

TOWARD UNITY OF CULTURE: A PROGRAM FOR A PROGRAM

by Paul Weiss

The barriers that have kept human groups of diverse ecologies and histories in a state of relative seclusion are rapidly breaking down in the wake of spreading trade, enlightenment, and communication—vertical sectorial barriers of geographic, national, and political groupings as well as horizontal sectarian interfaces dividing layers of philosophical, occupational, and educational distinctions within each group. Free flux and interchange across those leaky boundaries are bringing about a growing awareness that mankind has, after all, far more in common than divides it, the recognition of valid distinctions within notwithstanding. As a result, there have sprung up, in many countries—polyphyletically, as it were—moves to articulate, give expression to, and translate into reality that mounting realization of a basic unitary core of human culture.

Some of those moves are motivated by fears about mankind's future, others more positively by the ethical postulate or sober extrapolation from scientific and historical fact that the trend of progress of the human race is, or at least ought to be, toward harmonization—the “brotherhood of man” glorified in Beethoven's Ninth. Some of the movements circle about lofty professions of ideals, sometimes rather utopian; others are more down-to-earth, sometimes overly pragmatic in

Paul Weiss is member and professor emeritus, Rockefeller University, New York; and University Professor (on leave), University of Texas in Austin.

orientation. And there are all kinds of shades in between. Yet, all of them tend to converge upon a common focus. One wonders whether they might not have a better prospect of getting there faster, with less meandering, if their community of purpose were matched by a concert of realistic programming and action. If so, claims or pretensions of primacy, priority, or sheer self-assertion would have to yield to an overriding call for co-operation; for no one can rightly claim to have all the answers—we hardly have as yet spelled out the questions, let alone weighed them.

It is frustrating to hear monopolistic calls for science to take leadership, while other quarters, no less vigorously, cheer for the humanities or religion or the law. This definitely is not the time to prejudge issues; what we must do is face and meet them in a broad and dispassionate perspective. In this connection, I repeat the plea I once made to the academic world on both sides of that imaginary line which separates the "two cultures" of C. P. Snow—the scientific and the humanistic:

With the exuberance of youth, science has often maintained not only that it is a cure-all for mankind's ills, but that it can prescribe ultimate goals to guide man's conduct. A mature science cannot condone such juvenile extremism. It must take into account the other claimants to a share in human destiny. And if it is to thrive and serve humanity, it must range itself among them as a partner, and not set itself on top as a ruler.

The creative arts, philosophy, the kernel of religions (not of creeds), the lessons of the course of history; all of these are companions of science in shaping mankind's fate. . . . Science, to be consistent, must take this position of critical and modest self-appraisal and sober recognition of its own limits. No sophistry or verbal trickery, of wishful thinking or political design, can hide this need for those who see the broad perspective of our times. If science claims no greater share of man's allegiance than it can ask for on scientific grounds; if it will behave as educator rather than as conqueror; then the resentments, the suspicions, and injunctions of those who have feared the aggressive expansionism of a youthful science will subside, and barriers of prejudice can be let down on all sides. . . . I take courage to make a final plea: alarmed by signs that an abuse of science may lead to humans being treated as merely "cases" for a gigantic statistical processing mill in which they are to be levelled to standards of the average, the common, and the mediocre, I make a plea to science to reacclaim diversity as a source of progress (for uniformity means death), including the diversity of human minds in their responsible expressions. And then I make another plea to the non-scientific humanists not to regard themselves as prime custodians of civilization, shunning science as if it were inhuman. Let none of us lodge in the Master's Mansion, but let us all move down into the servants' quarters, so that we all may work together united for human progress in harmonious cooperation. The tasks are large, our forces limited. No group can do the job alone. So,

let us all close ranks, the men of science with those in other walks of life, for humanism and against the dehumanization of our culture.

The following essay is an attempt to live up to this spirit; to bring the phrase "unity of culture" a little closer to our grasp; and then submit some thoughts on how one might approach the elusive task of bringing it about.

WHAT UNITY OF CULTURE?

As a basic verity, "unity of culture" remains to be verified; as an ideal, it is an axiom; as a practical goal, it needs assertion; as a political slogan, it becomes perverted to the insidious question of: *Whose "culture"?* The scientist's, the humanist's, the spiritualist's, the fundamentalist's, the socialist's, the nationalist's, the globalist's, etc.?

The time has come when man must face the decision of either implementing the desideratum of unity or else reverting to jungle warfare of mutual extinction among conflicting doctrines, each claiming a monopoly for its particular brand of a dismembered culture. The time has come because rates of development and change in world affairs have become so steeply accelerated that the "lead time" for correcting errors of evolutionary mis-steps has been reduced to zero. As I said at the start, modern communication and growing universal responsiveness to communicated information have abolished the barriers that used to keep local events of conflict-generating potential confined long enough for the resulting strains and stresses to subside. This happy state no longer exists. Communication currents have broken through the former membranes and have brought the formerly isolated compartments into dynamic interaction, threatening to convert the potential energy of conflict into kinetic energy. The resulting turbulence precludes the calm and measured adjustments that were allowed to the formerly sluggishly interacting world; hence, in the new setting of our day, the slow way of *correction* of error by *hindsight* must give way to the anticipatory *avoidance* of error by *foresight*. Conflicts must be resolved before they erupt; and the conflicts in question are not just those of national, political, economic, or other group motives, but primarily those of ideas, which generate or rationalize those other motivations.

Such ideological conflict is as hazardous if raised as an antithesis between a *scientific*, or worse still, "technocratic" and a *humanistic* culture as it is between a "Western" and "Eastern" culture or a "capitalist" and "socialist" culture. Those are cults, not cultures. At best, they are different aspects of "culture"—singular. As man is global, there is,

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or ought to be, only *one* common culture, *a single undivided integrated continuum of culture*. To be sure, it has immensely diverse facets which make it appear under different aspects to people or groups of different character and traditions—none of them, of course, viewing it in its totality.

But by whose dictum “is there, or ought there to be, only *one* common culture”? Is this a proposition based on private opinion, utopian presumptions of esoteric groups and designs to turn the slogan to political advantage; or is it an axiomatic truism demonstrable by logic and science? This question itself is loaded with semantic and terminological traps. The answer, accordingly, will depend on whom you ask. One side will point to history and prove the pluralistic origin of culture, or rather of cultures—plural. The other side will confine the term “culture” to that inner core which all cultures have in common. The former, the particularist, viewpoint and the latter, the generalist one, are, of course, both equally valid; indeed they are complementary, depending on preference of accent on either differences or common features among members of the same class of phenomena. The former, however, becomes outright ominous if it results in any one of the fractional cultures setting itself up as, first, the “true,” presently the dominant, and eventually the sole, representative and spokesman of “human culture”—*pars pro toto*. To counter this perilous trend, abundantly reaffirmed by recent history, the generalists go to the opposite extreme of denying, or at least trying to abrogate, the reality of cultural diversity. And so the argument has been going, back and forth, carried by currents of emotion, rather than reason.

And the solution? The difference being one of *emphasis*, rather than of *substance*, there is of course no problem, hence, no cause for discord, no conflict, no need for conciliation; just need for mutual understanding and appreciation of the fact that those who look at the same piece of world through microscopes and telescopes gain different views. *Diversity* among cultures, mainspring and spur of progress, is as essential as is cultural *unification* as the stabilizer against excessive divergence threatening disruption. But diversity does not imply antagonism; nor does unity spell uniformity.

Now, in listening to these comments, most everybody will surely have had in mind such cases as hegemonial claims by nations, religious schisms, political doctrinal strife, or “one-world” rule. Yet, what I had foremost in mind are the schisms in the *ideological* foundation of human culture, to which national, religious, and political systems must ultimately be related. I have in mind the hegemonial aspirations of a

scientistic versus a *humanistic* culture; a *materialistic* versus a *spiritualistic* culture; cultural ideals of *progress* versus *conservatism*; and the like. Perhaps, if these could be harmonized, harmonization of the more mundane sources of conflict would follow. To harmonize them will take more than just a pious wish. It will take more than just learned treatises and academic exercises. Almost all that could be said on the subject has probably been said and written. But has it had its due effect? If it had, there would be no need for reiteration. If there has been any effect at all, it has been slight and progress toward the goal too slow, at any rate. And slowness of adaptation, as I said before, is something the world of today can no longer afford if it is to remain viable. In the political domain, modern travel and communication are rapidly bringing about some sort of commingling and blending of national cultures. Such amalgamation, of course, is still a far cry from unification: for unity is a matter of inner cohesion, not of artificial compounding. But even that type of preliminary rapprochement is not yet much in evidence in the province of the human spirit and destiny.

WHAT CAN BE DONE

So, what is there to be done to promote the case of true unity in spirit, and to promote it with the necessary speed and effectiveness appropriate to the needs of an ailing world? Some more learned treatises? Some contests, with prizes for the cleverest paper prescription of a cure? Some further paper schemes for remedial action by dreamers unfamiliar with the patient—the *real* world of human nature?

I firmly believe in the need and urgency of some far more systematic, vigorous, and imaginative approach, and though it would be rash to predict success, we simply cannot afford not to try it. I therefore am cheered by every new constructive effort. As I started out saying, a few germs of such efforts have been springing up lately in several lands. The setting up of “centers” as rallying points is certainly a useful move. They can serve as the nodal points of the envisaged “co-cognitive” network to be woven from the still disconnected threads of critical and creative thought about the nature of man and his culture.

How can they best serve? First, what should they avoid in order not to jeopardize their effectiveness?

1. None of them should explicitly or tacitly aspire to a monopolistic position. Priority establishes no claim to primacy; unity is based on universality.

2. They should not try to standardize and equalize their various pro-

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grams and techniques of approach, as long as they keep their diverse courses oriented toward a common goal.

3. They should not prejudice the outcome of their search by selecting only searchers known to have consonant ideas.

4. They should not engage in single-shot, incoherent actions, however valuable and conclusive in themselves. Separate unconnected events, whether conferences, seminars, books, opinion surveys, etc., have rarely proved to leave a major and lasting impress on the course of human affairs.

Now *positively* speaking:

1. They should make the study of the *unity of knowledge* a continuous *process*—"process," not just a series of punctuated spot events.

2. The process must start from an *identification of the problem*. To be acceptable and effective, this must be done not by one-sided precept, but must be left to emerge from *penetrating free and critical discourse* among scholars and men of affairs holding divergent views and philosophies, while groping for common ground in the firm belief that it must and will be found.

3. This diagnostic identification process will proceed in steps as follows:

a) First, the traditional doctrinal areas—the scientific, the religious, the philosophic, the artistic, the humanistic, the legal, etc.—must examine their own basic concepts within their own ranks and test them for reconcilability. In doing so, they will discover that there is a central area of congruity common to all of them as well as a fringe of incongruous peculiarities. The latter belong to the *private* domain of those various areas and need not concern the *public* domain of any group striving for *universality*. This purging process ought to result in the delineation of a core of relevant principles for each area of thought on which knowledgeable thinkers and thoughtful workers in that area could essentially agree; the marginal unresolvable distinctions should not be allowed to interfere with the next step.

b) In this next step, the identified cores of the various ideologies will then, by critical discourse, be subject to the same kind of distillation process in order to delimit the area of congruity or correspondence among them from their particular discrepancies and mutual inconsistencies (which hopefully might yield to persistent further efforts at reconciliation).

The purpose of these preliminary steps is to circumscribe the problem precisely, concretely, and realistically before entering or even con-

templating practical ways to meet it. It seems to me futile to try to "unify" the diverse and disparate forms of knowledge by either force of argument or persuasion. The best one can expect is (a) to obtain consensus on that common nucleus which is already unified but has not yet been universally recognized as such, and (b) to strengthen and steadily enlarge that nucleus.

A DIAGNOSTIC AND PRAGMATIC PROGRAM

This is admittedly a pragmatic program. It differs from past and present idealistic, but ineffectual, ventures in the same direction. It also is intended to be, at first, mainly diagnostic. It should point up misunderstandings, misconceptions, misapplications, and one-sided doctrines of whatever origin, as major barriers to the broadening of the base of a unified human culture. Many of those barriers have not been deliberately erected but have come about automatically by the self-confinement (not of individuals, but of groups) to limited sectors of the fields of learning and practice. Much of this can be relieved by "multi-disciplinary" discourse, adequately programmed, staffed, guided, recorded, edited, condensed to essentials with the conclusions published serially.

The first outcome of such exercises, I predict, will be the realization and practical demonstration that there is an immensely larger core area of *mutual agreement* than any one would normally have expected. Many of the disagreements generally assumed to be *fundamental* will then fade away as having been *imagined or trivial*, based on limited information or narrow perspective.

The second lesson will be an increasing awareness that "unity of culture" can be manifested and lived in a great variety of diverse forms without at all vitiating the general idea of "cultural community." There is not only merit in such diversity of form, but any attempt to abolish it would only lead to the replacement of old ideological despotisms by a new dogmatism.

Third, it will turn out that man will at last have to learn to cease pitting supposedly irreconcilable opposites against each other to win or lose, and adopt an attitude of "middle of the road," with a tolerable margin of freedom for excursion with impunity.

SUMMARY

What I have been setting forth here are essentially the following propositions:

- a) There is a larger *common core*, not only to humanity, but also to

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human thinking about it, than is generally appreciated and asserted as a guide for the thinking and behavior of people.

b) That core can be made the guiding beacon for the many-sided advances currently aiming at the ideal of cultural unity.

c) To serve as a beacon, rather than as a treacherous will-o'-the-wisp, that core of ideas and principles must be firmly rooted in knowledge. Its substance, now buried in many overlapping sectors of human knowledge and practice, must be extracted and distilled from the content of the different disciplines of learning, from the accumulated experience and wisdom of the human race, and from rational projections and reasonable forecasts of mankind's future.

d) By definition, that "core" will exclude those propositions and features which cannot command universal affirmation, that is, which rest on cultural, philosophical, and political differences of purpose and point of view. Some of those differences are inertial residues, bound to fade; while others are valid, viable, and vital expressions of true diversity and, as such, spurs to progress.

e) On the precept of "first things first," the prime task in delineating that common core of culture on which men of knowledge, wisdom, and maturity can realistically *unite* is to identify and remove the sources of existing or impending *disunity*. This will be largely a decontamination process, involving the eradication of misconceptions, misinterpretations, spurious arguments, and contradictions based on purely semantic confusion, unfounded premises, faulty logic, incorrect information, and so forth.

f) The resulting purified and clarified nucleus of that common core can then be explicitly formulated, widely disseminated, and hopefully expected to be accepted as a code or, at least, as a universal "rule of thumb" to guide actions of potential bearing on man's future. Without such a common standard, many of the best intentioned moves of man will continue to work at cross purposes and come to naught.

g) The envisaged process of sober, critical, unprejudiced self-examination through discourse shared by men of learning, spirit, and good will from all the major sectors of human knowledge and affairs might well prepare and inaugurate a truly *ecumenical age for mankind*. Yes, it might also fail; but we cannot afford not to try—or to let it fail by our own default. "Concern" is not enough; nor will sheer academic discourse do, unless its lessons can be translated into a pattern of universal tenets for human behavior that will command allegiance for its convincingness and cogency.

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