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“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.

The State of Culture 2025: the “Meta-Question”

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The significant change in culture over the next 20 years shall be the criteria, habits and values that we understand to constitute culture. At the moment, this is the single biggest feature of cultural change: for both political and social purposes, the culture which we recognise in our environment and by which we differentiate our identity, has been subject to significant change.

The question of what features of local or global culture shall change over the next couple of decades is itself implicit in a cultural paradigm. “Give me a place to stand and I shall move the Earth”: just as I cannot avail myself of a meta-language with which to deconstruct my prejudice, so too it is impossible to achieve a “cross-cultural perspective.” An aggregation of culturally embedded perspectives should provide a rounded view of what constitutes culture in the global consciousness, but there is an equally interesting lesson to be learned from an analysis of what people think the important features of their “cultural perspective” are.

WHAT IS A CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE?

The question “what is a cultural perspective” highlights some of the implicit assumptions of modern thought concerning culture. At the moment “culture” is associated with paradigms of art, society and thought. Although all three of these are undeniably interlinked, the first two are the most recognisable cultural features and those most easily analysable. The idea that there are paradigms of thought, and that these are subject to change, is the hardest to deconstruct, let alone make predictions concerning. However, there are some trends evident in (Western) society at the moment from which one can extrapolate.

The departure point for a discussion of cultural change is a description of the present state of culture – or in this case, answering the “meta-question,” a description of the categories which constitute culture. Hopefully, to a greater or lesser extent, this can be accepted on all hands.

Culture is intimately associated with personal and group identities: depending on the context in which one is asked about one’s culture, the answer will vary according to scale. For instance I might describe myself as either “Southern” or “Northern,” depending on whether I was placing my

identity at a national or continental scale; similarly, a person might be a “liberal” with regard to abortion legislation by one person’s standards, but “conservative” by another’s or regarding a different issue.

Cultural identity describes the ethnic, political, moral and aesthetic determinants which both confer group membership and personal identity. Cultural identity is in this sense a useful fiction, a self-reinforcing narrative which a post-modernist might say is more substantial in the telling than in concrete instantiation. Nonetheless, such narrative identities are an important feature of our personal (moral) identity, which allows us to place ourselves in a complex conceptual model of our physical and cultural environment, making us conscious, contemplative agents.

Though cultural descriptions (i.e. what is “good,” what constitutes a “reason,” what is art, what is “just,” etc.) and the identities they create vary hugely, descriptions of “culture” itself are largely the same. All descriptions of culture function to describe moral and aesthetic identities. It is at this point that a de-constructivist analysis of our concept of culture can help to show any more fundamental differences, which might be subject to change over the next 20 years.

VALUE, PROGRESS, AND IDENTITY

The features of “culture” that are changing at the moment are the concepts of “value,” “progress” and “identity.” They are changing both intrinsically and extrinsically; in themselves and in relation to other concepts. Firstly, here is a summary of a popular view of the cultural dynamics at work in Britain.

The dominant rhetoric of the “clash of civilisations” sees identities in direct conflict at both the personal and the group scales. Similarly, descriptions of national identity in Britain are being sculpted against the heavily politicised background of high levels of immigration and a perceived decline in law and order: British nationals are moving to French villages to enjoy the last bastions of “British values.” Thus, at the moment, it is easier to give a negative description of the British culture than a positive one and British values are most easily conceptualised in opposition to alien values, or even the absence of values altogether.

The “clash of civilisations” has replaced political opposition as a broader description of the dialectic of progress in our societies. Party politics looks more like identity politics, and political values are ensconced in broader ideologies. But, the mechanism of progress is largely unchanged: two competing paradigms are set in opposition in such a way that the better adapted survives or a compromise is reached. Hence, our culture as it is now is the product of an inexorable progress, the genealogy of which can be traced through all of history. In this sense all Western culture is relentlessly modernist.

In this model of culture there is little room for manoeuvre when it comes to reconciling difference. Values are not commensurable, and to a great extent, culture itself is incommunicable – a source of conflict rather than the arena of compromise and diplomacy.

Thus, culture, though undetermined, is on a trajectory plotted by the last 10,000 years of civilisation. The next 25 years will see the cultural homogenisation of parts of the world which are colonised by the cultural values of the most successful cultural group. The dialectic between ideologies shall continue and we shall be the pawns in a larger conflict of identities, the victor of which shall succeed on all levels, the cultural and political, and thus, the shape of progress over the next 25 years shall be determined.

This is, of course, all contingent on a certain way of thinking, which is itself probably wrong.

CONCEPTS OF CULTURE – THEMSELVES CHANGING

All these aforementioned ways of thinking about culture are under threat: they will not survive the next 20 years in the same form. This is because the way in which we have until now

understood value, progress and identity as distinct, discernible and quantifiable qualities and processes, is not easily sustained in the face of the integrated and nebulous values, processes and identities of globalisation. Values cannot be incommensurable if they are communicable; progress, in the context of value, is not obviously the product of the dialectic fiction; identity is more productively understood positively rather than negatively. Some evidence for each of these assertions follows and, though it remains unprovable, the evidence of experience should at least suggest that the predicted trajectory of culture in the next 20 years is based on a view of culture which is itself due to change.

VALUE, OLD AND NEW

In the West, the concept of value is changing. On an institutional level the emergence of corporate social responsibility is evidence of this. CSR can be traced to two different origins: firstly, the view that it makes good economic (business) sense to pursue a socially responsible course; secondly, there is the existential concern about what exactly the purpose of these large companies is. This new existential angst is also evident at the individual level, where *The Economist* reported that people have started to value experiences more than assets – part of a special edition addressing exactly the problem that people didn't seem to be getting happier as they got wealthier. Similar stories concerning the disjunction between wealth and worth pervade all the British media.

People are certainly not totally abandoning materialist ways, but there is a more obvious desire to identify and pursue the very stuff of value itself: the lifestyle and purpose that is intrinsically satisfying. This relocation of value is in evidence in a number of ways but broadly amounts to a new existentialism: people and groups analyse what they do in terms of their identity. As such, what one values, and how this is manifest is becoming more important and decisions will increasingly reflect such conscious moral commitment and the new economics of ethics. If a revised value judgement that connects closely to personal identity is the growing factor in the cultural movement of the West, it is nothing new for religious communities, and in fact it is not wholly new for any society in the world.

WHAT IS PROGRESS?

The second cultural change is the changing concept of progress and the dialectic. The concept of progress is a pervasive assumption of popular Western historicism, and it is beginning to look awkward in the context of the nascent broader understanding of value mentioned previously. The failure of the historical dialectic and doubts about what progress might mean are mutually reinforcing ideas. Just as one sees the “ideological conflict” used to explain any number of diverse political actions, with increasing irrelevance and impotency, so the idea that this process is part of some larger mechanism that is inexorably “progressing” becomes harder to conceptually reconcile with one's experience. This is particularly poignant against a background of political rhetoric which is full of moral terms, wholly disconnected from meaningful function.

Thus, “progress” itself works as a rhetorical tool, seamlessly introducing a normative element to any historical or atavistic declaration, without justification. A general return to identifying and pursuing what is valuable might disturb the conviction that culture has progressed over the last 10,000 years, but it will soon be harder still to maintain the idea that all of our activities are part of the relentless progression of a dialectic of ideologies. This conviction of inexorable progress has been exposed already in part by the recent popularisation of environmentalism: people are simply less convinced that cheaper air travel is necessarily “better” or represents progress.

WHO ARE YOU?

In relation to the changing concept of cultural identity, a new understanding of values shall also precipitate a constructive move to positive identification. The change in the concept of identity is perhaps the most important and noticeable change that will take place over the next 20 years. The more contemplative views of value and progress, and the post-modern cynicism about the super-structures which underlie our very idea of culture, will also be evident in the way we think of ourselves both as individuals, and in the context of societies.

Identity formulated as the negative space between the cultural “other” gives rise to questions about what kind of positive description of cultural identity can be offered. If this positive description is to be at all meaningful it must have concrete content which distinguishes an individual or group. Such thought experiments will become increasingly common in a climate of existential angst for both individuals and groups; such positive identities have also become more realisable with the creation of manifold, overlapping communities, precipitated by increased interdependency, communications and the internet. No features of identity (that are not banal or meaningless) are common to all people, however, in articulating one’s identity one is likely to find that all parts are held in common with some group – and this is extremely unlikely to be co-extensive with the national group.

Multiple, overlapping, interconnecting, contextually-relative identities are already commonplace. This is leading to exactly the kind of curiosity about value mentioned previously, and also to a realisation that the nomenclature of political representation as it stands, is divided on arbitrary or useless divisions, and is certainly not democratic. This realisation will give renewed momentum to reform of the UN as a forum cleaned of arbitrary political structure. Perhaps more importantly, this will disarm those people who would use identity politics to argue for some bigoted agenda; identity shall no longer have intrinsic direction but will be the very arena of serious thought and debate about principled action. It is, therefore, this realisation of multiple identities that will redress the status of identity and value in our cultures; these concepts will no longer be uncompromisable and incommunicable and whatever is claimed to be so shall be exposed as the domain of bigotry.

WHAT WILL SURVIVE GLOBALIZATION?

So what will replace these ways of thinking and what will the practical upshot be? In brief, the practical ramifications of this cultural change – that is a change in what is considered as culture – will not necessarily be obvious in 20 years time. However, I do think that people will more readily understand the claims of the global community on their local community, and will be able to see the connection between these two through the lens of value which will have a more central role in all Western lives. International politics shall be mediated in a new sympathetic environment that recognises commonalities and compromise. Whatever of culture is communicable and benign should survive globalisation, but the malign and meaningless cultural artefacts are likely to be shown to have no content or die out under the pressure of integration into a broader community. It will doubtless take much longer for the institutional structure to respond to this cultural change.

It took 2000 years for any significant change to be made to the form of the kouros statue. Its stylised shape took on great symbolism throughout the dominance of Egyptian civilisation, and only changed in the middle of the ancient Greek period. Eventually, experimentation and material cost led to the increased realism in the later statues but in what sense had the culture progressed or the associated values changed?

What is certain is that the statues were more realistic, but, beyond that, the cultural change is not directed. The same abstract values could be realised in many very different cultural manifestations. To suggest that statue making had progressed is rather to reveal one’s own cultural prejudice than to divine anything essential about that of the ancients.

Over the next 20 years there shall doubtless be many changes in the various cultures of the world, but the more significant, if less obvious change shall be in the assumptions about what our aspirations for humanity and the world as a whole are. These ambitions are only now taking shape in an environment that can allow the articulation of universal value and “human identity.”

POINTS FOR THE CLASSROOM (send comments to forum@futuretakes.org):

- *Wade discusses the prospect that present ways of thinking about culture will not survive the next 20 years, at least not in the same form. Do you agree, and why or why not?*
- *In 2020, will culture continue to be a criterion by which people differentiate or define their identity in 2020? Why or why not?*

- *The author states that British nationals are moving to French villages to enjoy the last bastions of British values. Meanwhile, in the US, some people are becoming disillusioned with “the American dream.” Will they likewise migrate to other parts of the world at some point, in quest of “the American dream,” and will similar migration patterns be observed for other nations?*
- *Will cultures continue to be a source of conflict vs. an arena of compromise and diplomacy? If so, will the conflict be fueled primarily by identity issues or by the loss of one’s way of life – examples of the latter including Aboriginal and Native peoples, small-scale farmers (as on the family farm), and the individual worker after layoff?*
- *What are possible alternatives to the dialectic as a mechanism of progress?*
- *Referencing *The Economist*, the author points out that people have started to value experiences more than assets. Will this become more pervasive, and in which countries or regions? In which nations or regions will people be most likely to have the experiences that will give them fulfillment? As more and more people do this, what is the long term impact on national and regional economies and on resource consumption? Will this herald a transition to a new economy that is not based on discontent?*
- *By which criteria, if any, can you challenge the conviction of “inexorable progress”? How will changing views regarding “progress” impact politics and policymaking?*
- *How will the demise of the career-for-life, and the increasing irrelevance of the nation-state (according to some viewpoints) impact one’s sense of identity – or multiple identities? (But will some regions and professions not experience these phenomena?) As stable reference points disappear and the pace of change itself accelerates, to what will people turn for identity and a sense of stability? One’s family? Tribe? Ethnicity? Other?*
- *Wade discusses global community. Will a global community emerge? (Also see “fission vs. fusion question and “identity-by-counterpoint” question in Linda Groff’s article, this issue.)*
- *Which useful lessons from some cultures will be lost due to global community or globalization?*
- *If a global community emerges, what present day business and governance structures will disappear?*