



The Paradox of Culture

Edward T. Hall

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Professor of Anthropology at Northwestern University and former director of the State Department's Point Four Training Program, Dr. Edward T. Hall has authored two books that develop the concept of culture as a system of communication: *The Silent Language* and *The Hidden Dimension*, and has defined the new field of "Proxemics," the study of man's experience of distance and his use of space as being a function of culture, status, and personality.

The best minds of each age inevitably come to grips with alienation in its various forms. The explanations keep changing, but there can be no doubt that it represents one of the core issues in man's life. Today one can observe at least three areas in which serious alienation occurs: in the self; between men; and between man and nature. In light of these explanations which keep shifting with time, it would be misleading, presumptuous, and wrong to take serious issue with the basic psychoanalytic explanations promulgated by Freud in his lifetime *in the context in which they were formulated*. Instead, I would wish first to add a dimension to a small portion of the Freudian scheme, and second to build on some of Fromm's thinking as it can be applied to culture and its effect on man's intellectual processes. Thinking of Erich Fromm's work over the years, I have been increasingly amazed by his ability to bridge two completely different types of intellectual processes, the world of myth and the dream, and the linear, "logical" written word of the Western world. In the final analysis, I would rather suspect that while Fromm is best known for his ideas, one of his main contributions will prove to be the way in which he has cut through the complexity of uniting these two disparate worlds. How did Fromm do this? For one thing, he has always been deeply involved in the human situation. He values man for what he is, in a culture that has done everything it could to reduce man to nothing. And that is

where the root of the problem lies. That is why one must strive to go beyond, building on the theories constructed by Freud and Fromm, and include at least the foundations of the hidden cultural matrix in which human thoughts are set. It is an understanding of this hidden matrix that psychoanalysis lacks as an essential component in its theoretical underpinning. [219]

The latent level of culture appears to be the source of much of the difficulty that we see in the world today. In my opinion, Western culture has produced a split in man by channeling his physical, mental, emotional, and social energies in contradictory ways. Western man is controlled by hidden rules—the nature of which he is only vaguely aware of at best, and completely oblivious to most of the time. What is more, until these patterns are known and understood, not only will man be alienated from himself, but he will be forever limited by hidden binding constraints.

In many long conversations with Fromm, he taught me most of what I know about psychoanalysis, and in particular his own contributions to psychoanalytic theory. There was no way at that time for me to repay my debt to him, for I was unable to put into words the idea that under the deceptive superficiality of surface culture, of which Fromm was fully aware, there lay hidden some deep and dangerous mental and moral traps. Historically, these traps were first identified in language. Edward Sapir, writ-



ing forty years ago, observed that in language (an important part of culture) man had created an instrument which was quite a different thing from what is commonly supposed. He states:

The relation between language and experience is often misunderstood ... (it) actually defines experience for us by reason of its formal completeness and because of our unconscious projection of its implicit expectations into the field of experience ... language is much like a mathematical system, which ... becomes elaborated into a self-contained conceptual system which *previsages all possible experience* in accordance with certain accepted formal limitations ... categories such as number, gender, case, tense, mode, voice, "aspect" and a host of others, ... *are not so much discovered in experience as imposed upon it...* (italics mine).¹

Working with other cultural systems, I have found evidence that it is not just in language that one finds such constraints, but elsewhere as well, provided of course that one is fortunate enough to have studied cultures sufficiently different from his own to bring its latent aspects into focus. Two widely divergent experiences, psychoanalysis and work with other cultures, have convinced me of several things concerning man's intellectual processes. First, thinking itself is greatly modified by culture; second, Western man only uses a small fraction of his mental capabilities; third, [220] there are many different and legitimate ways of thinking; fourth, we in the West value one way of thinking above all the others. The one that we favor we call "logic," which is a linear system that has been with us since Socrates. For Western man, his system of logic is synonymous with the truth, it is the only road to reason, all of which makes Freud's discoveries even more remarkable. When Freud educated us to the complexities of the psyche, forcing us to look at dreams as a mental process that evaded the linearity of manifest thought, in so doing he shook the very

¹ Edward Sapir, "Conceptual Categories in Primitive Languages," *Science*, 74 (1931), 570.

foundations of the scientific world. Fromm has added to Freudian theory, and with his characteristic brilliance, managed to bridge the gap between these two systems of thought²—the linear world of logic and the integrative world of dreams.

Since the interpretation of dreams, myths, and acts is always to some degree an individual matter,³ I cannot help asking myself what Fromm would have added to my own interpretation of a *New York Times* news item⁴ about a police dog that had been discovered on an uninhabited island near New York.⁵ Visible only from a distance, the dog, nicknamed "the King of Ruffle Bar," had managed to sustain itself for an estimated two years, was apparently in good health, and presumably would have survived his semiwild state, barring accidents, for the rest of his natural life. However, some well-meaning soul sighted the dog and reported him to the ASPCA, thereby setting the bureaucratic wheels in motion. Since "the King" could not be approached by people, a baited trap was set. According to *The New York Times* report: "... everyday a police launch from Sheepshead Bay takes off for Ruffle Bar, the uninhabited swampy island of the dog. Everyday, a police helicopter hovers for a half hour or more over Ruffle Bar." A radio report of the event broadcast at the time, detailed descriptions of how the helicopter harassed the dog in futile efforts to catch him (he refused to enter the trap), or at least to get a better view of him. Police were quoted as saying the dog "looked in good shape." When questioned, representatives of the ASPCA said: "When we catch the dog, we [221] will have it examined by a vet, and if it is in good health,

² Erich Fromm, *The Forgotten Language* (New York: Rinehart and Co., 1951).

³ No matter what point of departure one uses, symbols inevitably have both a shared and an individual component. No two people ever use the same word in exactly the same way, and the more abstract the symbol, the greater the likelihood of a sizable individual component.

⁴ *The New York Times*, February 20, 1970.

⁵ The island, Ruffle Bar, is situated in Jamaica Bay, about five miles southwest of JFK International Airport.



we will find a *happy* home for it."⁶

If the above story had been a dream or a myth instead of a news report, there is little doubt as to its interpretation. Both the latent and the manifest content are quite clear, which may explain why this local news item was given national coverage. I find, as I go over the story, that free associations come to mind on different levels. The story epitomizes the little man against the big bureaucracy. There is also a delusional side which cannot be overlooked. I refer to the ASPCA which became obsessed with capturing the dog. Once triggered, the ASPCA involved the police with a remorseless, mindless persistence terrifyingly characteristic of twentieth-century bureaucracies once they are activated. Interestingly enough, the police, having known about the dog for an estimated two years, had been content to leave him on the island. Emotionally they sided with "the King," even while carrying out their orders. "Why don't they leave the dog alone?" said one policeman; another observed, "The dog is as happy as a pig in a puddle."⁷

The delusional aspects have to do with the institutionalized necessity to control "everything," and the widely accepted notion that the bureaucrat knows what is best—never for a moment does he doubt the validity of the bureaucratic solution. It is also slightly insane, or at least indicative of our incapacity to order priorities with any common sense, to spend a thousand or more dollars for helicopters, gasoline, and salaries for the sole purpose of bureaucratic neatness. Even more recently, a *New York Times* news item⁸ reported a U.S. Park Police campaign to stamp out the time-honored custom of kite flying on the grounds of the Washington monument. Their charter to harass the kite fliers lies in an old law written by Congress

supposedly to keep the Wright Brothers planes from becoming fouled in kite strings.

The psychoanalyst Laing is convinced that the Western world is mad.⁹ [222] These stories of the dog and the kite fliers symbolize man's plight as well as any recent events I know,¹⁰ and bolster Laing's view. However, it is not man who is crazy as much as *his institutions*¹¹ and *those culture patterns that determine his behavior*. It is my opinion that we in the Western world are alienated from ourselves, and from nature, and that we labor under a number of delusions, one of the important ones being that life makes sense, i.e., that we are sane. We persist in this view despite massive evidence to the contrary. We live fragmented, compartmentalized lives in which contradictions are carefully sealed off from each other; we think linearly rather than comprehensively,¹² and we do this

⁹ R. D. Laing, *The Politics of Experience* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1967). Erich Fromm also speaks of "the dark period of ... insanity we are passing through," in *Sigmund Freud's Mission* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959). The notion that the world is mad is not restricted to the psychiatrists and psychoanalysts. Ada Louise Huxtable, the architecture critic, writes in *The New York Times*, March 15, 1970, "... one *practical* decision after another has led to the brink of cosmic disaster and there we sit, in pollution and chaos, courting the end; of the earth. Just how practical can you get?" (italics mine). Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* is devoted to the same theme.

¹⁰ The other insanities, like the war in Vietnam, spending more on space than on the cities and housing, or more on an unwanted supersonic transport (keeping 30,000 people awake for each passenger carried), are so vast and grandiose that the mind boggles at the enormity of the outrages that man can commit against himself. Somehow, the dog's plight not only symbolizes man's drive to be himself, but it is also on a scale that one can comprehend.

¹¹ John Kenneth Galbraith holds that the New Economics will also reflect the view that it is not the consumer but business and government bureaucracies that determine the economic state of the nation.

¹² "Linear" and "comprehensive" are not being used as synonyms for "irrational" and "rational." Quite the opposite—sequential or "linear" statements are suited to solving certain kinds of problems, whereas comprehensive processes are better adapted to other kinds. *What is irrational is using one where the other is required*, just as it is irrational to use a sports car to

⁶ Remarks attributed to a representative of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA), (italics mine). A *New York Times* dateline of February 23, 1970, describes the capture of the dog and repeated the statement about the "happy home."

⁷ Note the imagery, not commonly the type reported coming from the mouths of New York's finest. I am also sure that there was no thought of the implications of the metaphor.

⁸ *The New York Times*, April 23, 1970.



not through conscious design, or because we are not intelligent or capable, but because of the way in which our culture structures life in subtle but highly consistent ways which are not consciously formulated. That is, culture has components that influence us in ways that are outside or beyond our awareness. The cultural currents referred to are like the invisible jet streams in the skies that determine the course of a storm; they shape much of our lives, yet their influence is only beginning to be identified. Given our linear, step-by-step, compartmentalized way of thinking,¹³ it is virtually [223] impossible for man to consider complex events comprehensively, or to weigh priorities according to a system of common good.

Because our welfare—perhaps our survival—depends on our understanding these cultural currents and their hidden patterns, I should like to discuss some interrelated facets of these recently discovered components of culture. I refer to only four of an unknown number of disparate topics, patterns, and events which are mutually reinforcing (synergistic) in their effects when they occur together in a single culture.

1. Man's tremendous success in evolving his extensions.
2. The manner in which time and space are

pull a plow or a tractor to race with. See note 13 below.

¹³ Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), and "The Effect of Printed Books on Language in the 16th Century," in *Exploration in Communication* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960). Buckminster Fuller and Marshall McLuhan both in public utterances and their writings have distinguished between two different ways of thinking. McLuhan talks about linear and nonlinear thinking; Fuller about comprehensive and noncomprehensive thinking. The distinction, while popularized by McLuhan and Fuller, is also made by less widely known, but thoroughly respected academicians. A recent article in *Science*, November 28, 1970, by Beryl L. Crowe comes to the same conclusion that I have reached: namely, that the answer to some of our most basic problems lies in the way we think. Crowe also quotes Aaron Widnysky (1964) concerning a comprehensive study of the budgetary process whereby the government "proceeded by a calculus that is *sequential* and *incremental* rather than *comprehensive*" (italics mine).

unconsciously structured and used.

3. The structure of the relationship of: (a) information to (b) context in order to derive (c) meaning.
4. The manner in which our institutions, particularly our schools, compartmentalize virtually everything.

The world we live in has an internal dynamic which must be analyzed. The following quote briefly summarizes a few of its relevant features:

In the United States we allow individuals to do virtually anything: pollute the lakes, contaminate the atmosphere, build a high-rise next door that makes our own living space uninhabitable because it shuts off the view, create walled-in slums in public housing high-rise, transform a potential recreation area on a lake into a run-down industrial waste, plow up the countryside, bulldoze trees, and build thousands of identical prefabricated bungalows in open country. Peter Blake in his book, *God's Own Junkyard*, has documented this aspect of our anarchic and anomic approach to planning. I have discovered (to my sorrow) that in building a house, plumbers and electricians often make important decisions overruling the owner and the architect: they change walls with abandon, run pipes where they should never be, and arrange interior spaces at will. Similarly, important decisions on the [224] national scene are often made by officials, both public and private, who have little or no knowledge of the consequences of their actions.¹⁴

In addition to the historical features of our culture, there are synchronic processes at work which must be considered. If some mad scientist had set out to develop a cultural system for confusing and controlling man, he could hardly have done better. Let us examine how we are captives of our own systems of handling time

¹⁴ Edward T. Hall, "Human Needs and Inhuman Cities," *The Fitness of Man's Environment, Smithsonian Annual II* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1968); reprinted in *Ekistics*, vol. 27, no. 60 (March, 1969).



and space—beginning with time. American time is what I have termed "monochrome," that is, Americans usually prefer to do one thing at a time, which requires some kind of scheduling, either implicit or explicit. Not all people conform to monochrome norms, some being more resistant than others. Nevertheless, there are social and other pressures that tend to keep most Americans within the monochronic frame. However, when Americans interact with people of foreign cultures, those cultures with polychrome time systems cause Americans great difficulty.

Monochronic time (M-time) and polychrome time (P-time) represent two radically different solutions to the use of both time and space as organizing frames for activities. Space is included because the two systems (time and space) are functionally interrelated. M-time emphasizes schedules, segmentation, and promptness. P-time systems are characterized by several things happening at once. Emphasis is on involvement of people and completion of transactions rather than adhering to preset schedules. P-time is treated as much less tangible than M-time. P-time is apt to be considered a point rather than a ribbon or a road. What is more, the point is sacred.¹⁵ Americans overseas are stressed in many ways when confronted by P-time systems such as those in Latin America and the Middle East. In the markets and stores of Mediterranean countries, one finds himself surrounded by other customers vying for the attention of a clerk. There is no apparent order as to who is served next and confusion and clamor abound. On another level, within the governmental bureaucracies of these countries, a cabinet officer may have a large reception area outside his private office. There are almost always small groups waiting in this area, and these groups are visited by government officials who move around the room, conferring with each group. Much of their business is [225] transacted in public instead of having a series of private meetings in an inner office. Particularly distressing to Americans is the way in which appoint-

ments are handled by polychrome people. Appointments just don't carry the same weight as they do in America. Things are constantly shifted around, nothing seems solid or firm, particularly plans for the future. There are always changes in the most important plans right up to the very last minute.

In contrast, within the Western world, man finds little in life that is exempt from the iron hand of M-time. In fact, his social and business life is completely time-dominated. Time is so thoroughly woven into the fabric of existence that we are hardly aware of the degree to which it determines virtually everything we do, including the molding of relations with others in many subtle ways. By scheduling, we compartmentalize; this makes it possible to concentrate on one thing at a time, but, it also *denies us context* (to which I will return later). Since scheduling by its very nature selects what will and will not be attended and permits only a limited or fixed number of events within a given time period, one can see immediately the outlines of a system of priorities for both people and functions. Important things are taken up first, and allotted the most time; unimportant things are left to last or omitted if time runs out.¹⁶

Space and its handling also signals impor-

¹⁵ Edward T. Hall, "The Voices of Time," in *The Silent Language* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1959).

¹⁶ Anyone who wants to study priorities in the United States at virtually any level has but to examine time allocations. The point is not to be fooled—some things that we *say* are important are not so important as they seem. (Time fathers spend with children, for example.) Furthermore, the relationship of the number of events to time is linear, sequential, and fixed. You can only increase the number of events by decreasing the time allotted to each, since each event is a transaction and has both an attack or warm-up phase as well as a decay or terminating phase. A theoretical point is reached where productive time (the time between warm-up and terminating) drops to zero and the whole day is devoted to greeting and saying good-by to people with whom no business is done. To get around this M-time, executives are forced to delegate responsibility to others who are in the grip of the time process, except that time must be taken out for them to interact and pass on the information they were hired to gather. This not only forces M-time people to add layers to bureaucracies, *but* sets a theoretical limit on the size of all bureaucracies.



tance and priorities. The amount of space allocated and where a person is placed within an organization tells a lot about him and his relation to the organization. Equally significant is how he handles his time. In fact, discretion over scheduling—the ability to choose when one will be in the office—is an indicator of success in our culture. The exceptions are salesmen, whose jobs demand that they be away from their desks, and those who hold unusual positions. [226]

An example of the latter is the city editor of a newspaper; his job is inherently polychrome.¹⁷ The importance of place—where activities are permitted to occur—has become so much a part of modern bureaucracy that some employees whose performance would be enormously enhanced if they could get away from their desks are seldom permitted to do so.

For M-time people reared in the North European tradition, time is linear and segmented like a road or a ribbon extending forward into the future and backward to the past. It is also tangible. They speak of it as being saved, spent, wasted, lost, made up, accelerated, slowed down, crawling, and running out. These metaphors should be taken very seriously, because they express the basic manner in which time is conceived as an unconscious determinant, or frame on which everything else is built. M-time scheduling is used as a classification system that orders life. With the exception of birth and death, all important activities are scheduled. It should be mentioned that without schedules, and something very much like the M-time system, it is doubtful if our industrial civilization could have developed the way it did. Schedules were certainly important; in fact, they were crucial to industrial development in the initial stages.¹⁸ Monochronic time seals off one or two

people from the group and intensifies relationships with *one* other person or at most, two or three people. M-time in this sense is like a room with a closed door that ensures privacy. The only problem is that you must vacate the "room" at the end of fifteen minutes or an hour, a day, or a week, depending on the schedule, and make way for the next thing in line. Failure to make way by intruding on the time of the person waiting is bad manners as well as a special way of being inconsiderate.

The point is that monochronic time is arbitrary and *imposed*, that is, *learned*, but because it is so thoroughly learned and so thoroughly integrated into our culture, it is treated as though it were the only natural and "logical" way of organizing life. Yet, it is neither inherent in man's own rhythms and creative drives nor is it existential in nature. Furthermore, the [227] functional-structural aspect of organizations, particularly business and government bureaucracies, is the *subordination of man to the organization*, which is accomplished largely by the way in which the time-space systems are handled.

In a very real sense, time and space are functions of each other. How can you meet a deadline if you are constantly interrupted? How can you listen deeply and carefully to a patient's account of his life without proper architectural screening?¹⁹ It is in this respect that the cultural

not keep or maintain commitments on time until a generation of children raised in factories and conditioned to the whistle began ordering their lives according to this new synthetic system.

¹⁹ I am referring here to ideal patterns. Many people have to put up with spaces that cripple them in the performance of their jobs. Some of this comes about because of the tight way in which space, as well as time, is locked into the bureaucratic ranking system. It is quite clear, for example, that case workers in welfare departments require the privacy of an office, yet the rank of their activity and the low status accorded the needy are such as to make the office bureaucratically unfeasible (offices are for important people and their activities). Incongruities of this type at all levels, where the requirements of the activity call for one thing and the organizational needs for something else, endow much of life with the Alice in Wonderland quality that Lewis Carroll described so beautifully. It also accustoms us to the bureaucratic insanity and re-

¹⁷ Polychronic time (P-time), as the term implies, is nonlinear. Everything happens at once. Some jobs and occupations are more polychronic than monochronic. Whole cultures, such as those encountered in the Middle East and Latin America, are polychronic (Hall, *The Silent Language*, *op. cit.*).

¹⁸ Sebastian de Grazia in *Of Time, Work and Leisure* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1969) describes how the early English industrialists had to contend with a work force that was not schedule oriented and did



systems also contrast with each other, for polychronic people like the Arabs and the Turks are *almost never alone*, even in the home.²⁰ They interact with several people at once and are continually involved with each other. Scheduling is difficult if not virtually impossible with P-time people unless they have mastered M-time technically as a very different system, one which they do not confuse with their own, but which they use when it is situationally appropriate, much as they use a foreign language.

Theoretically, as far as bureaucracies are concerned, P-time systems should demand a much greater centralization of control and be characterized by a rather shallow or simple structure. The top man deals continually with many people, most of whom stay informed as to what is happening, because they are around in the same spaces, are brought up to be deeply involved with each other, and continually ask questions to stay informed. In these circumstances, delegation of authority and a buildup in bureaucratic levels should not be required to handle high volumes of business. This is actually the way it works out for people like the Arabs and the Latin Americans. Administration and control of polychronic peoples in the Middle East is a matter of job analysis: taking each subordinate's job and isolating the important functions that go to make up the job. Functions are then specified and often indicated on elaborate charts with checks [228] that make it possible for the administrator to be sure that each function has been performed. In this way it is felt that absolute control is maintained over the individual. Yet, *how and when the scheduling is done, is left up to the individual*. To schedule for him would be considered a violation of his privacy. In contrast, M-time people schedule the activity and leave the analysis of the parts of the job to the individual. A P-type analysis, even though technical by its very nature, keeps reminding the subordinate that his job is a system, and is *also part of a larger system*. M-type people, by virtue of compartmentalization, do not

inforces the notion that you really can't beat City Hall.

²⁰ Edward T. Hall, "Arab Concepts of Privacy," in *The Hidden Dimension* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1966).

see their activities in context as part of the larger whole. In their thinking they are pushed in the opposite direction because the schedule compartmentalizes, segments, isolates, and above all it stresses organizational goals. Again, this is epitomized in our allowing the TV commercial, the "special message from our sponsor," to break the continuity of even the most important communication. By way of contrast, in Spain I once counted twenty-one commercials lumped together at the end of an hour's program. The polychronic Spanish put the commercials *between* the major programs.

Both systems have strengths as well as weaknesses. There is a limit to the speed with which jobs can be analyzed, although once analyzed, proper reporting can enable a P-time administrator to handle a surprising number of subordinates. Nevertheless, organizations run on the P-type model are limited in size and depend on having gifted men at the top. P-type models proliferate bureaucracies as a way of handling greater demands on the system. The M-type organization goes in the opposite direction. They can and do grow much larger than the P-type, however. M-types combine bureaucracies, as in the consolidated school and the business conglomerate. The particular blindness of the M-type organization is to the *humanness* of its members. The blindness of the P-type is to the capacity of the top man to handle contingencies and stay on top of things. M-type bureaucracies as they grow larger turn inward, becoming blind to their own structure, grow rigid and are even apt to lose sight of their original purpose as seen in context. A prime example is the Army Corps of Engineers and the Bureau of Reclamation that wreak havoc on our environment in their dedicated efforts to build dams.

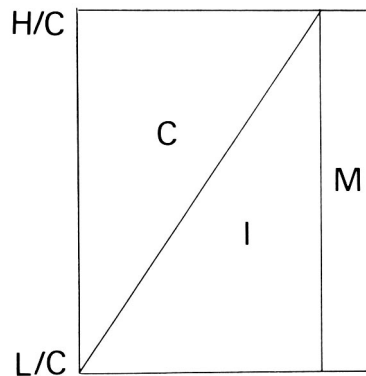
This brings us to another important topic—*context in relation to meaning*—which can be illustrated in the context of education, where much of our M-type compartmentalizing takes place and where it is inculcated in the young.

To understand the role of context as it relates to meaning, one must at [229] least partially understand Marshall McLuhan's²¹ point

²¹ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1964).



that the media is the message. Linearly oriented Americans have difficulty with McLuhan's thinking, because our culture is what I have termed a "low context culture"²² in which there is great emphasis on content but very little emphasis on context. The idea of context as a function of meaning is basically very simple, yet like many simple ideas, it carries tremendous implications for understanding a wide range of communication events. It also makes it possible to talk about and relate in a single frame some events which had previously been treated as unrelated. In a word: meaning (M) —any meaning—is a function of information (I) in a context (C). At this point, it is possible to write it as a simple formula $IC = M$. What I have just written is the "I" part of the formula. The context portion is minimal at this point, so the reader provides his own context until the writer further expands on what he means. Contexting the reader takes time, particularly when one is using a linear system such as writing. So, it may help to set down a few basic propositions: 1) Nothing has meaning when stripped of context. Subproposition: it is virtually impossible to strip any event of context, because of man's propensity for providing context whenever it is missing. 2) The relationship of information to context varies. In general, where there is a lot of emphasis on the *information part*, there will be less on the *context part*. Also where there is a lot on the *context side*, very little *information* is required. This can be illustrated by a simple diagram in which C stands for context, I for information, and M for meaning. At the [230] top, high-context (H/C) information is featured, at the bottom, low-context (L/C) information is featured.



An example of a high-context communication

²² The notion of high- and low-context communications was first developed and presented by me in a paper delivered at the American Anthropological Association meeting in Pittsburgh in 1966 as part of a program on Interactional Anthropology.

situation is a couple who have lived together successfully for 25 years or more. Neither one has to say very much for the other to know what is going on (they talk for other reasons, which is an entirely different subject). An example of a low-context situation is any set of technical instructions, descriptions, or even a computer program.

When people from two different cultures meet, they share a common background of information, *but they do not share contexts*; therefore, the *meaning* of what is happening is different for each of them. What is more, some cultures rely more heavily on context than others (these I term high-context cultures). This affects the way people think as well as how they communicate.²³

If one looks at the content part of our educational system, some of it may make sense, but most of it makes very little sense. A striking example is found in our method of teaching foreign languages—our way does not work and it has not worked for generations; yet we continue to use it. The claim made by many students today that their education is not relevant is in most instances justified, as are the claims made by critics like John Holt,²⁴ George Dennison,²⁵ Nat Hentoff,²⁶ and

²³ Thinking and communicating may very well be inseparable. Benjamin Lee Whorf (*Language, Thought and Relating* [New York: The Technology Press and John Wiley & Sons, 1956]) and Sapir (*Selected Writings* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1949]) both thought so. There is much to support this if one takes the $CI = M$ view—that is, adds context to the total situation. Until now, context has been treated in a variety of ways, but seldom as inseparable from meaning. In fact, much of our "science," most of our bureaucracies, our entire system of justice, in fact, do their best to dispense with context because no one knows how to deal with it.

²⁴ John Holt, *How Children Fail* (New York: Pitman Publishing Corp., 1966), *How Children Learn* (New York: Pitman Publishing Corp., 1967), *The Underachieving School* (New York: Pitman Publishing Corp., 1969).



others.²⁷ Nevertheless, if one forgets about manifest content for a minute and looks at what schools are really teaching (the latent content), one finds that the schools are highly effective instruments of society. Indeed, perhaps, they are too good at what they really do and not good enough at what they are supposed to do. Few people have identified or even looked at the context (media-latent) [231] aspects of education in the United States. Several messages are unmistakably clear: most schools can be counted on to teach students the fundamental fact that all things are subservient to time. Schedules dominate the school day, the week, the month, the year—in fact, the entire process of education. What is happening in the classroom, no matter how vital, is inevitably interrupted by the bell, the quarter, the semester, the school year itself. Educators assign priorities to subjects by the amount of time allotted to them as well as their placement in the overall schedule.²⁸ Equally important is the educational message that *bureaucracies are real* and that students must learn to deal with them. Furthermore, bureaucratic solutions and bureaucratic thinking can usually be depended on to circumvent the issue of external reality. Bureaucratic feasibility and bureaucratic survival are the *guiding principles in educational decision-making* and students and teachers learn this early in their school experience. A student finds in many of his teachers

the models for the bosses whom he will encounter later in his life. If he does not learn to deal effectively with different teachers, he will never be able to handle his future bosses.

What happens in the classroom is a *game* in which the teacher sets the rules. If the student happens to have a good auditory memory and he is articulate, he can learn to be quite good at the game. This makes the teacher happy. Students whose capabilities and talents lie in other sensory modes (*i.e.*, they may be visually or kinesthetically talented) or those who do *not* meet the auditory and verbal norms, have a very difficult time because their teacher is unhappy with their lack of verbal skills. Part of the academic game is that we pretend that all students remember and image in the same way, and therefore those who image or remember differently are classified as "dumb."²⁹ This enables the verbally talented to feel superior as well as loved by their teachers, but it also deprives our society of some sorely needed talents. [232]

On the bureaucratic side, the lesson most students must learn if they are to survive is that most teachers have to be successful bureaucrats above all else, otherwise, the teachers won't survive. The teacher's primary mission is to keep order. What is more, the reward for keeping order, as in all bureaucracies, is a free hand to keep order in his own way. One of my graduate students was recently fired from his position as student teacher in a public school. Up to the time of his dismissal he had received superior ratings. Yet, when it was discovered that not only was he not keeping "order," but he did not really believe that "straight rows make straight lives," he was fired—despite the fact that his students were doing better than average work.

In light of the above remarks the United States educational system, instead of being irrelevant, is remarkably relevant for the way in which its latent functions serve to prepare the young for real life. It could not have survived as

²⁵ George Dennison, *The Lives of Children* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1969).

²⁶ Nat Hentoff, *Our Children Are Dying* (New York: Viking Paperback, 1967).

²⁷ John Holt has compiled a list of forty-two authors and film makers who have documented the state of our schools. This list may be obtained by writing Mr. Holt at 308 Boylston Street, Boston, Massachusetts 02116.

²⁸ Another way of assigning priorities to subjects would be through the choice of people who instruct. "English is such an important subject, we could not possibly do with anything less than the *best* person available." It often develops that the man who is good is frequently at odds with the system. And while there are exceptions, given the choice, the United States educational establishment can be counted on more often than not to favor the system over excellence, particularly if it means tampering with either time or bureaucratic procedures.

²⁹ People like Buckminster Fuller who think in systems terms, and who use what I term kinesthetic imagery (they experience relationships with their bodies). I was privileged to have industrial and visual designers as students for several years. Teaching them was an experience entirely different from teaching the usual liberal arts student.



long as it has if it had not been relevant. It is only irrelevant to those who expect schools to truly *educate* people. Since I intend to address myself to this subject at greater length elsewhere,³⁰ I will not develop the topic further here, except to summarize the implications in terms of context:

Our educational system, like most school systems, is a function of both content and context, on the manifest and the latent level. Our particular delusion is that the former is reality and that the latter does not count. An educational system which presents material in fragments produces a citizenry with great vulnerability to circumstances requiring comprehensive thought or action. On the individual level it produces people who have great difficulty planning their own lives. Such crucial decisions as choice of mate and career are quite often left to chance. People just drift into things. On the national scale our inability to plan and to see the implications of our actions has resulted in a failure to recognize and stop the destructive assaults on our environment. We have great trouble conceptualizing any system. For example, in considering economic systems, we just don't see the connection between a government or business policy and the impact on people's lives. Galbraith³¹ has made this point patently clear. One can [233] also cite numerous examples in the political realm—Vietnam is the most obvious. This war can only make sense to someone who ignores the larger context, which is the drastic and devastating consequences of the war for our young people, our poor, our cities, and the welfare of the country as a whole.

In twenty-five years of systematic observa-

tion of Americans (including myself)³² interacting with other cultures in *real life situations*, I have developed an analytic system for making observations of very small events and analyzing their patterns.³³ This has forced me to look on the context side of the equation and has put me in the position of intermediary between cultures where people continually bring me different sides of the same story. Hundreds of these encounters have convinced me that the basic patterns of those parts of culture that are out of awareness are so stable, persistent and ubiquitous that only a few people recognize them and only a very few of these are capable of changing them. To summarize, there are two crucial points:

1. Cultures evolve as highly specialized adaptations to the environment. Cultures adapt internally to their own structure as well, molding members through their institutions to perform the requisite tasks.³⁴ It follows, therefore, that all cultures are vulnerable to those situations that were not prominently featured in the process of their own evolution. Since cultures evolved in different environments and developed personalities and institutions that are specialized adaptations to environmental pressures, they are therefore to some extent vulnerable to each other.
2. By its very nature, cultural vulnerability is much more serious and more difficult to deal with than political or economic vulnerability, because it always involves not only the character of the people themselves, but how life and institutions are organized. What is at stake, therefore, is frequently a matter of life and death, or life with meaning versus life without meaning.

³⁰ Education as an expression of culture constitutes an important section in a forthcoming book.

³¹ John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1958). Galbraith's thinking has not been accepted by many economists, particularly those who are content to work and think either without context or in very low context situations in which masses of data make the very interpretation of those data difficult and controversial. Witness the controversy as to whether it is purchasing power or money that determines the temperature of an economy.

³² There are a few social scientists who use themselves as controls or subjects in transactions with other cultures. For the past fifteen years I have made it a practice to do this systematically, some of the advantages being that there is always a context and the subject is always available.

³³ See Hall, *The Silent Language*, *op. cit.*, and *The Hidden Dimension*, *op. cit.*

³⁴ That is, cultures adapt to themselves. All over the world, people develop adaptations to bureaucracies, to social organization, to mechanization.



The tragedy of the American Indian is an example of cultural vulnerability. Members of any culture sense their own vulnerability when confronted with another culture. Yet one cannot deal with one's own cultural vulnerability by conquering or eliminating someone else. The [234] vulnerability remains and may even be exacerbated when a political cure of a cultural condition is attempted.

For example, the Japanese actually learned this lesson as a consequence of their defeat in World War II. Certain characteristics and strengths of their cultural system enable them to plan their entire economy in a comprehensive way and to integrate different facets of their political, economic, and cultural systems in a way that puts the United States to shame.³⁵ Of course, the Japanese have other problems—like pollution, a direct consequence of their economic success. However, given the Japanese capabilities, their capacity for controlling special interests, and their *high-context* culture, I would favor them over us in any race to solve both environmental problems and human problems.

For a nation, survival depends on the capacity to adapt and to develop new institutions and new personality types to deal with changing times. There is an old law of biology that states that in order to survive a species must adapt. The same is true for culture. *Culture is man's major adaptive mechanism* (he changes his body very little). But, paradoxically, culture is also the major environment in which man develops and with which he must contend. That is, man must adapt to himself, both as a member and product of his own culture and in a world of other cultures. Cultural adaptations were successful in the past when changes were taking place at a slower rate. Today, given our highly developed technical systems and speeded-up communications, changes are taking place at a rate that is appar-

ently faster than it is possible for our institutions to assimilate. What is more, the faster the change, the wider the generation gap.³⁶ The cultural processes that are at work, however, are much the same, except that the young are more aware of the implications of the split between real life and what happens in the schools than their parents are. Nevertheless, it is not enough for the young to say that the whole structure is rotten and must be destroyed. This is like the neurotic who says that suicide is the only answer. Admittedly, there are people who do commit suicide because they cannot stand the reality of their own lives, but there are more creative [235] approaches, albeit psychically painful ones. No change in one's own psyche is accomplished without giving up one's illusions of one's self.

To summarize, my basic position is that American culture, once vigorous and viable, has become much less so today. If we are to survive and adapt successfully, we *must* change, and this change will not be easy. It involves, among other things, a recognition of the fact that life is rooted both in context and in content, and that without both, life makes little sense.

In Fromm's words, Freud's discovery of the unconscious "... bogged down because it was applied solely to man's libidinal strivings."³⁷ It is paradoxical that Freud, who changed an age with his thinking, founded a movement that eventually became bureaucratized and ritualized.³⁸ As Fromm points out, Freud tried to unite in a synthesis the two divisive forces of nineteenth-century Western thought—Romanticism and Rationalism. Actually, the issue is not Romanticism versus Rationalism, but the deeper issue of an expanded concept of the unconscious (to include all other areas of life) and integrating this with the conscious. We must see the unconscious as present in all cultural events and then take the next and most difficult step of integrating the latent and the manifest—the media with the message, and the context and information—in order to arrive at true meaning.

³⁵ The Japanese gross national product was \$43 billion in 1960; and \$ 164 billion in 1969. Automobile production increased by a factor of 10 (481,000 in 1960; 4.6 million in 1969). UPI, December 19, 1969—dateline Tokyo. See also, Howard F. VanZandt, "The Japanese Culture and the Business Boom," *Foreign Affairs*, January, 1970.

³⁶ Margaret Mead, *Culture and Commitment: A Study of the Generation Gap* (Garden City, N.Y.: Natural History Press/Doubleday, 1970).

³⁷ *Sigmund Freud's Mission*, *op. cit.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*



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So far, Western man has only been capable of dealing with the *content* part of the equation, as "the King of Ruffle Bar" discovered when he entered the trap set by the bureaucrats of order. The context part of their behavior had escaped the bureaucrats entirely.

The paradox is that, in his strivings for order, Western man has created chaos, denying that part of himself that integrates, while enshrining the part that fragments experience.