

FUTUREtakes

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First Transcultural Thematic Issue

“Transcultural Impacts and Perspectives on the Future”

Perspectives from Armenia, Canada, France, Georgia, Germany, South Africa, Sweden, Ukraine, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America.

From the Desk of Tim Mack, President, World Future Society



The FUTUREtakes Special Thematic Issue

This special thematic issue of FUTUREtakes represents a central goal of the International Office of the World Future Society – building bridges between cultures for mutual understanding.

The process of building this special issue moved from embassy offices out to a wide range of interested parties, including Armenian-American students, German foresight firms, American academics, racially and ethnically mixed student groups, South African futurists and Swedish officials. And the manner in which they approached the question of cross-cultural understanding included cultural theory, trend index and social dynamics, ethnic and religious tolerance, values and social goals, Africa’s acceleration into the future, culture and identity, the revolution of tradition, national versus global perspectives, cross-cultural leadership and cultural symbols and their meaning.

What has resulted is an extraordinarily rich collection of insights on cultural dynamics and how cross-cultural undertakings function (or fail to function). Added to this are the provocative and highly useful classroom questions, which will allow educators and students to use this material as a springboard to further explore the issues that have been raised.

However, this is also an area of significant personal interest, and I am honored to be asked to add to this discussion. Accordingly, I have provided an overview concerning the forces driving global cultural change. As a macro approach to cultural change, it may enhance these discussions, and is offered in that spirit.

Cultural Dynamics in the 21st Century

Pre-industrial societies shared common characteristics that can be considered traditional cultural values: the importance of religion and God; absolute standards of good and evil; importance of family life; deference to authority. In contrast to these traditional values are secular-rational values, sometimes called modern or postmodern cultural values. Secular means nonreligious, while rational refers to the rationalization of society, including the use of reason, logic, science, and means-end calculations rather than religion or long-established customs to govern social, political, and economic life. These values include generally lower levels of religious belief, relative standards of good and evil, acceptance of diversity, relative gender equality, and less deference to authority.

Another way to think about cultural values is the division of societies into opposing groups that have differences that cannot be reconciled. One camp assumes the source of values and moral judgment exists outside the self in God (i.e., religion, regardless of the title of the deity) or in the authority of society, while the other locates the source of values and moral judgment in the self— i.e. absolutism and relativism. And as the growth of the influence of technology, including digital technology, on modern cultural patterns continues to increase, other secular values have gained in importance. It is unlikely that the impact of technology could be neutralized, but a better understanding of the direction of cultural changes may assist in shaping the nature of that impact.

Efficiency, for one, has become a very important value in modern culture. The desire for efficiency reflects open-ended aspirations toward the consumption of both things and experiences. However, if efficiency is now a pervasive value in modern culture, it may well be challenged for supremacy during the next decade by a counterforce, best defined as “tranquility.” The desire for calm, peace, quiet, serenity and simplicity will become more important in the future for a variety of reasons. First and foremost, the population of modern nations is aging and there seems to be a greater desire for these qualities in later life. As desire for tranquility grows, more traditional notions of leisure and living leisurely may reassert themselves. Graceful living may soon be desired more than the ownership of expensive possessions, especially for those whose material needs are largely met.

Even as global economies and communication systems have become increasingly internationalized and interdependent, a growing counter-trend has been Balkanization within cultures. The notion of commonweal fades where people start to define themselves based on ethnicity, entitlement status, addiction, religion, gender, occupation, age, political affiliation, leisure interests, victimization, lifestyle, or numerous other statuses. Digital communications technologies have increased our awareness of multiple and conflicting belief systems. There is a growing suspicion that many belief systems are social constructions, so the basis for deciding what is true cannot be attributed to any single method, belief system, or variable.

The aftermath of the 9/11/2001 attacks in the United States, subway bombings in London, terrorist attacks in Egypt, Spain, and elsewhere have all sped up the use of surveillance technology in everyday life. Random searches are more common and law enforcement agencies and private security forces use a variety of monitoring devices to observe public streets, apartment lobbies, and parking lots to reduce crime. Sense of place is, like privacy, being affected by technology. The ability of people to travel from their homes has increased dramatically. Higher levels of technology have transformed travel, communication, and the conduct of business, producing what President of the European Bank of Reconstruction, Jacques Attali, called a ‘nomadic elite,’ a class of people who conduct their business from anywhere in the world and owe no allegiance to any country or territory. Towns, particularly suburban areas, begin to look more and more alike in every modern nation.

Modern Patterns of Change

Constant change is our new global status quo. As we enter the 21st Century, new work patterns, the emergence of capitalism in unexpected places, the evolving urban environment etc. are changing many cultural patterns. Change in culture and changes in how people work and play have often been driven by advances in technology. Migration from countryside to city transformed many peasants into working class. Previously partners in agricultural work, many urban women were subsequently constricted to more limited work roles or homemaking and childrearing as primary tasks. Last century's industrial revolution put work at the center of social arrangements; free time became what was left over. Many of the same forces that are driving changes in the way business and government organizations function are also reshaping culture.

In the marketplace, individuals now have many more options as to what products and services they will or will not use and how they will live their lives, and the rate at which these options grow is accelerating. Many elderly citizens value convenience and want appropriate facilities. Modern cultural movements have been launched to minimize the urban sprawl and car culture that characterize urban culture.

Cultural Acceleration, Technology and Stress

There seems little doubt that time has become a more scarce resource in modern society. Historians argue that a speed-up of life has occurred since the middle of the eighteenth century. Social acceleration is not a steady process, but evolves in waves (most often brought about by new technologies or forms of socioeconomic organization) with each new wave meeting considerable resistance as well as partial reversals. Rosa has identified the types of acceleration that take place in a society as:

1. Technological acceleration—speeding up of intentional, goals-directed processes of transport, communication and production.
2. Acceleration of social change—acceleration of society itself. The underlying idea is that rates of change themselves are changing. Thus, attitudes and values as well as fashions and lifestyles, classes, or milieus, social languages as well as the forms of practice and habits are said to change at ever increasing rates.
3. Acceleration of the pace of life—the compression of actions and experiences in everyday life. Measuring the acceleration of the pace of life, Rosa contends, can be done subjectively by measuring individual experiences of time or objectively. This leads to measurable contractions of the time spent on definable episodes or units of action such as sleeping, eating, going for a walk. Acceleration implies doing more things in less time.

Modern society is starving for lack of time. 'Rushing', of course, is a complex term and there are many situations in which rushing would be functional. If your house is on fire, you should rush out of the building; if a mugger is chasing you, run away; if the wind blows your hat across the field, rush after it. As a way of life, however, rushing doesn't sound very inviting.

The term 'time deepening' assumes that, under pressure of expanded interest and compulsion, people are capable of higher rates of 'doing.' Rather than thinking of behavior in 'either-or' terms, people develop the capacity to do both activity A and activity B. Time deepening occurs in four ways. People may attempt to speed up a given activity. Individuals may substitute a leisure activity that can be done more quickly for one which takes longer. A person may do more than one activity at once. Someone may undertake a string of activities with little tolerance in the schedule.

Time deepening, while it may have some advantages in terms of accomplishment, can produce significant stress. The ability to relax and relieve such stress is positively associated with reducing a variety of health risks, from high blood pressure to headaches and backaches to diabetes to depression to heart attack. Certainly there is a connection to what most call the 'quality of life.' As a cultural

counterforce, the growth of interest in health, spirituality and creative “right-brain” skills across the globe appears to balance the ‘time deepening’ phenomenon. As well, the increase in globalization-driven government and business transparency appears to portend cultural changes in each country it touches. International trade and investment dynamics are reshaping and transforming many countries’ culture, economy, lifestyle choices – and these transformations are shaped in part through the growth of digital technology and transportation efficiency and connectivity.

Technology and Culture

A central issue is how technology, digital and otherwise, does in fact shape the cultural direction of a country. Such a discussion requires both an understanding of how technology of various types influences culture (as well as economies, markets and political structures) and an understanding of what cultural goals are desirable for the health and future vitality of a nation.

In the transportation arena, China has made policy decisions which favor an ‘automobile and highway’ system of transportation, rather than the ‘bicycle to train’ system which has been used in India with some success. This decision may mean that the number of automobiles in the world overall will increase dramatically. If the Chinese model their travel patterns after the United States, China could be the world’s largest auto market within the next 15 years, and perhaps the world’s most polluted country. While not as pervasive as the impact of digital technologies, choices concerning energy, transportation and other lifestyle-related areas work interactively with communications and ubiquitous connectivity to shape the cultural character of a country.

The Forces of Aging and Immigration

And technology is not the only driver of change...just as powerful is the impact of demographics. Japan is in a transition in which the percentage of its population age 65 and over has grown from 7.1 percent in 1970 to a projected 33.2 percent in 2040. Comparable percentages for Germany are a growth from 13.8 percent to 30.9 percent. Declining birth rates, in combination with rapid aging, will mean a transformed labor force.

On a macroeconomic level, labor is becoming relatively scarce in the more rapidly aging countries, while capital becomes relatively more abundant. This precipitates changes in the relative price of labor, will lead to higher capital intensity, and might generate large international flows of labor, capital and goods. Thus, an older “resident” population and a much younger and usually less educated “immigrant” population may exist in many countries, even developing nations. Puerto Rico will have more Dominicans, Australia more Indonesians, Sweden more Turks, and Canada more Chinese. Even Iceland, whose policies consciously seek to minimize immigration, is experiencing more immigrants from Thailand and elsewhere. Accordingly, the ‘culture’ of these countries will be strongly affected by this influx of new influences.

Divergent demographic trends, the globalization of labor markets, and political instability and conflict will fuel a dramatic increase in the global movement of people through 2015. Legal and illegal migrants now account for more than 15 percent of the population in more than 50 countries. These numbers will grow substantially and will increase social and political tension and perhaps alter national identities, even as they contribute to demographic and economic dynamism. The top fifth of the world’s people now have 86 percent of the gross domestic product and the bottom fifth about one percent. In part as a result of these transformative immigration patterns, the line between crime and war is disappearing and, as that happens, low-intensity conflicts of attrition will largely replace wars fought along traditional lines.

While it is often assumed by English speakers that English has become the international unifying language, the percentage of the world's people who speak English is declining, constituting about 7.6 percent of the world's population. Indeed, all Western languages in combination are spoken by only about one out of five people in the world. By 2025, 50 percent of the Christian populations will be in Africa and Latin America, and another 17 percent in Asia. This trend has already occurred in Catholicism, where Euro-Americans are the minority in global terms, another significant shift in cultural profile.

Impact of Travel and Tourism on Culture

While tourism has massive impacts on the local economy, environment and culture in which it takes place, these impacts are just beginning to be understood. Even theories of tourism reflect this uncertainty, viewing tourism in a variety of lights: as a form of play, or imperialism, as relations among strangers, as a search for the authentic, as a form of economic development, as a means of promoting understanding and world peace, and as a postmodern phenomenon that diminishes both ideology and sense of place.

Most tourism in the world continues to be mass tourism—that which is done using travel agents, tourist hotels, standardized “packages of travel, lodging and sometimes transportation.” In such experiences, travelers never get too far outside their “cultural bubble.” Ecotourism, however, which, while hard-to-define, includes rural tourism, heritage/cultural tourism, nature-based tourism, and adventure/experience-based tourism, and even ‘poverty tourism’ has been experiencing growth in excess of mass tourism. The International Ecotourism Society defines ecotourism as “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people.”

The biggest group of tourists, and still growing, is older people. The World Tourism Organization has projected that tourism will continue to grow dramatically with East Asia, Southeast Asia and the Middle East experiencing faster growth rates than other, more established tourism regions of the world, while Europe will decline comparatively.

Conclusion

As the globalization process – enabled by advances in digital technology – goes forward, the complexity and unfamiliarity of the world around us might prove overwhelming to some groups and individuals. In response, understanding of the dynamics of cultural change, the options, and the values that should be preserved will be critical in guiding change and making wise choices for the future. New technology is very often driven by innovation and imagination. Awakening the imagination can be a time-consuming process, and while the business world continues to move faster and faster, innovative ideas are often found by slowing down, stepping away, and allowing time to reflect. It is also clear that the open market system alone cannot provide enough shape and form to a set of optimal futures for any country. There is considerable survey evidence that the global public is beginning to recognize the downside of open-ended consumption.

As the digital and technological cross-fertilization of cultures continues, values will continue to play a central role in the satisfaction of those affected by these changes. There is a strong case to be made that it is consummation rather than consumption that people increasingly seek, i.e. taking pleasure to an achievable degree of intensity, and not just having more things, money or free time. Of course, there are always counter trends in cultural dynamics. It is very likely that both developing and developed cultures will continue to reject the message of ‘enough’ as long as there is economic inequality and people struggling to come out of poverty who have not tasted satiety.

The challenge for the 21st Century will be how to balance the increasing clash of cultures, the impacts of technology, the demands of environmental stability and the need for viable economic growth. This will be no easy task. The goal is making sense and meaning out of a complex set of forces and how they interact to form unique futures.