

Re-Constructing “Culture”

Martha Bartter

Truman State University Kirksville, MO 63501 mbartter@truman.edu

Abstract

In every known culture, humans operate in a systematic manner: to survive as a society, they reproduce, raise and educate their young, devising new and useful ways to do so, and pass these creations on as gifts to the future. In other words, humans everywhere deal with three important jobs: to learn an available portion of his/her culture, to contribute to that culture in some way, and to pass on what s/he has learned to the next generation. Alfred Korzybski called this process **time-binding**, and noted that anyone holding this view of the human process must view all humans as valuable contributors to the world.

In the United States, most of us live in a rich and wasteful culture. We throw garbage into “dumps” and once it’s out of sight, we don’t think about it any more. Our culture produces lots and lots of garbage.

One of the most important—and least noticed—kinds of garbage we create consists of people. Since we can’t throw them on a literal garbage dump, we have to find other, less obvious ways of getting rid of them. After that, we can forget they ever existed. We have many ways of assigning people to the “garbage” category, and have invented many ways of “dumping” them: prejudice, colonialism, poverty, exile, taking (and misusing) their land, assimilation, genocide, and now biocide.

Some psychologists claim that humans “instinctively” divide people into “known/friend” or “unknown/enemy.” Others claim that humans “naturally” dislike anyone who might compete with them for resources or wealth. We must interrogate both “instinct” and “nature” when applied to humans. Time-binding creates a more just and humane way to deal with our fellow humans; without a variety of humans, culture cannot survive. I recommend that we try it.

Keywords: Time-binding; “human nature”; culture; social justice

A Model We Couldn’t Stand

When Europeans first explored the North American continent, they found most of the inhabitants living in tribal cultures.¹ Many of the cultural systems they encountered upset them greatly: the people shared their subsistence (no one went hungry unless all were hungry); they worshipped as a natural part of their daily life, rather than setting aside one time to do so (and acting the rest of the time as though their worship made no difference); they accepted many different ways of forming associations, rather than insisting on “one (female) wife to one (male) husband”; they valued each member of their group for the particular abilities he or she showed; they selected multiple leaders according to their various abilities, rather than electing one by “popular” vote, etc. Most egregious of all, they did not demand that every other group follow the religion of their tribe. While the native people showed kindness to the invaders at first, they grew suspicious of and later hostile to them, as the invaders came to demand support, food, land, and complete acceptance of their customs whether the natives approved or not.

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Although one of the groups best known to the English settlers, the Haudenosaunee (the tribes of the longhouse) provided some of the fundamental structures encoded in our Constitution, social justice, a vital aspect of their system, was never adopted by the framers of the Constitution; in fact, it probably never even came to their awareness.

The traditions of the Iroquois League claim that at one time the various tribes lived in a kind of perpetual war of each against all, until a young man, known as the Peacemaker, decided to do something about it. Moving from group to group, he argued that they needed to talk with each other and find ways to end the violence. (His associate, Hiawatha, was later borrowed by Longfellow without his permission and misrepresented beyond recognition.) The Peacemaker brought a double message: violence makes you crazy, and no culture can survive without social justice. The tribes, each of which spoke its own language, came together in a political, economic, and cultural system which lasted for hundreds of years, to their mutual benefit (Wallace). The Haudenosaunee are rebuilding their culture today, based on the same values.

From 1689 to 1763, the dominant culture, needing allies for their “French and Indian Wars,” broke up the alliance using bribery and corruption. Then, as now, we seek to annihilate or assimilate people who don’t do things our way.

A Model We Have Chosen

Our dominant culture² systematically arranges to throw people away. You already know how it works. To quote President John F. Kennedy, “There is inherited wealth in this country and also inherited poverty.”³ “Inherited poverty” assigns entire groups to the garbage dump. Only a few weeks before he died, he challenged American education to help repair this. We have singularly failed to do so.

As a culture, we consider ourselves “fallen,” in need of salvation. Since we don’t like or trust ourselves much, we can’t like or trust others. Therefore, we systematically evaluate people on a number of interlocking scales of value, and find ways to “dump” those we find “less valuable”—rated lower on the specific scale(s) in use at the time. These scales may include, but are not limited to, economic status, religion, ethnicity, education, and location—where people live. We apply these scales without thinking about them. Then we act to keep “those people” in their “place,” preventing in large measure any attempt they may make to “better” themselves.⁴ We enlist a number of agencies in this: the school system,⁵ the legal system, the economic system, etc. Without the good basic education a privileged group receives, these groups do not obtain higher education, nor do they qualify for good (read “high-paying”) jobs. Therefore they cannot afford to live in cleaner, safer areas, but must reside in locations near factories, toxic waste sites, confined animal feeding operations, etc.⁶ The single most important factor in predicting the location of hazardous-waste sites in the United States is the ethnic composition of a neighborhood. Three of the five largest commercial hazardous waste landfills in America are in predominantly black or Hispanic neighborhoods, and three out of every five Black and Hispanic Americans live in the vicinity of an uncontrolled toxic waste site” (Encarta).⁷ As a rule, “those people” cannot obtain affordable health insurance; either they rely on welfare, or they go without.⁸

Poorly educated, overworked, often ill, “those people” perform valuable tasks for the community. They provide the essential but low-paid services we take for granted: garbage collection, janitorial work, farm labor, etc. Then we evaluate them by their wealth, not by how

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much we depend on the work they do. We see these evaluations as “normal”; “normalizing” requires only “doing terrible things in an organized and systematic way” (Herman, 97). After all, “too many” of “them” lower property values, and eat up “our” overabundance. At the same time, we expect a certain level of unemployment, to keep “their” pay low. Thus, we make throwing them away part of an organized and apparently socially useful process.

What about the rest of the world, the part we call “underdeveloped”? External development usually dispossesses the poorest people. If done for environmental purposes, no aid is provided for the dispossessed. If done for programs sponsored by World Bank and other international organizations, some (minor) compensation gets offered, usually land: we force people off rich (often ancestral) agricultural land which will get flooded for a power-generating dam, and give them an equal portion of thin highland soil on which crops don’t grow very well.

“It’s no coincidence that developing countries rich in gold and diamonds have the poorest populations. According to the Worldwatch Institute, ‘Mineral dependence has been shown to slow and even reduce economic growth in developing countries—a phenomenon economists have dubbed “the resource curse.”’ In Africa, for example, 60 percent of all private investment goes to the mining sector, and extracting raw materials for export provides no added value. Countries like the Philippines are left with a dwindling patrimony and a legacy of environmental degradation” (Snell, p. 36).⁹

Our culture systematically robs the “underdeveloped” nations of their population and their environment, through a combination of economic pressure and failure to allow them to create indigenous educational, health, occupational, and social systems. (They had them before “we” entered as colonialists, declared them “primitive” and destroyed them.) If they try to protect themselves, we disrupt their politics by clandestine means. If they complain, we enforce sanctions on them, or attack them. We “throw away” both the people and their land, which we render medically uninhabitable (Bertell).

Quite aside from other ecological disasters, we have rendered a large part of the Near East dangerously radioactive through our use, continuing since the first Gulf War, of depleted uranium¹⁰ to enhance the penetration of the bombs we drop and the bullets we fire from our anti-tank cannons and machine-guns. These projectiles catch fire before they leave the barrel of the gun, creating radioactive colloids which remain suspended in the air for long periods of time, and then mix with the local soil to be kicked up by passing vehicles or foot traffic. While the alpha radiation emitted by these particles does not even penetrate clothing, when breathed in it damages body tissue both by radiation and heavy-metal toxicity. It remains dangerous for over 4 billion years. Not only do we still send our troops there without protection, but we lie to them about the danger. We do nothing to protect the Iraqis whose homeland we have rendered toxic. In other words, we willingly “throw away” the people who serve in our armed forces as readily as the local people who must try to survive there, and will send Halliburton employees, oil well workers and other American “experts” there as well.¹¹

What to Do?

Some psychologists have declared that the brains of humans are “hard-wired” to distrust anyone outside their own social group, and that this built-in distrust comes from our “primitive” roots. “Studies suggest that our brains still have this protective programming—a psychological need to divide people into groups” (Begley, p. 43). The study focuses on racism, but the implications

reach much more broadly. After all, seeing people as members of a group does not necessarily mean that we also discriminate against the group, or devise ways to throw that group away. Everyone associates with several “groups” on racial, ethnic, economic, educational, social, political, occupational, and other levels. We see a number of these groups as both beneficial and important, when we belong to them. One “group” however, should take precedence: **human**.

A Definition for the Species-Term "Human"

Most definitions of “humans” seem rather absurd—“featherless bipeds” for example. And most definitions try to say what humans “are.” Alfred Korzybski organized his assessment in a different way: what do humans do that makes them different from other living organisms.¹² His profoundly important answer provides a way to unify our ideas of humanity: every human born **assimilates** some portion of the cultural heritage available to him/her at the time: language, history, ways of making a living, etc. Every human makes some **contribution** to that cultural wealth during his/her lifetime, enriching the generations yet unborn. And every human has the **responsibility** to leave the world—the environment—richer, more supportive, as a legacy for the generations to come. For this reason, Korzybski called humans the “time-binding class of life” (1950, p. 60). It matters when a human gets born.

Thus, every human shares both the opportunities provided by the environment, and also the responsibility for making sure that such opportunities will be available to his/her successors.

Clearly, as we engage in “business as usual” by throwing away the health, opportunities, welfare and lives of millions of people at home and abroad, we fail in this responsibility. We then assume that the contamination we spread will remain “there” and never impact us “here.” Moreover, as we enrich ourselves by destroying the physical, political, and emotional environment at home and abroad, we ensure that our children and their children will have to try to survive in a much less supportive world.

Applying Time-Binding to Our Culture

Contemporary psychologists argue that “linking the origins of racism to early humans could be misleading” and that the “latest research into human genetics further weakens the case for innate racial bigotry” (Begley, 44). Moreover, we as humans can quite readily change the definitions of “us” and “them,” and also the ways in which we apply such categories.

Time-Binding claims that all humans do contribute to their culture and to every human now alive, and also to future generations, even though we don’t know what specific contribution any one person may make. Therefore, to “throw away” any human damages not only our future but perhaps our own health and well-being. Seeing all humans as sharing the time-binding heritage should prevent us from discriminating among humans on any basis whatsoever. Does this mean we have to appreciate every person equally? Of course not. But it does mean that we must not judge people based on their race, religion, economic status, personal cleanliness, etc., and we must support all people to live, learn, and work to their (and our) best advantage.

A number of programs already in effect in “underdeveloped” nations can help us understand this. The Hunger Project claims that “chronic hunger occurs when people lack the opportunity to earn money, be educated, learn skills to meet basic needs, and have a voice in decisions that affect

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their lives” (Hunger Project). The Project provides support to local people working towards food self-sufficiency, and rewards many Indian and African scientists and social reformers who make significant contributions to the nutrition and well-being of their own people, using low-cost tools and innovative (often pre-colonial) techniques.

Those techniques may prove extremely useful, even life-saving to us in the developed world as fossil fuels become scarcer and more expensive.¹³ Those corporations who improve their bottom line by outsourcing jobs and moving offices offshore to avoid paying taxes may find that their efforts prove counterproductive. They have forgotten (if they ever knew) the principle on which the Ford Motor Company built its early success: paying their workers enough so that they could buy the product they manufactured.¹⁴ Imagine what might happen to the U.S. economy if every working person in the United States (and even in the “underdeveloped” world) could afford to buy U.S. goods (assuming that we ever return to manufacturing them). Imagine what could happen to our own disregarded, “thrown away” people if they were treated as responsible human beings, with valuable contributions to make, and their lands considered intrinsically worth conserving. Trickle-down economics has proved both unsuccessful and irrational. We need to “trickle-up” instead. Granting every human his/her essential value makes much more sense than throwing anyone away. Basing our relationships, as did the Haudenosaunee, on communication and social justice would provide a foundation for a more vital, human-friendly world. I suggest that we try it.

Notes

¹ The Aztec, first encountered by Cortez, had invented a hierarchical system very much like the Spanish. They were not tribal. Many of the cultures that allied with Cortez against the Aztec, however, probably were.

² I define the “dominant culture” as follows: 1) it practices totalitarian agriculture; 2) it “locks up” the food, so that people must “pay” to access it; 3) it considers all humans “fallen” or corrupt; and 4) it attempts to stamp out or “reform” any culture that does not follow these principles. In this I follow Quinn (1992, 1997).

³ John F. Kennedy, from his Convocation Address at Amherst College, Amherst MA, on the occasion of his receiving an honorary LL.D. and celebrating the groundbreaking of the Frost Library, October 27, 1963.

⁴ If they fail to “better” themselves we blame them for their failure. If they succeed, we either find ways to devalue their efforts, or remove them.

⁵ Education: the very system President Kennedy looked to for improving the inequality of economic status. Yet our schools frequently identify “those people” and track *them* into remedial classes (whether they need them or not) or into technical trades.

⁶ CAFOs inflict their pollution mainly on rural residents, especially those engaged in small farming operations. They, too, are being “thrown away.”

⁷ Many of the remaining such sites are located on Indian reservations.

⁸ This may not be true in other countries, but it is the standard practice in the United States.

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⁹ Anyone who travels in Nevada, Colorado or South Dakota can see the results of gold mining on the once-verdant hillsides, now covered with the insides of mountains being treated with acid to remove the gold. This leaching kills plant and animal life and pollutes the entire area, including ground water.

¹⁰ “British and American coalition forces are using depleted uranium (DU) shells in the war against Iraq and deliberately flouting a United Nations resolution which classifies the munitions as illegal weapons of mass destruction. According to a August 2002 report by the UN subcommission, laws which are breached by the use of DU include: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; the Charter of the United Nations; the Genocide Convention; the Convention Against Torture; the four Geneva Conventions of 1949; the Conventional Weapons Convention of 1980; and the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907, which expressly forbid employing ‘poison or poisoned weapons’ and ‘arms, projectiles or materials calculated to cause unnecessary suffering.’ All of these laws are designed to spare civilians from unwarranted suffering in armed conflicts” (The Sunday Herald [Scotland] March 30, 2003, available on the Common Dreams News Center.). The United States and Great Britain tried to prevent the UN Sub-Commission on Protection and Promotion of Human Rights from coming to a vote on DU, but the sub-commission “clearly decided that depleted uranium weaponry qualify as weapons of mass destruction (WMD)” (Campaign against Depleted Uranium). See also War Crimes Tribunal, which notes that “16 judges from 11 countries...found U. S. and NATO political and military leaders guilty of war crimes against Yugoslavia in the March 24-June 10, 1999 assault on that country.” (23 April 2006.)

¹¹ We have also failed to protect, move, or provide significant health care for the inhabitants of areas in the United States contaminated by uranium mining, bomb testing, etc., many of whom live in areas deemed 100 times more radioactive than anyone should stay in (Eichstaedt; Return of Navajo Boy).

¹² This forms part of his ascending scale of definitions: plants “bind” chemicals but don’t move around much; animals eat those plants (or animals that eat plants) but can move around, thereby “binding” space; humans not only “bind” chemicals and space but also time. It matters when a human gets born.

¹³ See, e.g., *The End of the Age of Oil* by Dale Allen Pfeifer, “The End of Cheap Oil” in the June 2004 *National Geographic*, and other useful books and articles.

¹⁴ Not that Henry Ford was a humanitarian—far from it. He hated unions, and his way to stop unionization of his plants was to raise wages enough that the workers did not feel the need to form a union. The success of his product—affordable automobiles—was simply a bonus to his corporation.

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