

MARK RIVA'S INTERVIEW WITH D. PAUL SCHAFER

IMAGINING, ENTERING, AND LIVING IN A CULTURAL AGE

Mark: You have said in many of your books that we need to pass out of the present economic age and into a future cultural age. Why do you believe this is necessary?

I believe it is necessary because humanity must put itself in the strongest possible position to come to grips with the life-threatening problems that exist in the world, most notably climate change, global warming, and the environmental crisis, huge disparities in income and wealth, conflicts between genders, races, religions, ethnic groups, and countries, the interaction of people with very different worldviews, values, customs, and traditions, and the constant threat of a nuclear, chemical, or biological disaster.

Unfortunately, these problems cannot be solved by the economic age we are living in at present, despite the fact that this age is the greatest human achievement in history. Billions of people have had their standards of living and quality of life improved substantially since Adam Smith's book *The Wealth of Nations* was published in 1776 which laid the foundations for the evolution of the economic age. This age has also produced incredible advances in science, technology, communications, medicine, health care, the arts, humanities, education, and many other areas of life. It is a phenomenal achievement. No other human accomplishment can match it in size, scope, influence, or impact.

Nevertheless, it is becoming increasingly apparent that the economic age is not capable of coming to grips with the aforementioned problems and others that have loomed above the global horizon in recent years. This is because the economic age is designed to produce goods, services, and material and monetary wealth, and is not designed to deal with problems as vast, complicated, multidimensional, and dangerous as this. This is why I believe we must enter a cultural age in the future as I will explain during our discussion.

Mark: If the economic age has produced so many benefits, why can't we go on living in this age by eliminating fossil fuels, creating new technologies, reducing pollution, and creating green, clean, and shared economies, much as we are doing at present?

Regardless of how important these developments are at present and going forward into the future, there are three basic problems with the economic age that can't be solved.

The first is the disastrous effect the economic age is having on the natural environment. This results from the fact that the natural environment was ignored during the entire time the economic age was being developed in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. As a result, it is not possible now to insert the natural environment into the theoretical, practical, and ideological underpinnings of the economic age **after the fact**. The architectural equivalent to this would be building a colossal office tower or gigantic condominium on sand or mud. At some point, it is bound to collapse because the foundations are not right and the production and consumption of commodities and creation of material wealth are not compatible with the preservation of the natural environment.

The second problem is that the economic age produces more and more inequalities in income and wealth over time, due primarily to the inherent nature of the economic system as we have seen over much of the last century. These inequalities are bound to increase in the future as corporations, wealthy elites, governments, and powerful countries create more economic growth to compensate for the decline in their revenues and profits, the adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the loss of millions of jobs and sources of income, and the desire to produce and accumulate more material and monetary wealth.

The third problem, which I believe is the most dangerous and severe problem of all, is seeing and treating economics as “*the whole*” and everything else as “*part of this whole*” or part of economics. This problem has evolved slowly and imperceptibly over the last two centuries, largely as a result of theories advocated by David Ricardo, who contended that economics should take precedence over all other activities in society, and especially Karl Marx, who believed that economics is the cause and basis of everything in life and the world and created the economic interpretation of history to justify his claim that humanity is destined to live in an economic age forever because this is the true nature of the world and human life and living in this world. The problem with this is that economics is not the whole, but rather a very essential part of the whole.

Mark: If the life-threatening problems that confront humanity cannot be solved by the economic age, what makes you think they can be solved by a cultural age?

This is very interesting. Just as broadening and deepening knowledge and understanding of economics and economies led to the creation and development of the economic age, so broadening and deepening knowledge and understanding of culture and cultures can lead to the creation and development of a cultural age. So let’s start with the nature and meaning of culture and cultures and move progressively outward from this.

Generally speaking, there are two very distinct and different ways of perceiving and defining culture and cultures, despite the fact that there are countless variations on them.

The first way, which originated in classical times, is based on the belief that culture and cultures are “*parts of something larger,*” most notably the arts, humanities, heritage of history, and, much more recently, the “cultural industries” of publishing, radio, television, film, video, sound recording, the social media, digital technology, sports, and so forth. This is the way most people in the world see and understand culture and cultures today, as do virtually all corporations, foundations, and governments when they make decisions about funding cultural activities and creating and implementing cultural plans and policies.

The second way, which emerged in the latter decades of the nineteenth century, is based on the conviction that culture and cultures are “*wholes*” or “*total ways of life.*” This arose when anthropologists began travelling to many different parts of the world during that time to study culture and cultures in depth and on the ground. This second way contrasts with the first way not only in *scope* and *contents* but also, and much more importantly, in *substance* and *kind*. This is because it includes all activities and not just some activities, as well as how all these activities are blended together to form wholes.

This second way of perceiving and defining culture and cultures can be traced back to Edward Burnett Tylor, one of the world’s first anthropologists, who defined culture - and by implication cultures - this way on the very first page of his book *The Origins of Culture* published in 1871:

Culture or Civilization, taken in its widest ethnographic sense, is that *complex whole* which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals law, custom, and *any other capabilities and habits acquired by man (people) as a member(members) of society.* (1)

This definition hit me like a ton of bricks the moment I read it four decades ago. While I had long believed that determining what is the whole and what are the parts is the most important requirement facing humanity because the whole is greater than the parts and the sum of the parts and everything emanates from this, finally I had come across a scholar who contended that culture - not economics - is the whole. Since this scholar was working in the cultural field, I decided to change my direction in life and spend all my time working in the cultural field, especially when I began to read more about culture, cultures, and civilizations. This was reinforced when I discovered that many cultural scholars in addition to Tylor perceived and defined culture and cultures in this holistic way, and Ruth Benedict, another cultural scholar, said, “the whole determines its parts, not only their relation but their very nature” in her book *Patterns of Culture* published in 1935. (2)

There is a legitimate reason why Tylor, Benedict, and many other cultural scholars visualized and defined culture in this all-inclusive, holistic sense. When anthropologists and sociologists travelled to many different parts of the world to study culture and cultures in detail and in depth, they discovered that people had words for all the specific activities they were engaged in as they went about the process of meeting their individual and

collective needs, living their lives, and working out their complex association with the world. What they did not have and needed desperately, however, was a word that described how all these activities were woven together in different combinations and arrangements to form wholes or total ways of life composed of many interconnected parts. Culture, not economics or any other term, was the word they used to designate this all-inclusive process and all-encompassing phenomenon.

Unfortunately, this holistic perception of culture and cultures has been largely ignored outside the anthropological and sociological domains over the last century and a half because humanity has been wrapped up in economics and the theories of economists. Nevertheless, this all-encompassing perception is imperative going forward into the future because it is the “right read” on the nature of the world and people’s and humanity’s experiences and existence in this world. Based on findings as powerful and profound as this, I concluded that culture and cultures - not economics and economies— are the real foundations and centrepiece of human existence. At its core and in its fundamental essence, the world is made up of culture and cultures. This is crucial because, as the ancient Chinese proverb says, “the beginning of wisdom lies in calling things by their right names.”

Remarkable benefits can be derived from this fact that are of utmost importance to the world of the present and the future.

In the first place, culture provides a way of seeing and understanding the world in terms of culture and cultures as wholes and total ways of life that is not only legitimate and justified by countless practical studies and much of the empirical evidence, but also is of vital importance in opening the doors to the next great era in human history as well as global development and human affairs in the years, decades, and perhaps centuries ahead.

Secondly, it makes it possible to see the total picture and not just selected or dominant parts of it which is the case today. This focuses attention on such quintessential matters as the relationship between human beings, other species, and the natural environment as well as the material and non-material dimensions of development and life. It also enables us to create all-inclusive and comprehensive theoretical and practical foundations for the creation and evolution of a cultural age rather than maintaining the partial, partisan, and flawed foundations of the present age.

Thirdly, it provides the container within which most if not all the different activities of humanity, societies, countries, and our lives are situated, as well as the need to position economics and economics in a much broader and deeper cultural, natural, and historical context and ensure that they address and serve cultural, environmental, and human requirements and not just commercial, industrial, financial, and technological interests.

Fourthly, and most importantly, it makes it possible to achieve balanced and harmonious relationships between the parts and the whole and therefore “unity in

diversity,” since this is what creating viable and effective wholes is all about, designed to accomplish, and has been lacking for a very long time. This can only be achieved when culture and cultures are seen and treated in holistic rather than partial terms, regardless of whether it is humanity, other species, all the complex interactions that go on in the natural environment, or the cosmos we are taking about, as discussed at length in my forthcoming book *The World As Culture*.

Mark: How does the World Culture Project you created in 1989 fit into this cultural context and set the stage for a cultural age?

When the United Nations and UNESCO created the World Decade for Cultural Development from 1988 to 1997, I felt this was an ideal time to create a project that would commemorate this Decade and help to shine a light on the crucial importance of culture and all the diverse and fascinating cultures in the world in holistic terms.

While a great deal of attention was devoted to studying culture and cultures in the past - largely because they were such a fundamental part of the cultural heritage of humankind and knowledge about them would be lost forever if these studies were not conducted – much less attention was paid to examining the role culture and cultures in the all-inclusive sense could play in the world at that time. As a result, I founded the World Culture Project in 1989 with the intention of creating some literature on this subject that I felt was badly needed but very much lacking going forward into the future.

The World Culture Project is based on the belief that culture and cultures have a central rather than marginal role to play in the world and are the keys to community, regional, national, and international development as well as environmental well-being and human affairs in the years and decades ahead. For purposes of this project, culture and cultures are defined as dynamic and organic wholes or total ways of life composed of many interrelated parts. As a result, they are concerned with the way people and countries visualize and interpret the world, organize themselves, conduct their affairs, elevate and enrich life, and position themselves in the world

Soon after this project was commenced, I began to delve deeply into everything I could get my hands on concerning culture and cultures. This ranged far and wide across many disciplines, from the arts, humanities, anthropology, sociology, and psychology to philosophy, biology, ecology, mythology, and cosmology. I quickly became aware of the remarkable intricacies, complexities, immensity, and fascination of culture and cultures, as well as their incredible assets and strengths and fundamental shortcomings and threats. I concluded from this that culture must be seen and treated as a **beacon** in the future, with the ability like all effective beacons to illuminate a safe, viable, and sustainable path to the future as well as to warn of impending danger and ensure that all the necessary safeguards

and precautions are established and put in place to prevent this. This led to writing my book – *Culture: Beacon of the Future* - which was published by Praeger-Greenwood in its *Studies in the 21st. Century* in 1998 and ended with a chapter on ‘Towards a Cultural Age.’

Over the next thirty years, this resulted in the creation of many monographs on culture and cultures in general and Canadian culture in particular, the publication of numerous articles and books including *Revolution or Renaissance: Making the Transition from an Economic Age to a Cultural Age*, *The Age of Culture*, *The Secrets of Culture*, *Will This Be Canada’s Century?*, *The Cultural Personality*, *THE ARTS: Gateway to a Fulfilling Life and Cultural Age*, and several others, making a number of videos and presentations at conferences and online events, and involvement in various Internet activities. Information on these and other works can be accessed on the Home Page, Hot Topics, and Publications Section of the WCP Website at: www3.sympatico.ca/dpaulschafer.

Mark: While the World Culture Project has served a useful purpose in making the case for the centrality, holistic character, strengths, and shortcomings of culture and cultures, how does this relate to your belief that we should enter a cultural age rather than some other type of age?

This is really fascinating. No sooner was the World Culture Project launched than I began to immerse myself in the research and writings of cultural scholars, historians, and practitioners. As I became more familiar with their research and writings, what slowly but surely began to form in my imagination and mind was an image of a cultural age based on the works of people like this.

I got a real break one day when I accidentally came across a book called *Visions of Culture: Voltaire, Guizot, Burckhardt, Lamprecht, Huizinga, Ortega y Gasset* in a local library that was written by Karl J. Weintraub and published by the University of Chicago Press in 1966. (3) This book contained the thoughts, ideas, and ideals of many outstanding cultural historians and gave me the feeling that I was on the right track in this respect.

This was confirmed by Weintraub when he said, “How can a civilization or a culture be understood and presented in all its complexity and yet as an intelligible and structured whole? (4) Weintraub went on to say that the cultural historian:

sees a culture not as a mere aggregate of traits but as forming an intricately interrelated pattern. In this delicately fashioned network the arts may have their ties to religion and economic values, morality may affect the constitutional arrangements and in turn be affected by political realities, a mood reflected in literature may also come to the fore in a social custom, and a scientific insight many work back upon a religious belief. (5)

This was a much more accurate interpretation of the way societies, cultures, and countries are actually structured and function in my view than the base-superstructure theory advocated by Karl Marx. Not only was it more authentic in terms of developments like this and the true character of reality, but also it was more in keeping with the conviction that history is an open book and humanity has the freedom and independence to make fundamental changes in directions over time in order to deal with difficult problems and life-threatening situations rather than being locked in a deterministic straight jacket and economic interpretation of history forever.

And this was not all. As I made my way through the various chapters of this valuable book, I discovered that some of the most essential ideas and ideals about the centrality of cultures and entry into a cultural age had been provided not only by all these cultural historians but especially by Johan Huizinga, the Dutch cultural historian. He provided a profound insight into what is undoubtedly the most important challenge facing humanity and the world, namely the need to achieve *balanced* and *harmonious* relationships between the parts and the whole. Here is what Huizinga had to say about this matter following his examination of numerous cultures and civilizations throughout the world:

The realities of economic life, of power, of technology, of everything conducive to man's (people's) material well-being, must be balanced by strongly developed spiritual, intellectual, moral, and aesthetic values. (6)

This profound insight struck a responsive chord in me the instant I read it, much like Tylor's statement about the holistic character of culture and cultures did years earlier. What could be more important to humanity and the world at present and going forward into the future - as well as creation and development of a cultural age - than this powerful statement? It applies equally to the world, countries, regions, communities, and people. In doing so, it says a great deal about the most important challenge we face, regardless of whether this is in a cultural age or any other kind of age.

This is because the more we focus on the realities of economic life, of power, of technology, of everything conducive to man's (people's) material well-being, the less emphasis is placed on developing strong spiritual, intellectual, moral, ethical, and aesthetic values, as has been apparent in the world for some time now.

Clearly much more emphasis needs to be placed on developing the arts, humanities, ethics, education, morality, and spirituality in the future. Not only are these activities the gateways that are required to understand culture and cultures in totality and in depth, but also they are the solution to achieving much more balance, harmony, and order in the world. This is especially important with respect to the relationship between human beings, other species, and the natural environment, the qualitative and quantitative aspects of development and life, the arts and the sciences, technology and society, and all the different

interactions going on between genders, races, religions, ethnic groups, countries, and cultures throughout the world. This explains why Huizinga also said:

The balance exists above all in the fact that each of the various cultural activities enjoys as vital a function as is possible in the context of the whole. If such harmony of cultural functions is present, it will reveal itself as order, strong structure, style, and rhythmic life of the society in question. (7)

Huizinga felt strongly that preoccupation with materialism and monetary wealth must be offset and counterbalanced by an equal and sustained commitment to altruism, conservation, activities that work with nature rather than against it (what we call permaculture today), and especially “service” in addition to all the other aforementioned values and ideals:

A community is in a state of culture when the domination of nature in the material, moral, and spiritual realms permits a state of existence which is *higher* and *better* than the given natural conditions, and when this state of existence is furthermore characterized by a harmonious balance of material and spiritual values and is guided by an ideal ... toward which the different activities of the community are directed. (8)

When this harmonious balance is not achieved, imbalances, disharmonies, tensions, and conflicts arise between the parts of the whole, as is occurring in many areas of the world today. Fortunately, Huizinga had a solution for this problem as well:

A culture which no longer can integrate the diverse pursuits of men (people) into a whole, which cannot restrain men (people) through a guiding set of norms, has lost its center and has lost its style. It is threatened by the exuberant overgrowth of its separate components. *It then needs a pruning knife, a human decision to focus once again on the essentials of culture and cutback the luxuriant but dispensable.* (9)

As I plunged more and more deeply into the vast legacy of works created by cultural scholars, historians, and practitioners over the centuries, I discovered that Huizinga’s insights into matters like this were symbolic of the research findings and writings of many others working in the cultural field. Goethe, for instance, said “live in the whole, the good, and the beautiful,” which in many ways reinforces and echoes the sentiments and convictions espoused by Huizinga. Comments like this, and many others I encountered, gave me the assurance I needed to believe I was on the right track in saying that we should enter a cultural age as well as in living my own life from that point onwards.

Numerous rewards can be realized from the research findings, writings, and insights provided by cultural authorities of many different types. Not only will a better balance and harmony be created between people, other species, and the natural environment as well as the material and non-material dimensions of life, but also a much smaller footprint will be made on nature because most artistic, intellectual, humanistic, and spiritual activities are human- and labour-intensive rather than capital- and material-intensive and therefore don't consume as many resources or make as many demands on the natural realm as industrial, technological, and manufacturing activities. There will also be a great deal more sharing, caring, and compassion in the world because people will become more actively engaged in a multitude of artistic, humanistic, ethical, and spiritual endeavours.

As I became more conversant with the works of cultural scholars such as Voltaire, Mathew Arnold, Thomas Carlyle, Franz Boas, Max Weber, Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, Pitirim Sorokin, Alfred Kroeber, Lewis Mumford, and Jacques Maritain in earlier times and Edward T. Hall, Stuart Hall, Gregory Bateson, Raymond Williams, Clifford Geertz, Wade Davis, S. Takdir Alisjahbana, Joseph Campbell, Thomas Berry, Néstor Garcia Canclini, and Ziauddin Sardar more recently - as well as cultural historians like Jacob Burckhardt, Karl Weintraub, Joseph Ki-Zerbo, Kenneth Clark, and E. H. Gombrich and practitioners including Picasso, Schweitzer, and many others - I began to realize that we have only scratched the surface of the rich legacy provided by these and many others over the centuries. And I began to realize something else. All the requirements were there to put a great deal more flesh on the bare bones of a cultural age. It is an age that I believe can bring much more harmony, happiness, welfare, well-being, equality, and sustainability into the world, particularly if we create the safeguards, checks and balances, precautions, and prerequisites that are imperative to ensure this.

For those who believe the rich legacy of thoughts, ideas, ideals, insights, and writings of people working in the cultural field over the centuries has no relevance to the world of the present or the future, it would be wise to remember that this would not be the first time in human history that major contributions similar to these have been ignored for long periods of time, only to be revived at a much later date due to their incredible significance to the world. The Renaissance is obviously the best example of this. It was based on ideas, insights, and ideals created in classical times that remained dormant and ignored for more than a thousand years before they were revived because they were so essential first to Italy, then to Europe, and eventually to the entire world. Or, to cite a lesser-known example of the same phenomenon, what about the musical achievements of Johann Sebastian Bach, who most musicologists believe is "the greatest composer of all time?" His phenomenal talents, vast repertoire, and countless musical accomplishments were ignored for a long time after his death until Felix Mendelssohn came across a number of his compositions in a library in Leipzig one day, revived them, and set Bach on the path to being recognized as a brilliant composer and cherished by millions if not billions of people around the world today.

And this brings us, via a rather circuitous route, to what may well be one of culture's greatest assets of all at present and preparing properly for the future. It is the ability to bring about change and act as the "*change agent*" that is desperately needed in the world. This results primarily from culture's capacity to move backward and forward as well as horizontally and vertically across a vast panorama of different disciplines and fields due to its holistic character and capabilities. Jean d'Ormesson, the French novelist, cultural scholar, and former Dean of the Académie française, captured this quality most effectively and eloquently when he said, "Culture used to look backward in order to try to understand the world, now, all of a sudden, it is looking forward in order to change it."

Interestingly, everybody is talking about culture's capacity for creating change these days. How often have we heard people, organizations, governments, educational institutions, hospitals, police forces, and so forth say it is necessary to *change the culture* over the last year or so?

Why is this? Surely it is because it is widely recognized in the world today that what is most needed going forward into the future is not partial, partisan, piecemeal, or incremental change, but rather systemic change that makes it possible for humanity to come to grips with the dangerous and life-threatening problems that exist throughout the world.

These changes must be *transformational* in the sense that they produce major changes in our values, value systems, worldviews, individual and collective behaviour, lifestyles, and especially ways of life, thereby making it possible to decrease the demands we are making on the natural environment, other species, the world's precious resources, fragile ecosystems, and the finite carrying capacity of the earth.

They must be *transcendental* in the sense that they elevate our perceptions, imagination, and consciousness through more effective education in culture and all the multifarious cultures and civilizations of the world, enhance our awareness and appreciation of the non-material dimensions of life as well as the cultural, natural, and digital heritage of humankind, strengthen our commitment to higher goals and objectives for humanity, live happier, healthier, and more contented and meaningful lives, focus on "*being more*" rather than "*having more*," enhance opportunities for the development of both popular culture and elite culture and facilitate productive exchanges and relationships between them, increase and intensify many more national, universal, generational, ethnic, and racial cultural relations, and enjoy experiences and events more than acquiring commodities and accumulating stuff.

Finally, they must be *redistributive* in the sense that they allocate income, resources, and opportunities more fairly and fully through the adoption and implementation of progressive tax policies and other measures that move financial resources and possibilities out of the hands of the rich, powerful, and wealthy classes and into the hands of many other groups, classes, sectors of society, marginalized minorities, and indigenous communities.

If policies and practices like these can be created, adopted, and implemented on a local, regional, national, and international basis, they will go a long way towards bringing a cultural age into existence and enabling to it flourish.

Small wonder Eleanor Barbieri Masini, another cultural scholar, said, “culture in the future is the crux of the future.” (10) This is where it all begins, and where our individual and collective cultural imaginations can take us in the end. Let’s seize this timely opportunity to cross over the threshold to a cultural age as the next great epoch in human history and planetary affairs.

References

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2. Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, Ltd. 1935), p. 33.
3. Karl J. Weintraub, *Vision of Culture: Voltaire, Guizot, Burckhardt, Lamprecht, Huizinga, Ortega y Gasset* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1966).
4. Ibid., p. 1.
5. Ibid., p. 2.
6. Ibid., p. 216, (insert mine).
7. Ibid., p. 216.
8. Ibid., p. 219, (italics Huizinga’s)
9. Ibid., p. 219-220, (inserts and italics mine).
10. Eleonora Barbieri Masini, *The Futures of Cultures*, Volume I, Meeting of the Working Group on the Futures of Culture, January 9-10 (Paris: UNESCO, 1991). p. 6.