

INITIAL THOUGHTS ON THE FUTURES OF CULTURES AND COMMUNICATION

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Following are some fragmented ideas about our project made in the absence of any discussion with any member of the project planning group. Thus, they are strictly tentative, showing some of the alternative directions the project might take, according to my initial, and isolated, understanding of the project. They are also based on the assumption that I am particularly responsible for organizing some thoughts around the topic, "the futures of culture and communication."

I am sure I will have a completely different understanding upon the completion of our initial planning session! Therefore please take the following as just my brief thoughts aimed at getting the ball rolling without any presumption on my part that I even know what game, much less the rules of the game, we are playing with the ball!

1. In many ways, "culture" and "communication" (or at least "expression" if not actually "communication") are one and the same thing. "Cultures" result from the way we humans attempt to give meaning to the environment around us. This attempt always involves individual and social "expression" and/or "communication" (in some set of modes or other).

2. At the present time, most discussions of the futures of culture and communication center on the futures of print-based and/or AV-based communication technologies, and their probable individual-social consequences. This is proper, and I imagine this will be our (my?) main focus. But communication takes many, many other forms whose "futures" might be focused on as well, or instead.

3. For example, speech. Thus the futures of the spoken languages of selected cultures might be studied. Or the futures of a single world

language (or several world languages, either "natural" languages, such as English, or "artificial" languages, such as Esperanto, or some other) might be examined. Or the futures of lectures and conferences--even of conversations.

4. But "cultural communication" is also found in architecture and urban design. We might, for example, want to study the "communication" implied in certain contrasting cities, such as Brasilia and Pyongyang vs. Las Vegas and Hong Kong, or the future of architecture per se (Clem Bezold and the Institute of Alternative Futures have recently done an excellent study on this for the American Institute of Architects).

A related theme would be the original future-oriented meanings of historical constructions like the Pyramids, Stonehenge, and the Easter Island faces vs. architecture in the style of Stalin, Hitler, and Mussolini vs. the architectural styles of the World Fairs, from the Crystal Palace, through the 1939-40 New York World's Fairs to Disneyland, etc. and their futures.

5. Another facet might be food as cultural communication. I am reminded of how Simon Nicholson used food in this way as a part of the Unesco workshop on "Forms of Presentation" (FoP Shop) meeting in Oxford a decade ago. But Coca Colonization and the omnipresence of McDonalds and Kentucky Fried Chicken, as well as the rapid global emergence of pre-eating hot towels and sushi bars, is another aspect.

The probable spread of vegetarianism and "health" and/or "ethics" related eating is another.

The history of preserving and packaging food (salted and eventually tinned foods, Japanese "bentos", vacuum packing, freeze drying, and the eventual emergence of entirely "artificial food") is another.

[Emerging issue: "It will be illegal in the future to waste precious land by growing food on it."]

6. A completely different slant would look at communication in certain social groups (or "subcultures"), for example, the family, the formal educational system, the political system, bureaucracies, the economic system, religious and other belief systems.

What is "said" in these "cultures" would be contrasted with who says it and how it is said vs. what is actually done, by whom and how, and their probable future developments assessed.

The futures of these subcultures as dominant modes of communication within the larger culture, vs. the rise of new ones, might also be our topic.

7. We also are reminded that there are different "body languages" in different cultures (e.g., the different meaning in different cultures of how close or how far apart people stand from each other; the different meaning of touching; etc.).

8. And what about humor--satire, irony, the absurd?

9. And, god forbid that Unesco should fund such a project, sex (and non-sex: flirtation, harassment, rape) as communication, and their alternative futures.

10. And the future of the "right to communicate" vs. things that are forbidden to be communicated, and other political aspects of communication and its futures in different cultures.

11. Then there is the matter of cultural change and persistence. It might be said that in traditional and even most agricultural societies, a culture and its modes of communication tended not to change--or at least they seemed not to change: because of the necessary over-reliance on speech, cultures changed without it being possible to notice and/or be sure of the change, given the technical inability to "document" that change occurred--indeed, to document accurately what was even "said"--as any participant in a heated oral argument will attest.

Cultures thus tended to persist relatively unchanged, or to change only slowly or imperceptibly, except when precipitated by natural disasters and/or conquest by other cultures (which latter arguably became the dominant mode of significant cultural change after the emergence of "civilization" and writing).

12. At the present time, change in cultural communication occurs through two main ways, sometimes separately, often jointly: political-ideological will and new technology.

13. The former, will, is found in the creation of intentional communities within larger cultural systems (e.g., the emergence of various religious groups in the late European Middle Ages, and in the US in the 19th century and in the 1960s). Indeed, some of the settlements by some of the Europeans of North America and the eventual creation of the United States could be an example of "willful" creation of new cultures. So, certainly, would be the creation of the USSR.

14. If we were to continue on this tack, the recent emergence (or re-emergence) and the future of the following new cultures (and/or others like these) might be the focus of our research:

Islam (Ziauddin Sardar might do this)
Tenri (Japan. Akio Inoue)
Juche (North Korea. Myong-U Kim)
Prout (India. Sohail Inayatullah did his PhD dissertation on this)

15. In a related mode, the evolving cultures of "Peace," "Gaia," and "Feminism" might be the focus of other studies. There are a vast number of WFSF and IPSA members who could do the first. Chris Jones wrote his dissertation on Gaia, and there is a global network focusing on "her" as well. Gaia might also be compared and contrasted as an alternative future to the culture of "science," especially that of the old "positivistic" science, and its handmaiden, the culture of "technology" (which I find so fascinating!)

Persons imagining and/or creating "feminist" cultures are even more numerous.

16. Another related focus would be the futures of a "global culture" vs. the re-emergence of "suppressed cultures" (e.g., Estonians, the Welch, Catalonians) and the re-emergence of the cultures of "indigenous peoples," such as the native people in North and South America, in Hawaii, and elsewhere.

17. In contrast, there is ample evidence to support the contention that "new technology creates new culture." Many studies document the way "literacy" destroyed "preliterate" cultures historically (e.g., contrast oral Greek culture of Socrates' time, with Plato's, when writing was replacing poetry, music, and dancing as dominant communication modes, with Aristotle's time, when writing--and thus "Aristotelian logic"--became, and to this day remains, supreme). There also are ample case studies of this process in modern times as well.

18. Similarly, Elizabeth Eisenstein, following Marshall McLuhan's pioneering lead, shows how the printing press destroyed the oral/scribal cultures of the Middle Ages and helped to create "modern" cultures.

19. Which reminds us that we speak of "communicable diseases." Disease is a major destroyer of old, and creator of new, cultures. The Black Plague was a sturdy companion of the printing press, and AIDS may turn the trick in the future.

In addition, people are "sick" differently in different cultures.

21. But to continue to focus on technology as a destroyer of old, and creator of new, cultures leads now to the study of the impact of radio, films, TV, video, computers, personal computers, etc., on modernity and the creation of post-modernity.

21. And that then obviously brings me to my own favorite culture(s) of the future--the cultures of artificially intelligent entities--the cultures of robots, and the cultures implied in the rapid emergence of a "wholly artificial world."

22. [Note: I suggest that any research into "new cultures," whether created by "will" or by "technology," involve at least two-person teams. At least one person would be "within" and advocating the evolving system and at least one other would be "outside" (but not necessarily opposed to or even skeptical of it--though such is a possible alternative)].

23. On a completely different level of concern, assuming I have some kind of continuing involvement in, or perhaps even responsibility for, the future of this project what might that be? Among the (not necessarily mutually-exclusive) alternatives I have thought of are futures of:

- Culture and Communication generally: all or some of the items 1-22;
- Cultures of electronic technologies, Robots and/or Artificial Cultures, specifically;
- Whatever the subject, for the Pacific Region only;
- Or something else entirely!