

WHAT ARE WE? EXPLORING THEMES AND JUDGING FOR YOURSELF IN CLASS DISCUSSIONS

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ABSTRACT: THE ARTICLE CONSIDERS MODERN VALUE-ORIENTED ACTIVITIES, MODIFYING THE CORRELATION OF GOALS AND MEANS, THE LIFE OF AN INDIVIDUAL, A GROUP OR THE WHOLE SOCIETY AND FULFILLING THE PROGNOSTIC FUNCTION FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF ANTHROPOLOGY AS THE STUDY OF COMMUNICATION CENTRAL TO THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE. MARKETABLE CULTURE DEVELOPS THE HABIT OF APPEALING TO EMOTIONS AND CREATING ARTIFICIAL NEEDS FOR PRODUCTS AND SERVICES.

KEY WORDS: VALUE PRIORITIES, VIRTUAL CULTURE, SOCIALIZATION, MARKETABLE CULTURE, SPIRITUAL SIDE OF EXISTENCE.

What are we?
Sticks and stones, schemes and dreams.
Myths and legends, ideas and images.
War and peace, angels and devils.
We are the best
that has been thought and said –
we are the worst.
We are, Alexander Pope noted:
*Created half to rise, and half to fall;
Great lord of all things, yet a prey to all;
Sole judge of truth, in endless error hurled;
The glory, jest, and riddle of the world.*

MARSHALL FISHWICK, AMERICAN SCHOLAR [1]

THREE major studies: psychology as the study of human behavior, sociology as the study of society and social process, and anthropology as the study of communication central to the human experience as a factor which develops, maintains, and changes culture, formed a relatively young field of inquiry – communication studies. The discipline focuses on communication as central to the human experience, which involves understanding how people behave in creating, exchanging, and interpreting messages. Communication stands so deeply rooted in human behaviors and the structures of society that scholars (*Harold D. Lasswell, Richard A. Lanham, Erving Goffman, Robert T. Craig, Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan* and others) have difficulty thinking of it while excluding social or behavioral events.

What accounted for the popularity of the TV project “The Name of Russia”, held in 2008, which suggested that Russians should choose among the most prominent figures in the history of our country? Each person under discussion is the embodiment of the best traits of Russian character: fidelity, persistence, love of their native land.

What accounts for the popularity of American movie heroes like James Bond, Rambo, or Indiana Jones? Each is a rugged individual, suspicious of “the system,” who relies primarily on personal skill and initiative. Together, they signify that their culture celebrates an ideal of sturdy individualism, especially among men but increasingly for women, too.

Such value-oriented activity modifies the correlation of goals and means, the life of an individual, a group or the whole society and fulfills the prognostic function, when the future is not only foreseen, but is created by the process of the formation of the hierarchy of values. Here we may speak about long-term trends of this process.

In ancient times the core values of social life were glory, courage, mercy, justice. Later, at the times of Middle Ages Christianity appeared rationality and restraint, later came wisdom.

WORDS which describe moral concepts, are unique to countries or areas: “face” in Asian cultures, “filotimo” in Greece. The most untranslatable, demanding and really mysterious words in Japanese and in Greek, involve personal pride, dignity, courage, duty, sacrifice, and above all demand respect and deep personal freedom.

RUSSIANS are among the world's greatest shoppers. They delight in surveying hand-woven carpets in China or India, inspecting finely crafted metals in Turkey, or collecting beautifully colored porcelain tiles in Morocco. And, of course, all these items are wonderful bargains. But one reason for the low cost is unsettling: a lot of products from low- and middle-income countries are produced by children, many as young as five or six, who work long days for extremely low wages.

So, living in a different age or culture would make you a different person. Even if you rebelled against the values of your time and place, they still would represent the context of your life—in other words, they still would influence your responses.

The Old Order Amish [2] in the United States, originated in Austria and Moravia during the Reformation, are pacifistic, agrarian people whose lives focus on their religious beliefs. They value simplicity, hard work, and a high degree of neighborly cooperation. The Amish dress in a distinctive plain garb and even today rely on the horse for transportation as well as agricultural work. They mingle as little as possible with the non-Amish. The Amish separate themselves (as much as possible) from the “negative.” They see the city as the center of leisure, of nonproductivity, and wickedness. To avoid evil, the Amish forbid all intimate contact with outsiders. Part of the separation from the outside includes not using electricity, telephones, or automobiles.

They do not encourage formal education past elementary school. The goal of Amish education is to teach reading, writing, and arithmetic and to instill Amish values in their children. They reject the idea of schools producing good citizens for the state. The Amish insist that their children attend school near home and that teachers be committed to Amish values. Through their nonconformity to many standards of the mainstream culture, causing frequent conflict with state authorities, the Amish proclaim their own special identity. In Russia we know similar religious subgroups called the staroobryadtsy.

Different as they are, the Amish and the staroobryadtsy actually practice many values citizens of the US and Russia respect in the abstract: thrift, hard work, independence and a close family life.

Consequently we can notice the inadequacy of the estimation of people in the society, irrespective of their social position and popularity. Inner uniqueness and spiritual independence from material life raise them on to the level of genuine personality: estimation, action, behavior.

Being well-known celebrities such people like Dostoyevsky and his personage Count Myshkin, Lev Tolstoy, daring to deny religious principles, Pavel Florensky, they all lived a tragic life, having become marginals because of their convictions. But theirs and their followers' activities were directed to the overcoming of alienation and reproduction of human values. The prominent Russian philosopher N. Berdyaev stated: "The strongest in this world is rough substance, but it is the least valuable. The higher is the hierarchy of values, the less they are stronger". [3]

Not only are you a member of a particular species, *Homo sapiens*, but you also exist at a particular time in the history of that species and in a particular place on the planet. That time and place are defined by specific circumstances, understandings, beliefs, and customs, all of which limit your experience and influence your thought patterns. [4]

In past centuries, family and teachers were the dominant, and sometimes the only, influence on children. Today, however, the influence produced by mass culture (the broadcast media, newspapers, magazines, Internet and popular music) is often greater.

Today, young children are more and more preoccupied with virtual culture, coming to them through computer cyber-space. Among teen and preteen gamers, the names of violent computer games travel fast. And before you know anything about these games, your kid wants to play them. It's difficult to stay on top of it -- and it's even harder to know exactly what's in a game in order to make an informed decision about whether or not to buy it.

Of course, many video and computer games can provide enriching experiences and learning opportunities. *Assassin's Creed* series is a historical fiction action-adventure video game which was made available on Microsoft Windows. The game primarily takes place during the Third Crusade in the Holy Land in 1191, with the plot revolving around the Secret Order of Assassins. The player is in reality playing as a modern-day man named Desmond Miles, who, through the use of a machine named the "Animus", is allowed the viewing and controlling of the protagonist's genetic memories of his ancestors.

THROUGH this plot device, details emerge of a struggle between two factions, the Knights Templar and the Assassins, over an artifact known as a "Piece of Eden", an ancient artifact used to control minds. The game received generally positive reviews, and won several awards at E3 (Electronic Entertainment Expo) in 2006. There is a certain amount of implied violence that comes along with that. You spend a lot of time in the game skulking around in the shadows and attacking people, and there is plenty of blood. As a redeeming point, you are an assassin to fight the bad guys. Your motto is - "we work in the dark to serve the light». But with ultra-violent video and computer games, the negatives clearly outweigh any positives for kids.

ANOTHER popular computer game Minecraft is in many ways educational. Players "mine" for elements and spend much of their time building communities. Elements of math, engineering, architecture and social engineering are present within the game.

AS the Information Revolution proceeds, virtual culture is taking the increasing importance. And if so, it may steadily erode longstanding traditions and affect generations yet to come. [5]

Changes in culture will almost certainly bring about changes in socialization. Now, screens are not for television and videos; harnessed to computers, they promise to connect, entertain, and educate us. Unlike television, which demands passive viewing, the computer is interactive. This interactive capacity and new information technologies leave less time and possibility for children to communicate with their parents. More than that, it is doubtful whether the virtual media meet the emotional needs of children. [6]

The similar situation can be observed on the global level, in every country, where a lot of samples of similar type are produced for profit. Many of the cultural products bearing the anti-commercial trademark 'art for art's sake' show traces of commercialism in their appeal to the sensational or in the conspicuous display of material wealth and sensuous stimuli at the expense of the meaningfulness of the work. [7]

Marketable culture becomes a commodity symbol that replaces a more local cultural symbol. Why does that take place?

- 1) Partly this is due to the commercialization and commodification of the production.*
- 2) Partly it is due to the fact that, to a larger degree, culture relies not upon intellectual reflection or cognitive insight, but mainly upon modes of less demanding stimulation, often becoming a form of political or ideological iconography, evoking passion rather than thoughtfulness.*

If we only consider the formats and devices commonly used in the media we'll see how modern advertising typically bombards the public with slogans and testimonials by celebrities. This approach is designed to appeal to emotions and create artificial needs for products and services.

As a result, many people develop the habit of responding emotionally, impulsively, and gullibly to such appeals. They also tend to acquire values very different from those taught in the home and the school. They expect the classroom and the workplace to provide the same constant excitement they get from television. That, of course, is an impossible demand, and when it isn't met they call their teachers boring and their work unfulfilling. Because such people seldom have the patience to read books that require them to think.

Many psychologists and researchers, such as John Watson, Maxwell Maltz, Abraham Maslow, Martin Seligman, Viktor Frankl tried to find the most appropriate and effective formulae for success and happiness: appealing not to the mind but to the emotions, changing one's self-image and self-esteem, describing the hierarchy of human needs, making self-actualization (or happiness) the direct object of a person's pursuit. The proper perspective on life, Frankl believes, is not what it can give to us, but what it expects from us; life is daily—even hourly—questioning us, challenging us to accept "the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets for [each of us]." [8]

In other words, all philosophic studies, showing the changes of value priorities, foresee the future as core values to be followed. But the historic reality brings its corrections, not always coinciding with the prognoses of philosophers.

At our class discussions during the course in Pragmatic Aspects of Theory of Communication. Cultural Anthropology we employ various assignments initiating a round of talks among students who should express themselves as personally as they like.

Debating Club: Exploring Themes and Judging for Yourself.

1. Analyze how does a schoolroom activity embody cultural values? What cultural values are expressed by children's stories and popular board and computer games?

Develop your writing skills. Write a one- or two-page essay to debate the issues.

2. Express yourself as personally as you like in your discussions.

Why do members of every society tend to be ethnocentric? Point out at least one positive and negative function of ethnocentrism. Can you do the same with cultural relativism?

3. Learn to speak concisely and laconically. Making connections:

Pop artists like Andy Warhol became both noteworthy and influential through work including and possibly critiquing popular culture. Certain radical artists of the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s expanded this technique of self-criticism beyond high art to all cultural image-making, including fashion images, comics, billboards and pornography.

Debate the proposition. Music and the visual arts often are spoken of as if they have their own "language". Is this a language in the same sense as spoken or written language? What do music and the visual arts communicate to an audience?

4. Work in group. Enumerate as many points as you can in which our society might be different today and comment on whether each would be beneficial or harmful. Be ready to explain your views in class discussion. Consider significant details. Share your group's ideas with the class.

In the late nineteenth century, the German sociologist Ferdinand Toennies (1855-1937) set out to chronicle the social traits of the new industrial metropolis. He contrasted rural and urban life using two concepts that have become a lasting part of sociology's terminology. Toennies used the German word Gemeinschaft (meaning roughly "community") to refer to a type of social organization by which people are bound together closely by kinship and tradition. The Gemeinschaft of the rural village, Toennies explained, joins people into what amounts to a single primary group.

On the whole, Toennies continued, Gemeinschaft is absent in the modern city. On the contrary, urbanization enhances Gesellschaft (a German word meaning roughly "association"), a type of social organization by which people stand apart from one another in pursuit of self-interest. In the Gesellschaft scheme, individuals are motivated by their own needs rather than a drive to enhance the well-being of everyone. City dwellers, Toennies suggested, display little sense of neighborhood and look to others mostly as a means of advancing their individual goals. Thus Toennies saw in urbanization the erosion of close, enduring social relations in favor of the fleeting and impersonal ties typical of business.

5. The text below [2] debates different approaches containing evident strengths and weaknesses. Account for your reasons, if you conclude that one view is entirely correct and the others are wrong; while explaining how you reached that conclusion find convincing arguments.

In everyday conversation, we usually reserve the term "culture" for sophisticated art forms such as classical literature, music, dance, and painting. We praise college professors, film directors, or dance choreographers as "cultured," because, presumably, they appreciate the "finer things in life."

By contrast, we speak less generously of ordinary people, assuming that everyday cultural patterns are somehow less worthy. In more concrete terms, we are tempted to judge the music of Mozart as "more cultured" than any modern rock-group, filet mignon as better

than fish sticks, and polo as more polished than Ping-Pong.

Such judgments imply that many cultural patterns are readily accessible to some but not all members of a society. Sociologists use the shorthand term high culture to refer to cultural patterns that distinguish a society's elite.

The term "high culture" is derived from the more popular term "highbrow." Influenced by phrenology—the bogus nineteenth-century theory that personality was affected by the shape of the human skull—people a century ago contrasted the praiseworthy tastes of those they termed "highbrows" with the contemptible appetites of others they derided as "lowbrows."

Popular culture designates cultural patterns widespread among a society's population.

Common sense may suggest that high culture is superior to popular culture. After all, history chronicles the lives of elites much more than those of ordinary women and men. But sociologists are uneasy with such a sweeping evaluation and commonly use the term "culture" to refer to all elements of a society's way of life, even as they recognize that cultural patterns vary throughout a population.

For two main reasons, we should resist quick judgments about the merits of high culture as opposed to popular culture.

First, neither elites nor ordinary people have uniform tastes and interests; people in both categories differ in numerous ways.

Second, do we praise high culture because it is inherently better than popular culture, or simply because its supporters have more money, power, and prestige to begin with? For example, there is no difference between a violin and a fiddle; however, we designate the instrument one way when it is used to produce a style of music typically enjoyed by a person of higher position, and the other way when producing music appreciated by an individual of lower social standing.

In my judgment, the major trend of the century to have begun underlies the fact that free trade and the development of means of mass communication have led the world community to the maintenance of the universal way of life and communication throughout the whole world in the process of global changes in social life. Some changes have only passing significance, whereas other innovations resonate for generations.

LOOKING ahead, we can't predict with certainty how new means of mass communication will transform the world during the coming century. *The society admits the rights of an individual as a consumer and a citizen, and his concrete influence upon the progress, occurring in the society.* Our resourcefulness for creating material comforts improves our lives in many respects, yet a preoccupation with things diverts us from the security and satisfaction of close relationships and the spiritual side of existence.

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