UNDERSTANDING TERRORISM

Culture and Sharing — An Essential Relationship?

Geraldine Gamburd

Are mutually constructive relationships a sine qua non of culture? Could human beings survive a Machiavellian War of All Against All? For a cultural animal, currently besieged by violent anti-social behaviours, this is a vital question. Can what we call anti-social also be anti-cultural? I will claim here that each time we see another politician assassinated, another person maimed, an art piece desecrated, a building bombed, we are seeing the world decultured before our eyes.

My premise, that culture and cultural beings cannot survive without constructive social relationships, is examined here by making explicit several characteristics of culture. We will explore in turn the relationship between culture and the individual, the nature of culture as a process of creation, and the origin of culture. Then we look at the origin of hierarchy and its destructive consequences: the conflict, violence and terrorism which destroy culture. Finally, we consider the conditions conducive to constructive social relationships.

Culture and the Individual

We claim here that human nature is cultural nature, that our culture shapes us. Physical anthropologists have noted that most animals have a relatively complete and consistent biological program or blueprint. In contrast, we human animals depend much more heavily on a more pliable cultural program to direct our behaviour. For example, deer have a biological program that tells them not to kill an animal that turns tail. We human beings depend on flexible or even ambiguous cultural roles to tell us whether or not to kill. Our "human nature" is

Dr Gamburd is Professor of Anthropology at the University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth.

immensely pliable and responsive to our cultures. Therefore, to understand our behaviours anthropologists claim we should study the specific ways cultures affect human beings. At a base level anthropologists assume that if we are born and bred into a culture that calls for sharing, cooperation and harmony, we will have a sharing, cooperative human nature and engage in constructive relationships. If the culture, on the other hand, calls for accumulation and competition our "human nature" will be acquisitive, competitive, and conflict-oriented, and we will engage in destructive behaviour. I want to emphasize that culture is not an essence that is unchangeable or biological, and so it does not determine behaviours in any absolute sense. Instead, the already existing culture or tradition affects the kind of behaviours and the kind of culture that can come forth as part of an emergent process. In the emergent process each individual has a certain amount of agency while at the same time s/he is largely governed by cultural tradition. That is, each individual within a given culture negotiates (wittingly or unwittingly) issues of agency and of tradition, a negotiation we will look at further when we consider culture as a process of creation in the context of a militant training camp in South India.

Because we are arguing that constructive or destructive behaviour depends on the cultural context, it is necessary to look at the history of how anthropologists came to make this claim. The emphasis on cultural environments as explanations for behaviour is central to anthropology as a discipline and continues to be viable within each of the changing schools of thought. Historical examples of the argument that human nature is cultural nature come from all branches of anthropology and archaeology suggests that approximately one hundred thousand years ago our reliance on cultural guidance became predominant over

→

that he was alive
five months later
and our greatest
hope
will be to find out
next year
that they are still torturing him
eight months later

and he may might could
still be alive." (Dorfman 1988: 7-8)

Bibliography

Das, Veena. 1990. *'Our Work to Cry, Your Work to Listen,'* in, Veena Das (ed.), *Mirrors of Violence*, Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Dorfman, Ariel. 1983. *Widows*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Dorfman, Ariel. 1988. *Last Waltz in Santiago and Other Poems of Exile and Disappearance*. New York: Penguin.

Lankadeepa. 1994 (11 January). Colombo: Vijaya Publications.

our reliance on a biological program. Part of this evidence is found in the vast burgeoning of cultural artifacts at the time of the Upper Paleolothic. The production of these artifacts, these man made items, is one hallmark of culture. It is however, the ideas and social components of culture that inform the definitions of culture offered by two scholars in the late 1800s.

Historical evidence of the use of culture has led to definitions which stress the centrality of culture rather than nature in fashioning our behaviour. E. B. Tylor, a British anthropologist describes culture as "that complex whole" including "knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and...[all] other capabilities and habits acquired by [people] as members of society" (Tylor. 1871:1). W.E.B. Dubois, a famous American sociologist refers to culture as a mighty social environment—of custom, wish, whim and thought (Dubois, 1967:5). More recently, in 1989, Belmonte, an anthropologist from Columbia University, has emphasized that the surrounding world "conditions the goals of behaviour...and throws an invisible but confining net over the lives and minds of rich and poor alike" (Belmonte 1989:xix and xx). Thus, we suggest that culture has as pervasive an effect on human beings as water has on the behaviour of fish. One more example of the over-riding importance of cultural context in anthropological studies comes from the useful distinction between genuine and spurious cultures. In the 1930s, Edward Sapir defined a genuine culture as one where the human potential for harmonious collective behaviour is encouraged, where sharing and cooperation are given priority. He described some of the more positive features of such a culture: it provides "a sense of inner satisfaction, a spiritual mastery" (Sapir, 1949:323). He argued that "Culture must cling to relatively small social and to minor political units, to incorporate the individuality that is to culture as the very breath of life" (ibid:330). On the other hand, a spurious culture denies us all of that. As elaborated upon by Belmonte, a spurious culture is one in which human beings are "pitted against each other in competition" (Belmonte 1989:xx). In pre-state societies, genuine cultures are predominant; in state societies. spurious cultures are predominant. In spite of this, Sapir claims that genuine or spurious cultures can occur at all levels. I too will argue that conditions under which both types of culture can occur can be created at all levels.

A cultural materialist view might equate genuine cultures with egalitarian societies in which there are no unjust hierarchical relationships that force us to adopt false behaviours. Examples of egalitarian societies such as the Pygmies of the Ituri Forest and the Israeli Kibbutz suggest that certain conditions are conducive to equality. All members of the society have access to food, land, and other resources. There are enough resources to go around. Population and resources are in balance. People work voluntarily and of their own initiative; in fact no one has a great deal of power because there are no hierarchical

classes or castes, so they cannot coerce each other. The structure of the economy emphasizes reciprocity and egalitarian redistribution. In the past, these characteristics have been found in small localised units where all members are active participants in production and decision making. One of the questions we address here is whether these characteristics can be incorporated into 21st century lifestyles, perhaps in the form of small communities based on sustainable agriculture and economic reciprocity.

Culture: Origin and as a Process of Creation

In the context of the idea of culture as a process of creation, Elaine Scarry (1985) suggests that culture is made or created by imagining. Based on her argument I suggest that the origin of culture was imaginative, creative and constructive. First, anthropologists suggest that the origin of culture, an event thought to have taken place between three and five million years ago, arose out of the need for sharing food, and that thereafter a sequence of events occurred that led to the development of culture. Very briefly, food sharing led in turn to the need for a carrying case to bring berries, melons or other small fresh foods back home and, at the same time, led to the need for a home base. Decisions about who would seek what food, and when and where, led to a pressure for language. Our pre-adapted 'voice box' led to language, and, in turn, to the naming of things and people and ideas— that is, to the creation of kinship and culture. Here we find the imagining suggested by Scarry in the naming of people, things and ideas, is necessary if culture and cultural beings are to continue to survive. It is as necessary to the continuation of culture as it was to its origin.

But I certainly have to concede that conflicts exists in culture, even that some conflict can have positive results. I will claim that these facts do not negate my argument. We look first at the conditions where conflict becomes destructive. In one kind of society, conflicts are resolved and leave groups intact as harmonious communities. Dirks (1988) has studied sixty such non-industrial rural societies. In his book "Annual Rituals of Conflict," he locates conflict in the conditions of scarcity and constraint. He found conditions of scarcity in the form of hunger, and conditions of constraint in the curtailment of individual liberty (Dirks: 856—858). He found that conditions of scarcity and constraint recur regularly in these non - industrial societies. Equally regularly, they are linked to annual rituals of conflict. The ritual absorbs the conflictful energy and at the conclusion leaves the group once more unified. These are societies with small social and political units, one characteristic of genuine societies in Sapir's classification. This situation illuminates the sociologist George Simmel's argument that conflict and cooperation are phases of a process which always involves something

of both. Here there are successive stages of conflict and cooperation, but they work to restore harmony and unity.

Repressive Hierarchy: Consequences of Unresolved Conflict

Of course, certain forms of conflict are more destructive than constructive, and it is those we will examine next. Here I will deepen my definition of culture. Culture is both a force which provides a basis for interpersonal behaviour, and an emergent process which always has the potential to change the nature of behaviour. This claims that culture is a process of creation in which each of us is an agent, but also that traditions formed by previous agents have a guiding hold on our behaviour. First we will consider specific examples of destructive behaviours like torture and the victim's response of isolated silence. Then we will address a cultural materialist theory which emphasizes practical everyday material conditions to illuminate how we came to lose our original constructive culture of sharing and reciprocity.

E. Valentine Daniel in *The Individual in Terror* presents an example of torture in a Tamil militant training camp in southern India where a twenty-one year old self-styled despot reigned. This example shows the clash of emergent and traditional behaviours. In the appendix I quote two paragraphs from Daniel's article to show how the behaviour of the victim was based on his expectations that, although leaving camp without permission, his return would be proof of his loyalty and would assure that he would receive only limited punishment. That expectation was entirely abrogated when the camp leader overrode old expectations of family loyalty and, in this particular case, chose to take seriously a newly created rule that one must value fighting more than family.

In the creation of this new part of culture, voluntary family loyalties were superseded by coerced loyalty to the commander and camp; punishment by solitary confinement was superseded by merciless beating, torture and maiming. This new set of cultural expectations, created by the camp commander and sanctioned by the residents of the camp, enacts an unjust hierarchical relationship which includes inflicting pain and torture. Power and violence become synonymous. To control is to control absolutely and to a much greater degree than outside the camps. To control is to inflict pain and to maim. It is not clear whether this despot used conscious manipulation or whether his agency and the complicity of the residents of the camp are evidence that the tradition is breaking down. This example leads us to answer in the negative one of the questions with which I began this paper—human beings cannot survive in a Machiavellian War of All against All. Furthermore, as we shall see, this anti-social behaviour can be seen as anti-cultural as well.

To understand how such destructive interpersonal and group behaviours could arise, that is to understand terrorism logically, we must move from the emotional and immediate situation. Both Scarry and Daniel make clear that even, and perhaps especially, victims of torture find pain to be inexpressible. The victims are silenced. They cannot share or communicate the pain of torture.

This is corroborated by both Scarry's interviews with Irish Republican Army prisoners and Daniel's interviews with Tamil prisoners of the Sri Lankan Army in Eastern Sri Lanka. Daniel notes, "I encountered time and time again torture victims who had been subjected to the same tortures by the same torturers in the same camps and jails, and even at the same time, and who—when they finally were capable of speaking about their experiences—denied that their fellow-inmates were tortured and accused them of lying" (Daniel #2:8). He suggests that the relationship between the torturer and the tortured is not one of dialogical exchange, because for the torturer the "pain is not a sign of pain, but an insignia of power" (Daniel # 2:9). Daniel contrasts the unsharability of the pain of torture with more "socialised or public" pains like a headache or backache, which are somewhat sharable.[1]

We must discover the conditions which allow terrorism in the form of the infliction of pain.[2] I assume here that situations set up for regularised infliction of pain depend on hierarchical relationships emerged in culture in the first place. Cultural materialists, assuming that the study of practical situations will be illuminating, suggest that the potential for using power in hierarchical relationships emerged first when foods were brought to a center to be redistributed by a big man. It was then that the conditions conducive to equality first began to be undermined. At first all members of the society still had access to food and land, and all worked voluntarily. But the big man at the centre urged people to produce more. This intensification (producing more) was made possible for the first time when people lived in areas of exceptional abundance. Sometimes this happened in areas where fishing was added to hunting and gathering, but in general intensification began with the invention of farming. In most settings, if hunters and gatherers tried to produce more, they would kill off too many animals and would be worse off in the long run. In contrast, farmers could produce more and be better off in the long run. They could either raise their standard of living or feed more offspring with this increase in goods. Evidence suggests they chose to increase both production and reproduction , to have more food, more goods and more children. The larger food supply and larger size of groups led to redistributive feasts—egalitarian at first, with voluntary producers in full control. As the redistributor gained greater control because of increasing intensification of food production, and larger redistributive networks, he became more powerful. Hierarchy and inequality became institutionalised. The emergence of hierarchy via the centralisa-

→

tion of and small group control over distribution of food is the reversal of the emergence of culture in the communal sharing of food. Hierarchy made possible an exaggeration of the characteristics of scarcity, constraint and brutality described above.[3] Hierarchy also brought about the labeling and exclusion which arise out of unresolved conflicts to be described below.

Destruction of Culture by Conflict, Violence and Terrorism

Next let us consider another central characteristic of culture, that it is destroyed by unresolved conflict and violence. In contrast to the societies where conflicts are resolved by rituals, there is another kind of society where conflicts are not resolved and thus there remains in the society a residue of unharmonious relationships. In those communities where harmony is not restored, there are elements of labeling and exclusion. D. Raybeck (1988) uses a database of a variety of societies: hunting and gathering, slash and burn, peasant, and contemporary industrial societies. He illustrates how conflict escalates to violence in societies that label some of their members as deviant and then exclude them from the larger group. Small-scale social units rarely label someone as deviant because they hope to keep members as active participants. However, in large scale social units, like cities, states or nations, values are poorly integrated and conflicting inequities abound, and abrupt labeling of a person as a deviant is common, as is the exclusion of the deviant from the group. The deviant is labeled as an outsider. As in Sapir's "spurious societies," human beings are pitted against each other in anti-social behaviour.

We have contrasted the constructive nature of sharing with the destructive nature of hierarchy and inequality. Elaine Scarry provides yet another dimension to understanding the construction and destruction of culture by setting up an opposition between the making and unmaking of culture. Scarry says that culture is unmade by power, pain, torture and warfare; she suggests that these are all processes of uncreating and dehumanisation. On the individual level, she suggests that pain and violence take away our voices in a way that unmakes culture. Using army captives, in this case Irish Republican Army prisoners, as an example she says that hostages are silenced or even made to speak "in the voice of the captor" - to make confessions which she claims demonstrate "the absence of the prisoners world". Scarry asserts that "Political regimes unmake the individual's world in their exercises of power"; pain destroys language, and torture and warfare are acts of injuring and destroying (Scarry: 27ff). We have noted above Daniel's emphasis on how difficult it is for a victim of torture to express the pain. (Daniel #1). We need also to mention that the victim may struggle to regain a voice (by gaining control of the discourse) and to gain force, and perhaps to become in turn the perpetrator of violence — the commander of the camp in southern India is a case in point. This does not alter the fact that creativity is diminished by this kind of unresolved conflict.

On the socio-cultural level perhaps even more damaging to the image of hegemonic political regimes that exercise power — that is to say systems with their hierarchies and powerful leaders — is Scarry's suggestion that injustice reflects the immorality of uncreating by taking away our artifacts,our voices, our culture; injustice dehumanizes us. I want to claim here that we may take injustice to include all forms of social inequality, including any form of stratification and domination. I suggest very broadly that inequality is a form of violence, whether it leads to torture, warfare, poverty or to the creation of personalities like that of the commander who will torture others. Beyond immediate physical suffering, injustice includes other forms of suffering engendered by social inequalities such as poverty; insidiously, poverty is manifested in lack of educational opportunities, inadequate health care and the absence of rewarding occupations. These injustices take away our culture. I argue that inequalities and injustices are aspects of spurious culture, the ultimate aspects of which involve coercion and the pitting of individuals against each other in rivalry and competition. The destruction of community life both by inequalities, and by violent resistance to them, makes the headlines in Asia, Africa, the Pacific, Europe and the Americas — it is rampant worldwide.

In this context we may note that in Sri Lanka, the rituals that once were able to deal with the inequalities and injustices of earlier times, thereby restoring some degree of harmony within local social and political groups, are now less effectual. In the current struggle in which the Sinhalese-Buddhist Sangha supports the governing class, a Sinhalese youth movement attracts the educated unemployed, and the Tamil ethnic group is increasingly disengaged if not disenfranchised, the religious rituals of sharing have lost their ability to contain conflict and violence,and the universalistic philosophy of life, whether Western or Eastern, has also broken down. Even though they were supported by the multi-religious and multi cultural secularism of both ancient and modern South Asian beliefs[4], the multi-ethnic secular and pluralistic ideals of the Enlightenment were held only tentatively for ten or so years after independence. At present, neither secular humanism nor religious rituals are able to contain the conflicts. At the same time, the number of generators of conflict is increasing. These are hunger,scarcity, strictures on liberties, inequities, labelling, intolerance for difference and dissent, the exclusion of whole groups, private self-interested behaviour, the creation of violent people's liberation groups, and the implementation of violent repressive national controls. Violence has escalated and taken the format of gun politics, insurgencies, riots and civil war. These phenomena

are overwhelming local level controls and rituals and eroding the possibility of responsible public behaviour.

Conditions for Constructive Social Relationships: Equality

How then can all these social problems/crises be resolved? Only secular social programs which change inequitable cultural conditions can solve the problems. Anthropologists suggest that egalitarian behaviour is rooted in open resources, simple tools, the lack of non-transportable property and a flexible structure of band social organisation (Harris, 1980: 81). The challenge is to create comparable conditions in today's world. If this cannot be achieved at the level of state societies, then we must design non-state societies within our current environment. This imperative directs us to the kinds of alternative spaces we must create.

In Sri Lanka there are genuine attempts to change cultural conditions and to resolve conflict by rituals of elections, by people-centered development processes, and through the efforts of the human rights movement. People-centered development processes are encouraged by several Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), and groups like Sarvodaya and the Thrift Credit Cooperative Societies have the potential to become genuine egalitarian, people-centered movements which develop and support self-reliant producer groups. These groups and activities can meet future needs. On this basis we can answer in the affirmative the first question with which we began this paper—mutually constructive relationships are a *sine qua non* of culture.

This theme, that hierarchical relationships destroy culture while egalitarian ones create and preserve it, pervades much of current anthropology. One anthropologist, Jeffrey Sluka says it this way: "The social cases of conflict and political violence in nation states can be traced directly to the correlates of social stratification...The only...means of reducing...social conflict and political violence is to...resolve or reduce the professed grievances of groups whose only effective political recourse is to employ these means." (Nordstrom, 1992:32) Conflict and political violence and so the destruction of culture by just such hierarchical relationships are manifested in Sri Lanka in the unrequited requests, made by youth and ethnic groups, for a more fair share of the commonwealth. The grievances of these groups are not resolved by the leaders in powerful hierarchies. Thus these groups make their demands more stridently, though often no more effectively, by using force, that is by the violence of gun politics.

It would be grim poetic justice if the creation of culture, which began with sharing and with a home base community, were to end because of individualistic accumulation culminating in community destruction through both state violence and the freedom fighter counter violence often called terrorism. Many people now suggest that people-centered development, which brings to everyone on the local level, access to resources, benefits, information and the decision-making process, could regenerate the harmony of genuine societies; and that 20th century communication technologies could link small societies in an amicable network. To find or create a space in which to create constructive social relationships in this way so cultural beings can survive may be the major challenge of the 21st century.

Notes

1. As a further contrast he cites the objectification of pain into a socialized pain by means of icons that express pain (like Christ on the Cross).

2. Infliction of pain is on another level than Daniel's definition of terror as the release of pain as in sobbing or shaking (Daniel # 2: 9 & 10)

3. Although we do not pursue that argument here, evidence suggests that warfare, as the third set of triplets, emerged with centralisation and hierarchy.

4. Sarvapalli Gopal describes the general custom of ancient times in South Asia "to live and let live" in a multi-cultural setting. He notes the often ignored stance of modern times, which is even spelled out in national constitutions, that the state should keep an equal distance from all religions. These secular values, he claims "provide the social cement required of multi-religious societies striving to become healthy democratic communities" *Pravada* Vol 2 No 7: 11)

Bibliography

Belmonte, Thomas. 1989. *The Broken Fountain*, Columbia University Press.

Daniel, E. Valentine. *Counterpoint to Culture*, Manuscript # 1.

"The Individual in Terror," Manuscript # 2. in S. J. Tambiah and B. Tariq (Eds.), *Official Nationalism and Ethnic Violence*, Oxford University Press, Forthcoming.

Des Pres, Terence. *The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps*, as cited in Thomas Belmonte, 1989, *The Broken Fountain*, Columbia University Press, P. 194.

Dirks, Robert. 1988. "Annual Rituals of Conflict", *American Anthropologist*, Vol 90. No. 4, December, pp. 856-870.

Dubois, W. E. B. 1967. *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study*, New York: Schoken.

Gopal, Sarvapalli. 1993. "Crisis of Secularism", *Pravada*, August/September, Vol. 2, No. 7. pp. 8-12.

Harris, Marvin. 1980. *Cultural Materialism: The Struggle for a Science of Culture*, New York: Vintage.

Nordstrom, C and Martin, J. 1992. *The Paths to Domination, Resistance and Terror*, University of California Press.

Raybeck, D. 1988. "Anthropology and Labeling Theory: A Constructive Critique." *Ethos*, Vol. 16. No. 4, December, pp. 371-397.

Sapir, Edward. 1949, Selected Writings of Edward Sapir in David Mandelbaum (ed.) *Language, Culture and Personality*, University of California Press.

Scarry, Elaine. 1985. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, Oxford University Press.

Simmel, George. 1955. *Conflict and the Web of Group-Affiliations*, Translated by Kurt H. Wolf and Reinhard Bendix, Glencoe: Free Press.

Tylor, Edward, B. 1871. *Primitive Culture*, London: J. Murray.

Wolf, Eric, 1969. "Review of the Children of Sanchez: Autobiography of a Mexican Family," in *American Anthropologist*, No. 70. pp.620-621.