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Culture, Space and Time – A Comparative Theory of Culture

Few will say it out loud, but many people expect Western individualism and liberal democracy to prevail globally over the long term. After all, it's the best system humans have yet devised, isn't it? Dr. ***Hans Jakob ROTH****, who served for over 30 years as a career diplomat in East Asia, does not believe so. He argues that the cultural differences between individualist and collectivist societies are far more fundamental and significant than we commonly think – and that they are here to stay. As well as putting forward a theory explaining these differences, Roth also calls for a new intercultural understanding.*

The necessity of comparative cultural theory

Many people in Western industrial societies are under the fundamental misconception that the global triumph of Western technology and economic advancement will inevitably lead to Western-style democracy and the adoption of Western value systems worldwide. However, all the indications are that competing cultural norms will continue to coexist in the twenty-first century. Therefore, we need cultural theories that more accurately capture the present global situation and its challenges.

Over the past several decades, cultural science has mostly followed a purely descriptive, phenomenological approach to studying cultural phenomena. It has shunned cross-cultural comparisons because nobody has found an answer to the question of what objective standard can be applied to evaluate cultural differences.

To highlight systematic cultural differences, however, limiting oneself to the description of individual phenomena is not enough. To establish comparability, one should assume that there are two forms of social existence: collectivist and individualist societies. As it turns out, this premise identifies several major cultural differences, which other approaches that assume cultural sameness won't capture.

Distance and proximity as basic models of societal and personal conceptions of the self

Our cultural environment, which is the result of a civilizational process that has spanned millennia, decisively influences the way we perceive reality. Individualist societies, which view individuals as relatively independent actors separate from the group, developed from an abstract conception of geometric space as it first emerged in Ancient Greece. For the first time in human history, this concept of space assigned individuals the role of detached observers, which became a central precondition for the emergence of the Western personality type.

The Western subject understands itself more as an observer than as part of the natural and social environment – this also forms the basis of Western culture's emphasis on visual perception. In contrast to the sense of smell, touch, and taste, only visual perception allows for the distancing between subject and object that has characterized Western thought.

Collectivist societies, in which individuals integrate themselves much more strongly into the social environment and define themselves as part of a group, have never gone through a comparable distancing process. In contrast to the Western distancing model, the closeness of the individual to his environment determines his perception and consequently also the view of the self.

In Eastern cultures there is no hierarchy of senses that is comparable to the West's emphasis on visual perception. The stronger reliance on the senses of smell and touch thus leads to a more holistic perception of reality.

The concept of time, and the perception of it, follows the same basic model of distancing and closeness. Until the twentieth-century revolution in physics, Western cultures understood time as linear and independent of space. The linear concept of time moving from the past into the future in a straight line informed Western cultures' advanced strategic planning capabilities. For non-Western cultures, the present and future are much less interconnected.

As with sensory perception, collectivist societies also base their concept of time on the principle of closeness. Therefore, the primary emphasis rests on the present, while the future is imagined more in the form of visions, which are not necessarily derived from present day reality.

"High context" and "low context" cultures

Besides perception, the way that people communicate with each other is the most direct expression of their cultural imprint. According to E. T. Hall, cultures differ in the degree to which information is communicated through actual words as opposed to through the social and situational context.

The less information the actual message contains, the more the recipient will have to rely on context to interpret it – which is the case in "high context" cultures. By contrast, in "low context" cultures more of the information in a message is codified and can thus be interpreted independent of the context.

This distinction becomes particularly evident when comparing Western languages to Chinese. Semantically, Chinese is much less precise than Western languages. To understand a message in Chinese, the recipient needs to consider the relational and situational context, as well as facial expression and gestures of the speaker.

As members of a collectivist society, the Chinese live in a dense network of social relationships that form the “high context” necessary to correctly interpret implicit messages. In individualist societies, whose members maintain more distant relationships, codifying the content of a message becomes all the more important. The latter thus focuses more on the content as opposed to the relationship structures in linguistic communication.

In-groups and out-groups

Individuals form their social identity both by identifying themselves with a particular group and by disassociating themselves from other groups. All human societies distinguish between in-groups and out-groups. Because individualist societies have a more complex and dynamic social fabric and give individuals more options to define their own personal identity, people’s sense of belonging relies less on in-group/out-group distinctions. In collectivist societies, in-groups, such as family, clan or village community, tend to be more tightly knit and serve as social safety nets as well as providing members with a sense of belonging.

Individualist societies in the West can’t provide the same degree of group protection. Instead, individuals form groups based on personal needs and can easily switch between groups – something members of collectivist societies can’t do without facing major obstacles.

Individuals in collectivist societies therefore trade off far-reaching restrictions on their personal freedom for the security provided by in-groups. This contrasts with the loneliness and lack of safety that often afflicts members of individualist societies.

Behaviour patterns and ethics

The distinction between in-group and out-group applies to all areas of life, but it leads to different behavioural patterns in individualist and collectivist societies. Assuming, in a somewhat simplified way, that people in modern societies are moving between three different areas of life – family, work/school, and the outside world – people in collectivist societies tend to put strong emphasis on finding inclusion in their workplace’s in-group. Meanwhile, they pay less attention to the family, which they see as a community that is unshakable. In individualist societies, where personal autonomy – also vis-à-vis the family – takes priority, a functioning family life requires more individual attention.

Since collectivist societies put a high value on harmonious relationships within in-groups, different behavioural norms apply in their in-group when compared to their out-group interactions. Consequently, ethical action in collectivist societies is often contingent on specific circumstances and relationships rather than based on absolute values. Western ethical models, which follow a set of universal principles, reach their limits when personal loyalty weighs more heavily than factual loyalty.

Analytical and intuitive thinking
The distancing of the individual from the natural and social environment, which is more pronounced in individualist societies, is reflected in the predominance of rational, logical thought patterns and an analytical approach to reality. Analysis breaks down reality into manageable pieces of information and then uses a dialectic process to draw conclusions about the presumed logical structure of reality. Since the senses of sight and hearing – as opposed to smell, touch and taste – allow for the selection and prioritization of information, they are valued the highest in individualist societies.

The opposite is true in collectivist societies: Their holistic view of reality, which puts equal importance on every kind of sensory experience, does not allow for the selection or prioritization of information. By seeing reality in its totality instead of breaking it down into its component parts, collectivist societies are limited in their ability to think analytically. Instead thinking is defined by intuition and concreteness. Emotions that the analytic mind excludes as irrational are thus much more welcome in collectivist societies. Likewise, contradictions that reason and logic would need to resolve are embraced and accepted.

Democracy and humanism
Western-style democracy and human rights – as adopted by the United Nations in 1946 – are based on the values of individualist societies, which emphasize personal autonomy and the priority of the individual over the group. Looking at the process of distancing and individualization in a historical context helps to explain how these values evolved.

Collectivist societies are not only constituted differently, they have also developed a different set of values. While the Western value system primarily protects individuals by conferring rights upon them, collectivist societies emphasize an individual's responsibility to the community. Five centuries of Western cultural dominance have produced an arrogance that makes it difficult for Westerners to understand and appreciate other cultures and values.

The political and economic ascendancy of East Asia, however, is putting an end to Western dominance. A new global humanism for the twenty-first century should no longer be based exclusively on the Western concepts of the individual and society.

Elements of a cultural theory
Cultural theory is meant to point out the basic common patterns in diverse cultures from which cultural differences can be extrapolated. The difficulty is to find a suitable level of abstraction. For example, the assertion that "We are all humans, and all humans are genetically similar" may be correct in the abstract, but it won't get us very far when trying to promote intercultural understanding.

The four basic, and always reciprocal relationships, which any cultural theory should build upon are 1) the individual and the group, 2) the individual and nature, 3) the group and nature, as well as the individual, 4) the group, and cultural traditions.

The question of distance and closeness – in the physical, psychological and philosophical sense – plays a decisive role in this network of relationships and significantly contributes to the understanding of different behaviours and thought patterns. Since a global amalgamation of these patterns is unlikely to occur, we need this kind of cultural awareness – as well as cross-cultural acceptance.

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The views expressed here are solely those of the author and they do not necessarily represent or reflect the views of the stars Foundation.

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