

UNDERSTANDING CO-CONSTITUTIONAL GENESIS

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As I write this, ethnic strife continues to ravage the world. It has been suggested that since the end of the "cold war," this phenomenon will be the greatest threat to world peace.¹ In Germany, demonstrations and counter demonstrations mark the most recent murders of three Turks by fascists, a woman and two girls. Meanwhile, Eastern Europeans have been sent home by the thousands. Kurdish shanty towns have been destroyed by Iranian soldiers, raging Hindu mobs, encouraged by Hindu police and religious leaders, destroyed a 16th century Mosque to make way for a new temple to commemorate "the place" of the "Lord God Rama's" birth. The latter case has set off a wave of reactionary violence throughout the estimated 1000 million Muslims in the world causing disturbances in India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and The United Arab Emirates. The current Christmas season of bombings in London, which is perpetrated by the Irish Republican Army is underway. The indigenous populations of the "Americas" continue to struggle so that this year's Nobel Peace Prize went to one of their defenders (Rigoberta Menchu) from Guatemala. After the collapse of the great communist coalition in Eastern Europe and Eurasia, millions are actively seeking and defending new identities and the resumption of old ones. Then of course there are the perennial crises in Africa and the Middle East. In all these cases, violence has been planned and carried out by organized national and religious interests. Since this is not a news publication, and since my audience is likely to be already very well informed about current events, it is not appropriate for me to "report" incidentals except as examples and illustrations of a principle. This principle I call, co-constitutional genesis, the womb of world/meaning.

Please allow me to begin with, for lack of a better phrase, a "thought experiment." This will require active participation on the reader's part as well as some degree of suspending suspicion at least until we've thought through this mental experiment. Of course, once complete it is open for critique. So with your participatory consent let us begin.

Imagine that "you" are drifting in an absolute void. This void is absolutely nondistinct so that there is no up or down, light or dark, contrasting or complementing colors, no now and then, here or there, hot or cold, loud or quiet, bitter or sweet, et cetera. Now, for the sake of my allegory, grant to me a linear, spatial metaphor. As "you" are suspended in this motionless and timeless state the only "other" thing in the void, a thick rope appears "at hand." "You" grab the rope. Then you turn to the "right" and look along the length of rope and you see that it stretches off into the "distance" without end. "You" look to the "left" and see the same monotonously endless stretch. Then in a vain attempt to establish your location (identity), to simultaneously identify where, when, who, and what you are, "you" announce that, "I am here."

But then you realize that because this rope is eternal and infinite, without ends, to say "I am here" is an absurd self-contradiction. This is so because to say "I am here" is the same as saying "I am everywhere and nowhere." "Here" is equally applicable to all other infinite number of places you might happen to grab. Because there is no other point of reference along the endless rope wherever you are, makes absolutely no difference. "I am here" is an utterly meaningless statement.

The thought of being utterly alone with the only distinction to constitute "you" being the rope (a "not you" but "it") may suddenly give rise to terrible emotions in your heart; fear, depression, loneliness, dread, meaninglessness. As Kierkegaard (1941) suggests, if there was a rationale for divine creation it was god's absolute, unimaginable loneliness. Of course Hegel (1967) too

plays on this idea but neither of these great thinkers clearly articulates the co-constitutional logic that dictates that when god created the other, at that instant, "he" created "himself" as that being which is distinct from creation, including of course the devil. The creator is co-constituted by the creation. This is really co-creation. Each completely depends on the other for its existence. I submit that the principle of co-constitutive genesis should also be applied to psychology. Unlike Freud, whose pseudo-scientific application of the thermodynamic model to the psyche, calling it a closed tripartite "energy system" of "personality," my model of co-constitutional genesis argues that the self is the consequence of the differences that manifest "others." I am what they are not -- "I am not rope." Thus all "things" are significations, communicative constructs of interdependencies -- differences.

All of this may seem to be a quaint yet irrelevant thought experiment, but for the moment be a generous reader and let's see what consequences may logically follow. When we attempt to apply this notion of co-constitutional genesis it may be acceptable to suppose that such dreadful thoughts haunted our ancestors. I suggest that the consequence was the invention of elaborate systems of magic, sorcery, witchcraft, totem, and taboo as attempts to give meaning and to explain and control the increasingly emergent awareness of the forces of nature as Other. Such systems generated fantastic and complex distinctions among the stars, good and bad fortune, and many other "things." Even Neanderthal generated ritual to "observe" and perhaps explain death -- the ultimate and most dreaded (untamable) natural force.

The first great cosmic distinction is the separation of human (as cultural being and maker) from nature (Kramer, 1992, p. 4). Culture is that which is not natural. At the instant of distinction both are created, and nature, as Other, looms ominously before humanity thus generating the vital need for culture (magical and other kinds of systems of signs and symbols) with which to combat this maelstrom of issuing forces (Cassirer, 1946; Humboldt, 1860). But these mystical systems did not prove to be wholly satisfactory in the desire to tame nature, to co-create "culture" and "nature" as mutually dependent phenomena. What follows are other elaborate systems such as religion, tribal/ethnic distinctions, mythology, philosophy, science, curricular specialization, oral and written history (remembrances of ethnic "blood" groups), and other explanatory schemes, all of which may be subsumed under the rubric "tradition." And what do all of these systems have in common? They purport to "locate" us morally, physically, legally, economically, tribally/nationally, historically, et cetera. All systems attempt to give us identities by situating us within a cosmic scheme. We thus become moral, economic, ideological, tribal/national (and so forth) beings.

So what exactly do I mean by a system? It is not the same as one finds in the various and sundry literatures about systems theory and cybernetics.² First of all I suggest that scholars like Talcott Parsons (1937, 1951) and Arthur Koestler (1967) are, inventing rules of systematics for efficiency's sake (hence their stress on rationalization, control, equilibrium, stability, hierarchization, equifinality, and other directional concepts). They do not explain (to my satisfaction) the inner dynamics of systems (especially organic, not legalistic ones) that are more fundamental, that have not been invented with the criteria of some meta- or suprasystemic value structure dedicated to "reason" or "progress." Religions, mythologies, sciences, and ideologies are not reasonable or efficient things. And yet they are very valuable to us -- indeed vital. The value they manifest is not however the modern one of efficiency, but identity and signification.

Let us return to my rope analogy. Science perpetuates our struggle against natural forces. However, it also occupies itself with massive and expensive efforts to establish points on the rope that can give us a sense of when and where we are, a sense of direction -- cosmic orienteering. Its *modus operandi* is measurement, the effort to relativize and mathematize phenomena along a common scale so as to generate meaningful comparisons. When was the

big bang, when and how was the Earth formed, when and how did life emerge, when and how did hominids emerge, when will the sun die, and so on. Astronomy, with its obsession to map the universe and "locate" its beginning and end in physical space/time, manifests this cosmological need. Particle physics too seeks answers about the "original" force of "singularity." Genetic mapping manifests the attempt to tell the story of evolution. In many ways the great questions of science are exactly the same questions at the core of religions and mythologies. They share the same motivation, a primal search for meaning and identity.

Religions and mythologies create elaborate systems and graphic portrayals of our "place" in spiritual "space" such as Medieval European icons and Oriental mandalas. Humans of course are "higher" than other sentient beings, they are "closer" to the creator, even made "in his image." The Forbidden City in Beijing, China is an extravagant three dimensional mandala that locates the emperor at the "middle" of the spiritual, political, and physical universe. The great central pole around which pagodas are built also represents the balance of orientation. This compulsion to establish bearings is evident cross-culturally by such massive efforts as the designs and directional orientations of Medieval cathedrals, Oriental stupas and temple-cities (Ankor Wat, Cambodia, and Lhasa, Tibet), and pre-Columbian and Egyptian pyramids. Cosmic mapping takes many forms and such expressions are usually sacred because they explain/identify all things including us vis-a-vis our relationships to all things. For instance, traditional "family books" in the Orient and genealogical charts such as "family trees" in the Occident, identify one through pedigree. In the Oriental world, perhaps the worst sanction that can be taken against an individual is to leave them out of the "family book," to efface, erase, and deny them so that descendants will not remember ("worship") them.

After the Renaissance, mythology became rationalized into ideology which also purports to explain who, when, where, and what we are and should be in terms of "roles," "structures," and "functions" (the modern mechanistic metaphors are indicative of the machine age). The rational bureaucratic mentality gives us flow and organizational charts, finger printing, voice printing, and genetic printing. We are "on disk."

We create points of reference and relate them into stories that orient, guide, and comfort us. For example, Christian eschatology places me spiritually and temporally as anno Domini (A.D.) rather than "before Christ" (B.C.). Of course my "place" relative to the coming of the savior makes a critical spiritual difference. The Marxian "end of history" mimics the "judgment day" teleology of Christianity from which it takes its inspiration.³ The Aztecs, Mayans, Incas, and other aborigines of the "Americas" all have elaborate stories/explanations about the "place" of humanity in the cosmos. Cross-culturally, creation and destruction myths abound. These are efforts to give ends to the cosmic continuum so that we can have a sense of purpose.

We are driven to create communicative devices such as maps; spatial, temporal (calendars), and moral ones. Saviors, both religious and secular, function as moral standards and other types of reference. Because such systems tell us who we are they are of fundamental importance to our very self-identities. This is why clashing systems are defended to the death. The defenders are not just defending some abstract religion or ideology. The struggle is for their very existence -- identity! This is the dynamic of "vital" interests. This is also why it is precisely when "a people" are in decline or otherwise feel threatened that the desperate invention and evocation of traditions and mythic "past" glories and even divine origins begins at a furious pace. At such critical times, the manufacture and defense of culture becomes a high priority -- indeed the supreme concern. All energies are given to the defense of "the order." This is why embellishment and celebration of the status quo manifests itself as reaction against change. This quickly becomes a tautological solution to any sense of decline or threat. We must be a worthy and great people because we have glorious roots and because we have a glorious and sacred tradition we are a great people. When a nation or a people are investing obvious effort in

the invention and maintenance of a tradition, including the proliferation of new religious and pseudo-religious sectarianism and secular pageantry, it is a pretty sure sign of current problems. For instance the authors of the book The Invention of Tradition (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983) powerfully demonstrate that most of the "great tradition" and royal protocol in England is less than 100 years old, and that much of it was invented just as the English Empire began its decline. Likewise, when the European monarchies were facing the demise of feudalism they launched great remodeling and construction projects on their palaces. This is the case just prior to World War I in Vienna, Berlin, Moscow, and throughout Europe. Similarly, the last Shah of Iran spent a fortune on his coronation invoking a romantic version of imperial Persia's long lost splendor. Tradition seems to be a collective defense mechanism for society as a group. It maintains the self as a member of a group that includes generations that are living, dead, and not yet born.

The evocation of ancient and glorious roots that lie in a mystical and primordial past is typically heroic in stature (Siegfried, Gilgamesh, Arjuna, et cetera). A good example is Hitler's invention and coaptation of myth, folklore, and occult to his cause, signaling an intolerant turn to fantasy for the legitimation of present and future deeds. "Roots," "culture," and "tradition" are great magical sources of legitimation. I call them "god concepts." There is no more ferocious type of war than one for "sacred" causes. This is the source of fanatical murder and martyrdom (ritual suicide). In such conflagrations, nothing is to be spared, nothing is sacred because everything is sacred. Once the sacred origin is located, then the great chain of causation can commence with complete determinism. This origin may be the "first cause," or divine "prime mover," or the "big bang." It does not matter. Once faith in the great chain of causation is engendered, then all future events become inevitable, predictable, legitimized. Thus, entire populations pursue sacred "causes," and no obstacle is tolerated for their path is predetermined. Everything, including war, is preordained ("it is written") and therefore presumably justified.

"A people" that trace their pedigree, their story, back to such sacred origins tend to be very ethnocentric. Nothing can be more pure and complete than legitimation of power (in all its manifestations including economic and industrial) by tracing the lineage of the people directly back to divine origin. The magical elements of blood and semen constitute both the sources of and legitimation for the unquestioned exercise of power. Ethnocentric pride is rooted in mythic "pasts" (not necessarily long ago) that are presentiated by the physical presence of the current king, racial differences, documents, holy artifacts such as reverently preserved pieces of long dead saints and prophets, and other "concrete" expressions of authentic origin. This phenomenon, which can be observed cross-culturally, manifests what Jean Gebser (1985) calls the "ever-present origin." Since magic is not restricted to linear time or logic, such a contradiction is not a problem for the true believer. An example is the recent belief by Japanese that their emperor descends directly from the divine origin and that they are all his children. Japan is one big divinely legitimized family. This magical fundament is the very source of their techno-industrial success. Of course, science and technology are motivated by prelogical emotions such as arrogance, wants, and desires. The idea of a privileged or "chosen" people of course leads to exclusivity which is the seed of conflict.

But now the logic of difference and identity demonstrates a curious conclusion that is rarely noticed or appreciated.

If all the world were one "color," then that singular color would be colorless, and the very category "color" would not exist. If all people were black, then being black would not be significant. "Race" is a meaningful word (category) only because there are perceived differences. Now, if the logic of co-constitutional genesis is correct, then when one ethnic group seeks to exterminate all others it is unwittingly pursuing a suicidal course. Nihilism is the logical consequence of "purification." If the uniqueness of "I," as an individual or as a member

of a unique "group," is dependent on the existence of others, then their demise impoverishes the significance of my own identity. Because of this logic, in order to maintain one's own suicidal purpose, ever more narrow distinctions must be made. Thus we witness the measurement of degrees of racial purity being invoked. The circle of exclusivity tightens until everyone is excluded. This argument recommends that we appreciate rather than attempt to exterminate our mutual differences. The theory of co-constitutional genesis suggests that the cultural environment, like the biological environment, needs diversity in order to be "healthy."

APPLICATION

The theory of the co-constitution of meaning has many implications one of which is discussed here. This involves the "definition" and ontic status of national and ethnic selves. Self, not as a concept but as an identity, is the consequence of difference. While on a Fulbright to Bulgaria, many of my colleagues would suggest from time to time that the United States has "no culture," no "tradition." The unstated yet clear implication was that since I am an American, therefore my personal credibility could not match that of other Europeans including themselves. Despite the fact that they have very few books, almost no access to personal computers, and very poor networks of communication and world news, they believe that because they are European, and of a supposedly known pedigree that they know more than Americans about virtually everything including how to live generally. Because they were allied with the Nazis during the Second World War, they have a special affection for things German despite the fact that many Germans regard Slavic speaking peoples as "oriental" (meaning lazy and stupid) in mentality, and despite the fact that German judgment has proven to be tragically suicidal twice in this century.

Normally I perceived challenges to my identity/credibility as expressions of an inferiority complex that some Bulgarian intellectuals confessed to me (usually while intoxicated). But on the occasion of a public speech I gave, one older faculty person rose to ask me if I knew who Mohandas Gandhi was. After I answered in the affirmative, he went on to ask me if I knew what Gandhi had said about the United States. I responded that I did and decided to join the conversation. I reasoned that as a Fulbright I was in some way obligated to express my own perspective and to not simply listen. So to prove that I did in fact know what my colleague was talking about I recounted that when Gandhi visited the United Nations, he was asked, "What do you think of American culture." He responded, "It is a good idea." My colleague smirked and sat down. I then asked him a question that I deemed to be ironically appropriate for just that week. India had once again exploded into the ethnic conflict mentioned earlier in this paper. I asked him, "What is an American?" He declined to answer me. One must understand that this conversation was taking place in a context of "ethnic cleansing" occurring in the neighboring former Yugoslavia. This policy had been precipitated by the forced expulsion of 300,000 Muslim Turks from Bulgaria in 1989 (until that date the largest refugee population in Europe since the Second World War). In large measure ethnic conflict constitutes the 4000 year history of the Balkans, if not the rest of the world.

So it is to this audience, in this context that I asked my question. My audience was obviously interested to hear my follow-up to a query that to them was unanswerable except perhaps in banal terms such as the "melting pot" metaphor or in more vituperative language such as "mongrelized nation." It had become obvious to me that they were thinking in terms that are highly perspectival (identity is everything) but yet highly emotional. Who you are is far more important than what you do. As Gebser (1985) has argued, blood and semen are the material sources of this social bond(age), including royalty, and religion, including communism, is an extension of this mentality into the realm of complex ideology.

It so happened that I had my passport with me. I held it up and declared that an American is a legal abstraction. I reminded my journalism faculty colleagues that the United States is founded largely by losers who took the extreme step of immigration because their "mother/father lands" had proven to be poor parents, not places of very pleasing experiences. Thus many immigrants were and are willing to give up their language and even alter their family names because what they were (and are) leaving are sources of not very good memories. The great traditions these people abandoned mostly represented histories of war and oppression. Of course the privileged oppressors saw little need to immigrate. The United States, I argued, is bound not by race or creed but by a legal instrument (the Constitution) that had been written by journalists, intellectuals, and entrepreneurs who were steeped in the post-Renaissance rationalism of the Enlightenment philosophers, a philosophy that continues to evolve. The United States was perhaps the first and only nation founded on such a rational basis. The down side to this may be that we do not all share the same folkways, values, religious faiths, and so forth. The up side may be that this legal instrument manifests the attempt to guarantee legal recourse to all citizens equally -- with no regard to inherent difference. The rejection of tradition, like the desire to forget bad times, is a deliberate effort of the American phenomenon, what makes it really revolutionary. It is this orientation that fuels the perennial expression of isolationism in American life. Because they had just escaped Europe, many Americans were reluctant to return and sacrifice themselves in predominantly European (later world) wars called One and Two. Of course this purposeful amnesia is only partially desirable and hardly absolute. But it is this vastly different attitude towards the past and how it dictates the present and future, including self identity, what an individual is or may become, that constitutes the American dream of equal opportunity. To be sure, Americans risk not having a traditional identity, and this sense of modern alienation takes its toll, independence can be lonely and freedom forces responsibility. But the blind, highly emotional, sometimes hysterical and often murderous defense of tradition and ethnic identity has proven time and again to be a not very satisfactory alternative. Although an American is the consequence of a very secularly legal-rational worldview that may seem detached and passionless, it has been demonstrated that Americans are willing to defend this new ideal. As the saying goes, I am willing to die for your right to disagree with me, for your right to be different from me. To understand the vitality of the American system, one must understand this orientation.

The audience was visibly stunned. In the profound silence that hung like a fog, I asked whether there were any more questions. There were none. After we broke up several people, mostly democrats including a few ex-communists asked me to write this down for them. It occurs to me that writing it down may not be inappropriate for Americans too.

A second implication my theory of co-constitutional genesis has for mass media issues involves cultural extinction. Mass mediated communication, by definition, means that a single source communicates simultaneously to (not "with" for it is not yet interactive) many receivers. As mass mediation extends throughout the world, there is a problem of cultural "mainstreaming," to quote George Gerbner (1990). The "advancing fog of sameness," to quote Paul Feyerabend (1987), may not be driven by a master plan of "cultural imperialism," but its effects are the same -- a loss of cultural diversity. This impoverishes the sender just as much as it does the receiver, for increasingly they become the same. In fact, the sender is more harmed from this global trend because cultures around the globe have the benefit of their own indigenous ways so that the importation of American or British or French cultural products can take the form of enrichment by manifesting alternatives -- diversity. But the one-way flow imprisons and deprives the members of the sender culture of alternatives -- meaning. A one-sided conversation is not only a contradiction in terms but it is also eternally boring. ★

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ENDNOTES

1. Of course ethnicity was an ingredient in the cold war itself.
2. I wish to distinguish my theory from several scholars by acknowledging their useful efforts. These include Anatol Rapaport, Ferdinand de Saussure, Roman Jakobson, Claude Levi-Strauss, Ludwig von Bertalanffy, Norbert Wiener, Claude Shannon, and Warren Weaver.
3. Marxist scholars are well aware that the essay Marx wrote for his entrance into university was about Jesus Christ. The Marxian theories of teleological history, alienation, and production are thinly veiled renderings of Christian ideas no matter that Feurbach "turned them on their head." For the early Marx, Jesus Christ is the ultimate example of the Proletarian hero. His dialectic is basically good versus evil and his hierarchic structure of base and superstructure, and labor value revisit the ancient religious problematic of incarnate spirit.