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Post-Cultural Studies: A Brief Introduction

This is a relatively brief reflection on where we are with our “culture” in the present, a time when Politics has done a great deal of damage to our communicative purposes and hopes.¹ Our culture has become a “post-culture,” we believe, in a sense to be defined here. It is hard enough to say what one means by “culture,” so the challenge of describing what “post-culture” means will be greater. It should be attempted because there has been a deep-seated change, in recent decades, in how human beings interpret themselves. The rate of change has accelerated even in just the last ten years. We create culture for many lesser reasons, but the over-arching reasons for our efforts all relate to knowing who and what we are and why we exist at all – what is our purpose? Culture is our attempt to address both our hopes and doubts.

Our forms of culture are *symbolic*, and a “symbolic form” of culture provides a horizon for our self-interpretation. Ernst Cassirer (1874–1945) dedicated his life to the study of these forms, their origins, their development, their function, and structures. At various times he named *myth*, *language*, and *objecti-*

1) This has become especially visible with the rise of Trumpism in America, see: Sexton, *American Rule*. We will capitalize the names of specific symbolic forms in this essay to indicate the technical as opposed to generic uses of the words.

vating knowledge as the major, or “general” forms, all present during the whole development of culture. Each is an independent and irreducible “energy” that contributes to the development of culture.² Each is a mode of symbol-making. Objectivating knowledge, which has come to dominate the modern era, is the human tendency to create for ourselves “objects” we may then “know.”

Culture is, therefore, the “means of our self-interpretation.” When we create symbols, we leave a bit of ourselves, our peculiar human form of energy in them, and that is their dynamism: their power to give back to us whatever of ourselves we left in them.³ The three most general forms enable us to give any individual symbol a wide variety of meanings. The objectivating activities provide horizons of interpretation and meaning to our varied combinations (or “objects”), and usually their purpose is “knowledge.” Cassirer wrote a massive four-volume study (entitled *Das Erkenntnisproblem*, 1906–1932), of this objectivating process from the Renaissance to the present (1932 at that time), describing the development of this process, especially in science, but also in history and other types of knowing. Thus, our symbolizing efforts were directed away from Myth and Language and toward objectivation, (i.e., object-creation), during that era. We might well argue that objectivating knowledge was replaced by a resurgent emphasis on Language during the second two-thirds of the twentieth century, a trend which continues into the present.

Yet, all of the activity is symbolizing activity. To discover a symbol is to be challenged by it as with a question: Am I Language? Am I Myth? Am I an Object for knowing, and if so, how should you know me? These general questions lead to specific questions: Do I teach? Am I for exchange? Am I a record of what was? Am I a vessel of power? Am I determined by legal parameters? Am I for aesthetic enhancement/contemplation? And so on, all being forms of the deeper question “what is my purpose?” and “what is my function?” in both the general and specific senses.

Our means of self-interpretation have grown into our means of knowing the world, during the Modern Era. But knowledge is just the most powerful form of interpretation. It does not surpass interpretation; it is one kind of interpretation. At the beginning of our collective effort that we call “culture,” we cannot distinguish Myth, Language, and Objectivating activity from one another. They are, as Cassirer demonstrates, irreducible independent energies, but they exist together for us, in an unconscious complex, at the dawn of culture. We only feel this complex, in our darkest past.⁴

As culture develops, the core interactions among the three primary or “general” forms give rise to a dizzying constellation of meanings. The meanings diverge like an expanding universe from its big bang. Just as the contemporary physicists try to discern the fundamental forces of the physical universe, those who study culture attempt to do something analogous with the basic independent energies of human creativity. The symbol, as the carrier of an idea/image/sensation/memory complex, seems to be at the heart of this effort. At various times in human history, a single general symbolic form has had supremacy over all the others. We have moved from Myth to Objectivation, to Language. All “knowledge” would be judged according to that dominant form, and anything very far away from the dominant standard would be ridiculed, ostracized, forbidden, banished. “Taboo” is the basic and undifferentiated version of this kind of judgment, as a felt complex. It has recently

2) Cassirer, *An Essay on Man*.

3) Human cultural products are then imbued with our symbolic activity. For example, see the energy given back to us by utopian fiction in Kramer, *Utopia as the Gift of Ethical Genius*.

4) Cassirer writes about this undifferentiated quality of Gestalt of cognition recalling Herder: “To designate this unity and wholeness of sensible consciousness, which we must think of as preceding any division into different sensory spheres, into a world of the visible, the audible, the tangible, Herder goes back to the term ‘feeling,’ we do not grasp [*ergreifen*] all those differences, according to which we tend to divide sensation into classes, as static givennesses, but here we apprehend [*erfassen*] them, as it were, in *statu nascendi* [in the nascent state],” Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, 3:37.

become increasingly taboo to treat the object of knowledge as independent of the knower, which has sent the effort of culture toward Language.

Also, specific forms of culture, as they reach full objectivation, would dominate the horizons of interpretation adorning various periods. One could say that Art dominated ancient Greece (the Romans said that about the Greeks for a thousand years). In the case of Rome, it was Law that dominated. Then for a thousand years, Religion set the standards of knowing. As the Modern era unfolded, Science became the supreme symbolic form, and anything that was not scientific knowledge was not really knowledge at all. Some Specific forms work fairly well together. For example, Law works well with both Religion and Science, but not with Art. Art had a constructive relationship with Religion in much of the world, but has had an uneasy relationship with Science. History works extremely well with Law and Art (although it slows them down, which is annoying to Art, but not to Law). Religion does not especially want a History but must have a history, so there is a struggle. History has a deep tension with Science. Politics has an uneven relation with all of the symbolic forms, although it is closely allied with Economics. Education is chameleon-like and adapts to every form that is in a dominant position, but it always has problems with each as well, to the extent it tries to function independently. The Military has a contractive relationship with History, but a troubled relationship with Law and Politics, especially. Medicine works well with Science, tolerably well with Art and History, but has a bad relation with Economics and a very difficult relation to Law. This sort of struggle characterizes the development of culture. Tensions among the Specific forms of culture are subordinate to the dominate general effort of culture that happens to be ascendant during an epoch. Thus, we have watched all the Specific forms being adapted the ascendancy of Language, and re-drawing the boundaries of their horizons. New tensions have emerged and old ones have diminished.

Clearly, during the twentieth century, Politics unseated Science as the authority over all knowing, and in the present has become quickly a way of speaking and imaging that is colonizing all of the other Specific forms. Politics has enclosed and farmed (cultivated) every other form (take a look at how different political parties view climate change for an example of how Science has been reduced to a way of speaking rather than a form of knowledge; to see this happening in Medicine, examine the treatment of COVID in the US, and so on). But is it possible to have an object of knowledge as created by Politics that is not cynical? Is it possible to have a politicized way of speaking that is truthful? That is a serious and difficult question, partly because there is no clear account of how Politics makes images into symbols (whether their purpose is knowing or seeking power). Propaganda, yes, but can there be an un-cynical propaganda? Most of what we have achieved regarding political symbol-making is critique – a hundred varieties of critical theory without clear paths forward.⁵

If we are to be dominated by the objectivating form of Politics, we must gain a better understanding of what Politics “knows,” and how. If we are to be dominated by Politics as Language, we must understand how it speaks and means, the event of political meaning and the contours of political discourse. Regarding the former, we have a guidebook in Machiavelli, but that is cold comfort. It is good that cynicism in Politics is so well understood, as objectified power, but what are the alternatives? There is a great deal of work to be done here. Further, where is Politics vulnerable, if anywhere to a countervailing influence? To what symbols must it yield, now that its object of knowledge must serve Language?

There is a challenge presented by the rise of imperious Politics, but it is not necessarily desirable that we should try to prevent that rise. Rather, we should guide it wisely, if that can be done. We meliorists, who believe in the better precisely because we refuse to allow the best to be the enemy of the better, have work to do; otherwise, we will be defeated by self-interested, smooth-talking narcissists. As we can see from the work

5) A good example is Mbembe's *Critique of Black Reason*.

of historians – not just the philosophers of History such as Oswald Spengler⁶ and Arnold Toynbee,⁷ but especially those like Michel Foucault,⁸ whose comprehensive critique of historical systems may suggest alternatives to cynicism and the circulation of power. He was right to foresee that the location of resistance would be the body of a kind of speaker. The event of meaning has a home, the speaking body, or more precisely, the image of the speaking body (Barthes is, after all right in pivoting to the image, since it is not an act of predication, but a play of signifiers and the signified which the image presents). We can say that people who speak truth to power, such as Foucault himself, are what he called the “*parrhesiast*,” the Greek term for a Truth-speaker; these people are the vanguard of post-cultural studies. It does not mean “rabble-rousers,” “misanthropes,” and “malcontents,” but rather people with both confidence and hope regarding the human prospect – people who would be persons under this new affordance of Language.

In the case of Politics, post-cultural studies is an effort to shine light on what is dark in our political practices, especially communicative action, the exchange of images, and to root out the energies that rob our political discourse of its fuller meaning, depleting our hope for the future of governing.⁹ Post-cultural studies is a form of critique that defends the effort of culture by using the communicative practice of speaking truth to power against the dark energies that would turn citizens to cynicism and apathy about the project of governing. We critique the relation of Objectivating Knowledge and Language, insisting upon their cooperation. Governing is the purpose of politics. That purpose has disappeared in a haze of hyper-teleological rhetoric, drowning out the very purpose of communicative action.¹⁰ Such rhetoric can be challenged effectively by the *parrhesiast* rhetorical critic. Where the critic of Science in the Age of Objectivating knowledge might have been the Philosopher (as Cassirer held); the critique of the image in this, and the dawn of the Age of Language, must be a Rhetorician. Foucault’s rhetorical turn was prophetic. This embodied critic, whose body is host to the critique as an event of meaning, requires some courage to confront politics at the very level it abuses, the use of Language, subjugating Myth and Objectivating knowledge. Cassirer himself theorized the relation of Objectivating Knowledge to Myth in his final book, but it remains to us to see the relation with clear eyes and clean ears in the young Age of Language. If rhetoricians and communication theorists do not do this work, who else can? Marketing agencies and spin doctors? It is worth finding out who, in the sense of “the possessors of what talents,” can contribute to this project.

It would thus serve all practitioners and theorists in the other objectivating symbolic forms to see rhetoric and the study of the image as allied to their cultural efforts, and to enter into becoming cultural therapists with the symbol-making process itself at the center of concern. So, where Cassirer had the charming idea that philosophers could mediate and translate among the competing symbolic forms, it seems now that rhetorical theory is, today, better suited to that kind of work. Philosophy and rhetoric have in common that they do not command a symbolic form of culture of their own, but rather range over all of the forms. But philosophy operates best in a calm setting, observing the objectivating process involved in knowing and self-knowing; while rhetoric is made for the wild and woolly, the rough and tumble of active culture, and that is where we are right

6) Spengler, *The Decline of the West*.

7) Toynbee, *A Study of History*.

8) Foucault, *Discourse and Truth and Parrhesia*.

9) One of us develops a reflection on the phenomenon of dark communication (together with two other philosophers) in: *Wicked Words: Messages from the Dark Side*, forthcoming.

10) The current rise of anti-liberal discourse on the political right, referring to the traditionalism of conservative revolutionists of 1918–1933 (Spengler, Evola, Junger) is a way of hindering progress in how we govern ourselves. See Rose, *A World After Liberalism*.

now. Knowledge? We need it. But it is inert when negatively charged electors swarm around the nucleus of culture, which for better or worse, is the State.

What is this present situation, apart from the politicization of every symbolic form? We propose that we are at or are approaching the “height” of our Modern culture, in a certain sense. The “height” of any given culture we might locate at any number of points in human history, from the appearance of monotheism in the Holy Land and Greece, to the reign of Law in the Roman Republic, to the rebirth of Art in the Renaissance, to the rise of Science in the Enlightenment and its institutionalization in the nineteenth century, to the onset of the information age that we currently experience. Information is knowledge operationalized as regimented Language. Everything has become that Language. These are times of rapid change, dynamic, unsettling everything, but also tremendous flourishing and creativity.

It is at the height of a culture that its fractures and fault-lines begin to appear. For our purposes the relevant question is whether *culture comes to a point at which it can no longer interpret itself as anything more than a sprawling collection of fragments* which no longer can be situated within an over-arching scheme of symbolic forms. As far as we can discern, that is what happened when Myth gave way to Objectivating Knowledge, which has happened in numerous cultures at various times – times when those cultures ceased believing in their own gods. Here we witness the rise of Language and the subordination and instrumentalization of both Myth and Objectivating Knowledge. This is not something to celebrate, but it certainly is an opportunity. It is during times like this that Politics begins to do its more destructive work. When Politics divides us, as it has done many times in the past and is doing presently, that is when the truth-speaker, the *parrhesiast* must appear. And does. Nietzsche’s Zarathustra is too early in 1880, as he says, but not now. And the historical Zarathustra came when it was time in Persia. Truth-speakers reform, re-imagine, re-work, re-vivify, and even re-create the symbols and their meanings. They always come in groups, in movements, even if there seem to be only a few in the vanguard.

This situation which calls out for the Truth-speakers is what we mean by “post-culture.” The reason for this name is that *culture comes to a point at which it can no longer accumulate and absorb its own productions*. We came to know too much. Something had to give, and did. Objectivating knowledge was vanquished from the field of cultural battle. It has become too differentiated and pluralized to easily allow a synthesis of knowledge. We see the time approaching when we give up on the idea of “mastery” of a given symbolic form, the ideal knower – the Economist, the Artist, the Scientist, and so on, with their Nobel Prizes – and move toward communities that carry out the work once done by past masters. The bodega, the monastery, the laboratory team, the think tank, are collections of people trying to hold a symbolic form together, to assimilate and interpret the central meanings generated by symbols that have taken on a life of their own and given themselves to some kind of “public.”

Whenever that line was crossed, of the limits of self-assimilation of the objects created for knowing, including most importantly the self, or what Foucault called “man,” historically and in the present; it was a transformation in the human race *from the ideal of the all-knower, through whom we are seeking the unity of all knowledge, to a collection of knowers*, a community of inquiry modeled on cooperation among experts of the various symbolic forms. But these communities must have an exterior, a rhetorical image, or, god help us, a “brand.” We see such a model of cooperation in knowing in, for example, the complementary talents of our space station crews, or a College of Cardinals in the high middle ages, when religion held the place in culture that science holds now, the British aristocracy under the Magna Carta, and others. *The hopeful ideal of knowing means that, even if no individual person can be the all-knower, an intelligent social group can play that role*. And yet, now it must have an image. With such an arrangement, in principle, the project of building culture can continue, but only on the condition of developing its brand. If not God, then the Church. If not the King, then English Common Law and English Liberty. If not Truth, then scientific inquiry, and meaning. If not Knowledge, then meaning.

But a fully functional community of inquiry is exceedingly difficult to assemble. Is the PR person part of the community? Is it not the very calling of the PR person to see a community of inquiry not as it sees itself and construes its purpose, but to see it as others do, or should? For such a rhetorician, is not belief in the calling of that group a liability? The idea of the modern university is supposed to be such an assemblage, for example. From the Institute of Advanced Study at Princeton to the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago, to the Collège de France, and analogous institutions in many countries, our society has tried to draw on the many aspects of our knowledge for the accomplishment of cultural purposes. But did not the Polish Academy of Sciences need a PR specialist when its findings regarding Polish history during the Second World War ran counter to the established rhetorical ground (the brand) of the ruling party? Knowledge is not what was needed – that was possessed. PR was needed, and it was not to be found.

Well beyond academia, we find further examples among the coalitions that drafted the Equal Rights Amendment, that wrote and presented the Declaration of Universal Human Rights, the wide cooperation on the Marshall Plan, The Camp David Accords, The Good Friday Accords, and a stack of other genuinely important projects that cross political divides. All of these are worth googling and studying. What do they mean today? It is difficult to hold them under the old operations of Objectivating Knowledge. They are, today, first and foremost Language, and persist as established brands, not as decisive achievements in our collective moral development. The results of our explorations in political experimentation have been mixed, but the ideal arrangement of experts has not been discovered, at least where the purpose is the building or restoration of culture. The various objectivating forms keep invading each other's territory and planting a flag of supremacy of interpretation. The objectivating forms conflict, and are fighting battles that ended in fact some decades ago.

Were “philosophers” in a position to mediate the competing and imperious tendencies of the major forms of Objectivating Knowledge? Perhaps at some points in the past, but not now. Perhaps what could not be unified in knowledge could at least be held together in reflective and critical thinking for Kant or Hegel. Since philosophers have never been masters of any independent symbolic form, but rather they must study all of the forms insofar as reflection can assimilate them, it made a certain amount of sense to ask philosophers to translate the increasingly specialized and isolated languages of these domains for one another. A philosopher of Kant's ilk could (perhaps) tell a lawyer what an artist means, or a historian what an economist means, and so on. Cassirer's understanding of “phenomenology” consisted in bringing these forms under a flexible but critical reflective order, such that there could be a fusion of their horizons.¹¹ He argued that if there were to be a “fourth critique” to add to Kant's three, it would be the critique of culture.

And indeed, that is the task before us now. But not under the aegis of Objectivating Knowledge. But philosophers would or could be among the Truth-speakers, not the master mediators. Cassirer's life's work did not so much carry out the critique of culture as to arrange the history and achievements of culture in such a way that a critical perspective could be achieved. We might call it the “groundwork for a metaphysics of culture,” rather than the metaphysics itself. We have tried to frame a post-cultural study in this short essay, shining some light on the most challenging dilemmas of our current dark communication, suggesting some symbolic tools for their navigation. That is the work of post-cultural study, and we hope that co-researchers now recognize the presence of hyper-teleological communication, of imperious imaging, where it occurs, and can return communicative action to its constructive purposes.

11) Cassirer, *The Problem of Knowledge*.

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