

The Power of Culture: An Exploration of Collective Transformation

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CONSCIOUSNESS, PASSION, & PURPOSE



CHESTER ARNOLD

“Hope remains only in the most difficult task of all: to reconsider everything from the ground up, so as to shape a living society inside a dying society.”

—ALBERT CAMUS

DOES CULTURE EVOLVE? OR DOES SOCIETY, through unconscious social agreements, simply recycle the same patterns century after century in updated packaging? Examining the social trends throughout recorded history, it would be easy to draw the conclusion that we are creatures of a deterministic world. Cultures steeped in Social Darwinian cycles of war, conquest, and power struggles might be our fate as long as humans inhabit the Earth. What is it in our cultural story that recycles war, exploitation, and empire? What are the unconscious social agreements that make these cycles all but inevitable?

Every culture has stories about its origins and history. These stories weave together a cultural mythos, a way of making sense of the world by defining beliefs, values, and appropriate behavior. Mythos provides the foundation for cultural patterns and incorporates both conscious and unconscious social agreements that are passed down from generation to generation. Although mythos offers structure and meaning, it also confines and limits. If we wish to transform embedded patterns, we need to understand our cultural stories and what needs they satisfy.

Noam Chomsky, recently voted the world’s number one public intellectual, says that the principles of language and moral judgment are part of the human condition. These are innate abilities. But culture has an extraordinary influence on both language and moral judgment. Undoing ingrained patterns is far more difficult than many personal growth workshops would lead us to believe. Certain patterns we exhibit on a personal level are reinforced by the culture, so attempting to transform them becomes problematic in a society that is invested in maintaining the old patterns.

Philosopher and psychologist Herbert Marcuse (1898–1979) claimed that the optimal development of a person’s potential or the realization of their individuality couldn’t be attained within our current culture. He did not believe they were unattainable because of any human limitations or even because of limitations in psychological or spiritual methods, but because “the

established civilization, by its very structure, denies such a transformation.”

To pursue personal transformation without being engaged in social transformation or to engage in social transformation without a commitment to personal transformation is to continue a well-established cultural pattern: dualism. The separation of body from soul, the personal from the political, the spiritual from the material, all suggest that one area is more important than the other or should take precedence. Believing that all of creation is one is not the same as living as if we are one. The former is a personal belief; the latter is the integration of theory and practice, or praxis.

CONFRONTING THE DOMINATOR MYTHOS

Both Marcuse and evolutionary theorist Riane Eisler identify a dominator system of social organization that has prevailed throughout recorded history. The dominator mythos, which also characterizes our current culture, supports authoritarian power structures and patriarchal social values. It glorifies war, exploitation, and the conquering of new frontiers. Rebellions and revolutions have been followed by counter-revolutions and restorations. As historian Hannah Arendt put it, “The most radical revolutionary will become a conservative the day after the revolution.” As a society we have been trained in the dominator mythos, and we have internalized dominator values and dominator methods of action.

These values and methods are held in check by conscious and unconscious social agreements. Three examples that bear exploration are (1) the belief that war is part of human nature, (2) the selective memory of historical events, and (3) the role of hero.

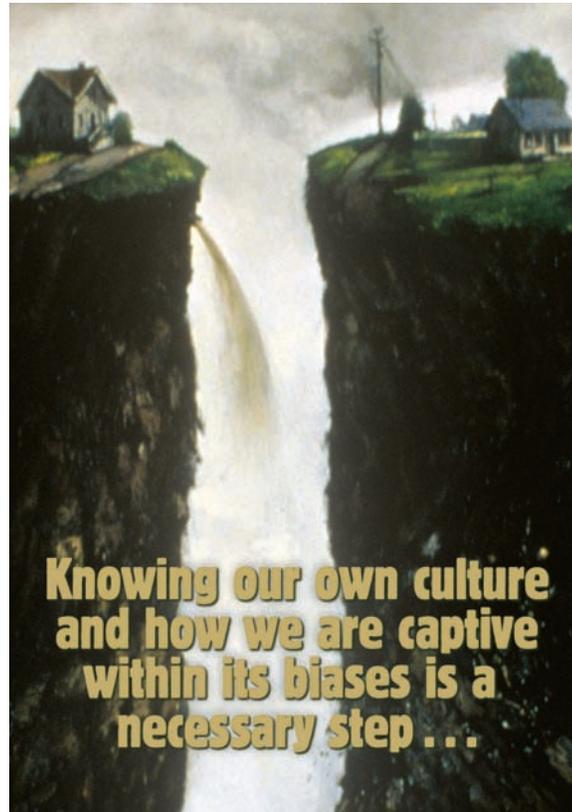
The agreement that war is an innate quality of human nature serves the dominator system of social organization by maintaining a mythos about the inevitability of war. Not only does war prop up ruling elites and expand their economic opportunities, it also maintains a value

system that says might makes right. Even if we don't accept the idea that war is part of human nature, we are influenced by it because it pervades the entire culture. Entertainment and propaganda reinforce this assumption on a daily basis. Cultural beliefs are also held in check because people want to fit in and appear normal. Peer pressure and self-censorship thus become other means of sustaining the status quo.

Selective memory of historical events is common to all cultures. Beliefs we hold about our nation, our people, and our religious or ethnic groups will determine how we construct a historical record that supports these beliefs. Some historical facts will be omitted or glossed over, others will be embellished with legend and larger-than-life heroes, and some will simply not be seen. What we are capable of seeing or not seeing reflects our relationship to the existing mythos, which also defines what we call "reality."

Although I have read stories about people who could not physically see what they could not incorporate into their frame of reality, I never experienced it in such a concrete way as I did recently. I was invited to a function near my home in Northern California; unfamiliar with the street on the invitation, I consulted MapQuest.com. The directions said to take St. Vincent Drive directly off of Highway 101. I had driven that section of freeway hundreds of times in the past eight years and had never seen an exit for St. Vincent Drive. The day after my MapQuest query, I was driving down that highway, and lo and behold, there was the sign—that I had never seen!—announcing St. Vincent Drive.

My story suggests one reason why facts alone don't convince many people. If they don't fit the frames of reference, the facts will be viewed as skewed or simply untrue. So the reason for focusing on cultural mythos as



the relevant factor in societal transformation is that it provides those frames of reference. Knowing our own culture and how we are captive within its biases is a necessary step in learning how transformation takes place, whether we are talking about personal or social transformation, our own or someone else's. Even our quest for personal growth or spiritual development has arisen from a particular set of beliefs. How does our culture influence the type of search we undertake? What beliefs in our mythos morph into tenets of our new philosophy? Do we understand that relationship?

Another common agreement in most cultures throughout recorded history is the archetype of the hero. The belief is that heroes show us what is possible and inspire greatness. Often, heroes exalt some type of sacrifice for a greater good. They also offer projection screens for us to create idealized personas that we can honor, respect, fear, or adore. Its counterpart, the antihero, provides us with another type of projection screen: the scapegoat, someone to carry our shadow. The antihero gives us a place to indulge our hatred, feel righteous, and make war.

War propaganda relies on selective social agreements about history, the identities of the hero and antihero, and the belief that war is an acceptable way to resolve a problem. If one of these three components is missing in a society, it is much more difficult for the powers-that-be to wage war. Since we are steeped in the cultural mythos of the hero, for example, it is difficult to imagine being without these icons. We need a much better understanding of how the hero and antihero maintain the dominator paradigm. What need does the hero serve? Is there a better way for this archetype to emerge? What would a culture without heroes look like? States that did not engage in heroic battles, annex territory, expand empires, or defer to powerful rulers were not considered important by

historians with our particular cultural bias. Such stories did not fit our profile of advanced civilizations or states; hence, they have been omitted from most of our history books.

CULTURAL INTERVENTION

Breaking an addiction or eradicating a deeply entrenched pattern often requires an intervention. As a society, we have not yet accepted our codependence with the patterns that keep us revolving in the dominator paradigm. One type of cultural intervention is to begin questioning our cultural assumptions and to stop being passive in the dominator myths. Taking on such sacred cows as our beliefs about gender, economic systems, race and ethnicity or the tenets and directives in religion and spirituality brings us face to face with some of our blind spots and unquestioned beliefs. To create a new society from the ground up, as Camus advises, requires that we examine the beliefs and stories that make up our cultural myths.

Historian Gerda Lerner says, “To step outside of patriarchal (or dominator) thought means being skeptical toward every known system of thought (and) being critical of all assumptions, ordering values, and definitions.” Since our thinking is trained within the myths of patriarchy or domination, our training is suspect. This means that the systems we create from this training are also suspect.

So, are we trapped in a maze with no escape? Are we endlessly pushing a revolving door? Where is the exit ramp on this mythic highway?

Primatologist researchers such as Frans de Waal—author of *Our Inner Ape* (Riverhead, 2005) and research scientist at the Yerkes Primate Center at Emory University—insist that warlike behavior is only one possible option for humans. Noting the compassionate and altruistic nature of the bonobos, they find primates that shun aggressive behavior—that would rather make love than war—and do so regularly. De Waal and biologist Bruce Lipton have demonstrated that we do not need to exist in a deterministic or dominator culture. But a certain level of consciousness—both about our inner and outer worlds—is necessary to overcome the patterns that are programmed on default mode.

ABOUT PRAXIS PEACE INSTITUTE

The background for this article is the Culture and Mythos Series that Praxis Peace Institute initiated in February 2005. It consists of lectures, workshops, discussions, and research groups and covers a two-year period.

Through these presentations, we are conducting an in-depth exploration of culture, its influences, and how we might transform cultural patterns. Speakers and workshop leaders have included Angeles Arrien, Riane Eisler, Tom Hayden, Sam Keen, David Korten, George Lakoff, Rabbi Michael Lerner, and Richard Tarnas, among others.

Praxis Peace Institute will convene a six-day conference, “Transforming Culture: From Empire to Earth Charter,” in Dubrovnik, Croatia, June 4–10, 2007.

The Institute of Noetic Sciences will be a cosponsor and host a one-day program within the conference. For more information, visit www.praxispeace.org.

In his 1995 Pulitzer Prize–nominated book, *On Killing* (Back Bay Books, 1996), retired U.S. Army psychologist David Grossman writes about the psychological conditioning that soldiers received between World War II and Vietnam to help them overcome their innate resistance to killing. The result: 90 percent of the soldiers in battle fired on the enemy in the Vietnam War compared to only 20 percent in World War II. This clearly demonstrates that most humans are not innate killers. They have to be highly trained, conditioned, and even brainwashed to accept the role of killer.

Another type of intervention is conflict resolution and the development of communication skills. The field of conflict resolution is a creative process based on mutual respect, empathy, and the desire to behave more responsibly toward one another. It emphasizes the cooperative side of our human capacity and strives to undo the conditioning that justifies indulged anger and warfare. Conflict resolution and responsible communication not only propose alternative values and behavior but they also plant the seeds for an alternative mythos—one that could eventually alter the social pattern of war. Will a critical mass of humanity, however defined, commit to this alternative vision of conflict? If so, we might actually uproot a very old social pattern. It is not the avoidance of conflict that leads to peace; it is the responsible and respectful handling of differences that establishes peaceful principles.

A COOPERATIVE MODEL

So, do partnership models that thrive without warfare actually exist? The answer is yes. The former city-state of Dubrovnik in Croatia, for example, was an alternative model to the accepted ideal of empire, but very few people outside of the Balkans know anything about it. Consciously created in the 1200s as a state that would neither engage in warfare nor conquer territory, the founding city council members decided to have no monarch or long-term rulers. The council would elect one of its members as governor for a mere thirty days; that way, long-term personal goals and temptations of power abuse were averted. The council members also focused on building good diplomatic relations with the known world at that time and had embassies in fifty cities. They became a major port on the Adriatic Sea and excelled in trade,

diplomacy, and civil society. They built a plumbing system that would make the chamber pots of Europe seem primitive. They outlawed slavery in 1416, before any other European state. They built the earliest quarantines to protect their citizens from the plagues sweeping Europe.

Their most significant accomplishment was a legacy of more than six hundred years of peace up to the end of the Dubrovnik city-state in 1808. Heroes were in very short supply in old Dubrovnik. Without the need to conquer or create enemies, to set up classes of divine-right rulers, or to create heroes of mythic stature, Dubrovnik placed a higher value on its citizens and civil society. The few statues in the walled city were dedicated to Sveti Vlaho (St. Blaise), the patron saint of Dubrovnik, and to Mijo Prahac, a commoner who left his fortune to the city. Above the doorway of Dubrovnik's city offices is the Latin inscription from its city-state days, translated as "Forget private business; care for public affairs." No statues of rulers, generals, sports heroes, or celebrities. This heritage of justice and egalitarianism has been credited by some to have helped Dubrovnik escape the worst of the killing and conflagration in Yugoslavia's recent civil war.

THE ENGAGED CITIZEN AS AN EMERGING ARCHETYPE

The greatest hindrances to democracy are not terrorism, a despotic ruler, or controlling special interests—they are apathy, hopelessness, and cynicism. Fortunately, this pattern is being interrupted by an emerging citizen archetype, an aware individual who engages in both personal and social transformation simultaneously.

Transforming culture will not be simple or easy. It will take more than prayer, good intentions, and meditation. It will also take more than going to protests, signing petitions, and lobbying for peace. The patterns are deeply embedded; they will not move outside the cultural comfort zone without serious intervention, awakened consciousness, and civic participation. 🌍

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