerful effect on every country. There is scarcely a country anywhere in the world that has not experienced fundamental shifts in political ideologies, geographical borders, bureaucratic practices or governmental structures as a result of these changes.

Closely connected with these political changes are the economic changes. The shift to capitalism, democracy and free trade has brought with it greater focus on the private sector and the marketplace, and with it, increased emphasis on profit as opposed to non-profit ventures, commercialization, increased concentrations of world financial wealth and power, and the division of the world into larger and larger trading blocks. While some countries have been more fortunate than other countries, few countries have managed to escape the consequences of radically-changed methods of production and distribution, altered forms of employment and expenditure,
rapid escalations in public debts, and increased inflation. Clearly there is a new economic reality taking hold in the world - an economic reality which suggests that the days of continuous growth and expansion may be over and the days of austerity, consolidation, thrift and frugality have set in. One only has to look at the lengthening lists of welfare recipients, the proliferation of bread lines and food banks, and the growing ranks of the unemployed to confirm this.

These transformations in political and economic practices are being matched by countless environmental changes. While the environmental movement has been going on for some time, events like the Chernobyl disaster and publications like the Brundtland Report on Environment and Development have served to bring about a new ecological awareness in the world. Not only is it becoming increasingly clear that the world's natural resources are being consumed and contaminated at an unprecedented rate, but also there is growing realization that a whole new slate of environmental policies and practices is needed to protect the globe's fragile ecosystem.

These new environmental policies and practices are mandatory in a world threatened by exponential population growth and standing room only. Even the most optimistic forecasts suggest that expanding numbers, particularly when they are etched against shrinkages in arable land and the depletion of non-renewable resources, may prove to be one of the most demanding and difficult challenges of all. While urbanization may offer a temporary reprieve in a purely spatial sense, largely by sanctioning vertical as opposed to horizontal expansion and compressing more and more people into the same physical space, it does so at an exorbitant price. Not only does it dramatically increase the amount of noise, air, water and traffic pollution, but also it makes it more and more difficult to sustain the level of social, recreational, environmental, and human amenities which are needed for a healthy and sustained existence.

It would be foolhardy to underestimate the profound impact that contemporary developments in technology and communications are having on all this. Not only is the computer transforming employment and consumer practices in all parts of the world, but also the rapid growth of genetic engineering, biotechnology, the mass media, and the so-called "cultural industries" is revolutionizing daily procedures and practices everywhere in the world.
Technology is clearly a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it opens up countless opportunities for the storage, retrieval and utilization of knowledge, information, and ideas in every field of human endeavour. On the other hand, it makes it difficult to cope with the demands and dictates of a technologically-oriented and media-dominated world. While the cruelties of war, poverty, famine, human rights abuses, and corruption are never easy to accept, they are much more difficult to accept when they are catapulted around the world every second of every day. Obviously it is going to take a great deal of psychic stability on the part of all people to deal with the profundity and propinquity of these developments in the future.

Placed alongside all the political, economic, environmental and technological changes are all the social changes which are occurring throughout the world. Not only are the populations of most countries becoming increasingly pluralistic and multicultural in character, thereby increasing the potential for racial violence and ethnic unrest, but also there is the gender battle that is going on between the sexes. These developments are occurring at a time when many of the traditional safeguards and support systems which have been evolved to cushion the shock of unprecedented and unpredictable change are undergoing profound transformations themselves or are breaking down. Whereas it was once possible to look to the family, the neighbourhood, the church, the temple, the mosque, or the community to cushion the shocks of pronounced economic technological, political, demographic, environmental and social dislocations, today this no longer seems possible.

There is one final development which must be addressed since it appears to be having such a profound effect on the world situation. It is the reaction people are having to the relentless trend toward globalization, the emergence of larger and larger trading blocks, the creation of economic and political superstates, and the increased concentration of financial, industrial and technological power in fewer and fewer hands.

There can be little doubt that developments on this front are having a destabilizing and disorienting effect on people everywhere in the world. This is manifesting itself in a number of "counter-cultural movements" aimed at increasing
people's sense of empowerment and control over the decision-making processes affecting their lives. Whether it is the quest for independence, identity, sovereignty or sovereignty association, or the resurfacing of interest in neighbourhoods and communities, the consequences are everywhere much the same. The more pressure that is exerted toward globalization, the more people institute countervailing movements aimed at taking greater control over their own destinies. What is of particular concern here is how xenophobic and racially-oriented many of these movements have become.

When all these multifarious developments are placed side by side and added up, they produce the portrait of a world that is in cataclysmic if not revolutionary change. What is distinctive about this world is not only its interdependence, but also its fluidity and fragility. Not only are events happening at lightening speed, as recent events in the Soviet Union so graphically portray, but also they are intimately and inexorably interconnected.

Under these circumstances, it is easy to understand why more and more people around the world are feeling confused, disoriented, and insecure. It is not that all of these changes are necessarily negative. In fact, many of them, like the quest for equality between the sexes and the environmental movement, are exceedingly positive. It is just that they are compounding at such an accelerated rate, and are so pervasive in their size and influence, that they are making it difficult for people to know how to respond to them. In fact, in the modern world, change itself may have become the problem. Not only has it become so rapid, complex, volatile, and pronounced that people in parts of the world are having the utmost difficulty dealing with it, but also it seems to be running out of control.

What seems to be lurking behind all this is a growing realization that a matrix of problems has emerged on the global horizon which stands well beyond the traditional systems which have been designed to deal with them. Whether it is world population growth, poverty, the environmental crisis, growing inequalities in income and wealth, the breakdown of social institutions, the erosion of ethical and spiritual values or ethnic and racial unrest, there is a sinking feeling among world leaders and citizens alike that the entire global system may be on the verge of collapse. It is not only
political ideologies, economic theories, social conventions and environmental practices which are being severely tested. More fundamentally, it is the whole conceptual framework and theoretical apparatus which humankind has erected over the centuries to preserve some semblance of world order which is being shaken to its very foundations.

It is within this rapidly-evolving global situation that culture is emerging as a powerful world force. This is manifesting itself in a number of developments such as the declaration by the United Nations of a World Decade for Cultural Development from 1988-1997 as well as the recent announcement by Unesco and the United Nations of a World Commission on Culture similar to the Brundtland Commission on Environment and Development. These developments are occurring at a time when many countries throughout the world are involved in measures to strengthen their cultural identity, practices, programs, policies, and possibilities.

These are clearly not isolated, disconnected, or spontaneous developments. On the contrary, they are inevitable and unequivocal responses to the momentous local, regional, national and international transformations which typify our times. For culture has contained within it the potential and the capacity to address many of the most debilitating and perplexing problems currently confronting humanity. Looked at from this vantage point, there may be a great deal of truth in Victor Hugo's shrewd observation "greater than the tread of mighty armies is an idea whose time has come". For culture appears to be truly an idea whose time has come.

Culture: The New Global Paradigm

What is it about culture that makes it indispensable to the future? Four things. First, the ability to provide a cosmic perspective aimed at understanding the cosmos as a whole as well as the complex interrelationships that exist among the component parts of the whole. Second, the ability to provide a value system that is more sensitive, enlightened, and in keeping with the newly-emerging global reality. Third, the ability to interpret history in a way which is more authentic and consistent with the contribution which all people make to world progress. And finally, the ability to
provide a new conceptual framework and practical system capable of carrying humanity forward into the next millennium.

Many may argue that perceptual shifts are necessary, but not really all that critical in terms of the basic issues and fundamental problems confronting humanity. However when Fritjof Capra observed that "all the difficult economic, environmental, social, political and human problems of our times are really different facets of one and the same crisis, and that crisis is essentially a crisis in perception", he underlined the quintessential importance of "the art of seeing" as a basic prerequisite to effective problem solving. Perhaps this is why Goethe observed towards the end of his life that "it was with the eye more than with all the other organs that I learned to comprehend the world".

Alexander King of the Club of Rome goes even further. In a recent essay underlining the need for a multidisciplinary approach to problem solving he contends:

Nearly all contemporary social problems, whether national or global, are interrelated and exceedingly complex, a tangled mass of individual threads connected in ways which are only dimly understood, so that attempts to solve a specific issue have repercussions on many others. Furthermore, each problem has many elements, technical, economic, social, political and human and can seldom be resolved by the politician, scientist, engineer or economist in isolation. With the increasing interdependence of nations and the emergence of so many problems of global dimension, many disciplines have to be called simultaneously into play. Yet multidisciplinary action is difficult to achieve, for society is organized essentially on a vertical basis. Government departments are grouped by sector, and the policies of each are devised with only secondary consideration of their effects on the policies of the others. The same may be said of the universities, organized by faculty, department and subdepartment, each deepening understanding of its particular specialization and usually unfamiliar with the others’ findings.
What is becoming increasingly clear is that the disadvantages of specialization far outweigh the advantages. Therefore, no amount of piling more and more specialists on top of each other will work because specialization itself has become the problem. While we know a great deal about disciplines in and of themselves, as Alexander King so rightly observes, we know very little about the complex interrelationships that exist among disciplines. Thus, when the economist tells us we must consume more because it is essential for the economy and the environmentalist tells us we must consume less because it is essential for the environment, no amount of discussion between the economist and the environmentalist will solve this problem. Clearly a new way of seeing is needed which permits the observer to see the economy and the environment from a holistic perspective.

Culture provides this perspective. Defined in its broadest cosmological sense as "worldview" in general and "ordered whole" in particular, culture focuses attention not only on the cosmos as a whole, but also on the complex interrelationships which constitute the cosmic whole.

Of all the various types of interrelationships which in combination comprise the cosmic perspective provided by culture, four in particular deserve our attention since they are so fundamentally related to the human condition, the ecological situation, and global survival in the future. These four interrelationships are: the relationship of people to themselves; to each other; to the objects they create; and to the natural environment. The relationship of people to themselves bears on people's innermost psychological and spiritual well-being. The relationship of people to each other bears on the bonds that exist, or do not exist, between relatives, friends, neighbours, countries, continents, and cultures. The relationship of people to the objects they create bears on the technological and material circumstances of people's lives, as well as on preservation and diffusion of the cultural heritage of humankind. And finally, and perhaps most important of all, the relationship of people to the natural environment bears on the ecological association that people have with all other species and forms of plant and animal life with which they cohabit the planet.
Given the cosmic perspective provided by culture, it is reassuring to see that more and more individuals, institutions, and countries throughout the world are coming to the conclusion that culture is much more than the arts and the mass media. Indeed, when most people talk about being "the products of their culture" today, they mean that they are not only the products of their art forms and media activities but also the products of their economic systems, political ideologies, social conventions, educational practices, religious values, and environmental circumstances. In other words, they are the products of everything they create and consume as well as how they position themselves in the world. This fundamental shift in perceptual thinking about the actual orbit and purview of culture was confirmed recently by the member states of Unesco when they unanimously endorsed the following definition of culture at the second World Conference on Cultural Policy in Mexico City in 1982:

Culture ought to be considered today the collection of distinctive traits, spiritual and material, intellectual and affective, which characterize a society or social group. It comprises, besides arts and letters, modes of life, human rights, value systems, traditions and beliefs.\(^5\)

The arguments for adopting this much more comprehensive and compelling view of culture were set out even more forcefully in the planning documents and working papers for the **World Decade for Cultural Development**.

Reflection on the subject of cultural development finally led to what was almost a new definition of culture by the participants at the Mexico City Conference. Without neglecting the importance of creativity as expressed in intellectual and artistic activity, they considered it important to broaden the notion of culture to include behaviour patterns, the individual's view of him/herself, of society, and of the outside world. In this perspective, the cultural life of a society may be seen to express itself through its way of living and being, through its perceptions and self-perceptions, its behaviour patterns, values and beliefs.

Where development action is concerned, the implications of such a conception of culture are evident: any project which fails to take into account both the natural and cultural environment of a given population runs the risk of failure. In this statement lie the roots of the strategy
proposed by the participants in the Mexico Conference in the context of the World Decade for Cultural Development. This strategy implies a series of coordinated actions designed to restore cultural and human values to their central place in economic and technological development.\(^6\)

Armed with this much more comprehensive and all-embracing concept of culture, we are in a perfect position to understand how culture can be helpful in transforming notions about development, value systems, and life styles.

Adoption of the cosmic perspective advocated here should immediately transform our understanding of the real nature and meaning of development. Regardless of whether it is community, regional, national, or international development, development is no longer a one-sided, specialized affair based primarily on economic, technological and political considerations. Rather, it is a cosmic, integrative affair based on the judicious blending of all the determinants of development: social, political, economic, environmental, artistic, human, technological, and spiritual. It is qualitative as well as quantitative; an art as well as a science; as concerned with things of the heart, the soul, the intellect, and the spirit as it is with power and the pocketbook.

When development is defined in this well-rounded and integrated way, can any country in the world claim to be developed? On the contrary, are not all countries in various stages of development, struggling to make improvements in all the multifarious determinants of development and working diligently to achieve a better balance among the diverse determinants? Surely all countries are common companions on the road to development in this sense, they are merely taking different routes depending on their values and needs. Some countries may have reasonably well developed economic and technological resources while their artistic, social or spiritual resources require improvement. Other countries may possess more developed aesthetic, social or spiritual resources while their economic and technological resources require improvement. The point is that all countries are in a similar developmental boat.

Surely what we must break away from is the idea that some countries are "developed" while other countries are not. All this has produced is a world that is
increasingly divided into unequal parts, as well as a world order that has produced some of the worst abuses and injustices in human history. Clearly, what we must work towards is an understanding that development - like culture - is a dynamic, evolutionary process which is constantly changing, mutating and adapting over time in response to new conditions and altered circumstances. For what is the point of development in the first place if it is not to make improvements in all the various components and dimensions of the cosmic condition. Viewed from this vantage point, it is obvious that there is no difference whatsoever between cultural development on the one hand and general development on the other hand. In fact, they are synonymous, since both are concerned with the enrichment of life in all its diverse forms and manifestations.

More enlightened value systems and life styles are sure to flow from this balanced and more all-embracing view of development. Such value systems and life styles remind us that the real challenge in life is to live a good and upright life, not in the contemporary sense of a life filled with consumer indulgences and consumption practices, but rather in the classical sense of a life filled with ethical standards, spiritual fulfilment, and intellectual integrity. Values and life styles such as these confirm the fact that the honest sharing of feelings and emotions, artistic creation, learning, scientific discovery, sharing, friendship, and human love are still the most essential things in life, the things that are remembered long after every-thing else is forgotten. Not only do these things reduce the drain on natural resources, thereby holding the key to the current environmental crisis which is engulfing the globe, but also they are the things that bring about real happiness and fulfilment in life, thereby solving the riddle of mal-development.

As these value systems and life styles gather momentum, they are bound to yield a more harmonious association with nature, one based on unity with nature rather than supremacy over nature. This should enable humankind to take a much more restrained and commonsense approach to the natural environment. The name of the game should be conservation, renewal, and never taking more from the natural environment than is necessary for survival, rather than exploitation and spoliation. Not only will this enable humanity to treat nature with the dignity and respect it so richly
deserves, but also it will permit people to enjoy decent **styles of living** without straining global resources to the breaking point.

New perceptions of value systems, life styles and concepts of development should help immeasurably in the complex and intricate task of generating more authentic interpretations of history. While this is a dangerous business, as recent encounters with a number of revisionist views of history confirm, it simply must be done if we are to arrive at a more accurate interpretation of the process of historical evolution.

In the execution of this task, one objective must transcend all the rest. It is the objective of truth. The world can ill-afford major transfers of political power or the retracing of geographical borders if they are based on the substitution of one distorted view of historical truth for another. If revisionist views and new interpretations of history are to have any meaning at all, they must be based on truth, regardless of how this affects governments and people in power.

Where revisionist views of history and historical interpretations are factual, objective, and truthful, they should be exceedingly helpful in confronting some of the greatest ills in the world - ills that presently stand in the way of planetary progress.

As matters stand now, major injustices are being done to many of the aboriginal peoples of the world as well as to many ethnic minorities as a result of the one-sided and highly biased account of historical evolution. While some progress has been made in recent years in this regard, largely as a result of the aboriginal peoples themselves as well as specific ethnic minorities and several African, Asian and Latin American nations, they will really only be fully eradicated when the contributions that suppressed peoples have made are fully recognized and given their due. Cultural history provides a way of levelling up the scales of historical justice in this sense, largely by replacing the partisan and one-sided rendering of historical evolution with a reading of historical evolution that is more honest, accurate, and in tune with the contributions that all peoples, countries and cultures have made to historical development and world progress.
This confrontation with historical truth, particularly when it is combined with more enlightened environmental practices, value systems, life styles and concepts of development, should help to open the doors on a new kind of world.

What kind of world should this be? Certainly not the kind of world where a single nation or a few major superpowers speak softly but carry a big nuclear stick. Nor should it be the kind of homogenized and uniform world of which technologists and communications authorities dream. Rather it should be the kind of world where a prominent place at the core of individual community, national and international activity is etched out for culture and the world is redesigned according to culture's wisest and more enduring principles and practices.

In the creation of this kind of world, a central role should be reserved for the cultural heritage of humankind. In the final analysis, global progress does not consist of the fashioning of individual works, the building up of specific institutions, or the creation of particular cultures. Regardless of how important these things are, they are all merely means towards a much more enthralling and enduring end: the development and diffusion of a universal storehouse of cultural achievements for appreciation and use by all the globe's inhabitants. As the shining star which is clearly discernible amidst the meteoric rise and fall of individual states and particular cultures, is this jewel in humanity's crown not the true measure of humankind's collective progress down through the ages? Not only is it the product of all peoples and all countries, but also it is the true birthright of all citizens, regardless of their education, socio-economic status, or geographical location in the world.

Why is it so essential at the present juncture in human history to project this cherished heritage of hope into the foreground? It is essential because it will not prove possible to solve the rapidly-escalating transnational problems of our times - over-population, pollution, poverty, resource shortages, income inequality, and the constant threat of a nuclear catastrophe - without full familiarity with and collective sharing of this universal treasure trove of cultural creativity. The great Indian sage Rabindranath Tayore foresaw this day when he said "we must prepare the field for the cooperation of all cultures of the world where all will give and take from each other."
This is the keynote of the coming age." Ultimately this is what makes global diffusion and full utilization of the cultural heritage of humankind the only real hope for human survival and world progress in the future.

Markham, Canada
1992

REFERENCES


