CULTURAL PLURALISM AND TECHNOLOGY

YI-FU TUAN

ABSTRACT. Cultural pluralism is a powerful ideological and political movement of our time that challenges the dominance of Western culture in general and of its most prominent component, technology, in particular. Although misused technology can be a threat to nature and human life, technology as a skill and method is a human aspiration and achievement everywhere. Cultural pluralism, though a desirable end, can deteriorate into separatism and self-imposed isolation and into a belief in culture’s unknowability to outsiders that does not do justice to the human imagination.

WHEN I was an undergraduate in England (1948–1951), my heroes, like those of many of my peers, were Albert Einstein, Bertrand Russell, Albert Schweitzer, Igor Stravinsky, Pablo Picasso, and Thomas Mann, to mention a few. They were alive when I was young and were a source of inspiration to me. Now that I think back, they were all white males. Was I, a Chinese student, subverted by Western culture? Where was my native pride? I could have listed some Chinese heroes, Sun Yat-sen, Hu Shih, or Lu Hsün. But I did not think then, and I still do not, that they were equal to their European counterparts. Chinese intellectuals were quite able to admit the relative backwardness of their culture in modern times without feeling demoralized. How was this possible? One reason may lie in their awareness that their own civilization, however mediocre now, had its millennium of supremacy approximately between A.D. 300 and 1300.¹ So why begrudge Westerners their millennium, dating from 1300? It is a matter of taking turns.

From a secular-materialist perspective, a human life is frail and ephemeral, whereas culture and its institutions are strong and enduring. What consolation can there be to say that one’s own culture will attain supremacy a hundred or a thousand years hence? From a religious perspective, however, the individual with his seat in eternity can afford to wait: it is civilization that is frail and passing. Such an interpretation, fantastic as it must seem to well-educated people now, was intellectually respectable in the theological decade immediately after World War II, when thinkers such as Reinhold


● Dr. Tuan is the John K. Wright professor of geography and a Vilas Research Professor at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin 53706.

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Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, Jacques Maritain, Herbert Butterfield, R. H. Tawney, and T. S. Eliot were household names in colleges, universities, and beyond. Their social programs differed widely; some pressed for economic justice, others less so, but they were agreed in giving the human individual, as a creature made in the image of God, a transcendental status.

How radically the world has changed in the last forty years. The West has lost not only its empires but also confidence in its high culture. Among the factors that have helped to sap its confidence are the waning of religion as a source of inspiration; the knowledge that high culture could not immunize a people against committing unspeakable atrocities; a growing sense of guilt over its recent imperial past; and self-criticism, fueled by guilt and its own intellectual tradition, that questions the West’s achievements, including a technological thrust that seems to be out of control and threatens the foundations of life.

Cultural pluralism is the liberal ideal of our time. How to reconcile it with the West’s own historical character, specifically its engrossment in science and technology, is an important question for thinking people everywhere. Geographers should be able to contribute significantly to the debate, for they have always shown an interest in areal differences and similarities. Our concern may run along the following lines. Politically we may embrace the pluralist ideology and seek to establish in the United States a less-glaring asymmetry between the Eurocentric viewpoint and those of other heritage; as specialists in ecology we recognize the compelling need to monitor the effects of technology on environment; as students of culture we explore how cultures can build toward a larger whole while maintaining their identities. My own contribution here is to provide a prolegomenon to these concerns by examining at a general level the meanings of culture and technology and the possibilities of intercultural communication.

**Fetishism of Culture**

The dominance of the West has aroused great resentment, including hostility toward Western culture even while it is widely embraced. One manifestation of resentment is to make a fetish of one’s own culture—to treat it as something almost holy, the rape of which is the ultimate sacrilege.

E. M. Forster’s two cheers for democracy might also be applied to culture, which I take to mean “local, customary ways of doing things.”

Culture is near the core of one’s humanity. In that sense it is far more fundamental than democracy, which, as George Santayana observed, is a noble superstition. Without grounding in a specific culture, the world loses shape and focus. Culture may be conceived as a pair of spectacles that we need to wear so that the world can seem vividly particularized and real. Unfortunately,

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all spectacles are tinted. They give a view of the world, but they also hold
the viewer captive to a specific, narrow sighting of it.

Culture draws boundaries—material ones like dwellings and fences and
conceptual ones like moral codes. It creates havens against the specific threats
of nature and human enemies and against the metaphysical horrors of the
unknown. Boundaries are necessary to all frail creatures. A short story by
G. K. Chesterton illustrates the point. It tells about a man devoted to freedom,
who began his career by opening birdcages in neighbors' homes and ended
by smashing fishbowls. As another illustration of the same point, consider
the tree. Its branches radiating outward into the air and sun are a powerful
and appealing symbol of life—of freedom and growth. But branches can
radiate outward only because they are attached to a trunk that is rooted in
a specific patch of soil. Only from the nurturing environment of a particular
locality is life able to fan out and to thrive. This does not mean that we
should therefore make a fetish of locality and culture. Home or haven must
not be converted into a prison. The temptation to do so is strong. Forces are
at work to impart deep meaning and value to one's own people, one's own
place on earth, and one's own way of doing things. From anthropological
literature we know how common it is for people almost everywhere to see
themselves alone as truly human: other beings lack full human status because
of the perceived eccentricities in speech and custom.

Simone Weil asserts that humans often fail to distinguish the necessary
from the good. Because culture is necessary, it is good. The jump from one
to the other can seem perfectly natural. What we have to do becomes good
to do. The practices we have invented to cope with a specific environment
are necessary. In time they can seem not only practical and necessary but
also good. People forget the prosaic, human origin of these practices by
claiming that they have been handed down from the gods or culture heroes.
Not only practices directed at nature are seen this way. Social customs, many
of which are clearly effects of necessity and of power, can also be transmuted
easily into good. Practices that seem manifestly unjust to Western democracies,
for instance the rigid caste system in India, have endured for more than
a millennium in large part because of the tendency I have described: even
the oppressed—the outcaste—could see their inferior position as somehow
right and just.

So I return to the image of culture as tinted spectacles, worthy of honor
but with only two cheers. Self-criticism, which is a fruit of self-confidence,
can remove some of the tint. Small groups struggling to survive in the midst
of hostile nature are unlikely to tolerate criticism in their midst. Large,
complex societies, more confident vis-à-vis nature, can afford to turn the

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3 Barrington Moore Jr., Injustice: The Social Bases of Obedience and Revolt (White Plains, N.Y.: M.
E. Sharpe, 1978), 55-64.
critical eye on themselves, on the values they hold. In the face of reflection and a critical stance, culture acquires "transparency." Customary, immemorial ways are no longer unexamined beliefs—the dark ground of being. They are objects—mentifacts—"out there" that one can observe, appraise, and contest.

Cultures can be compared with one another on the basis of selected criteria. One criterion might be the extent of control over nature; another is transparency. "A culture may be judged by its degree of transparency, by the consciousness it has of itself and others. In this respect," wrote Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "the West ... is still the system of reference."7 Is this true? I think so. The most fervent advocates of cultural pluralism as a societal ideal and the most radical critics of technological civilization—indeed, of culture in the broadest sense of the term—are Westerners or thinkers influenced by the West.

TECHNOLOGY IN THE BROAD SENSE

Culture consists of customary ways of ordering reality. Rather than use the soft word "way" or "ways," I could have used the harder word "technique." A culture consists of techniques with which a people aspire to gain a sense of control over their environment. There is a famous passage in "Antigone" that is a paean to technique. According to this choral ode in Sophocles' play, step by step, the arts and the sciences have brought humans from helplessness to a mastery of nature and to their crowning achievement, which was the sociopolitical state. Techne, the song seems to suggest, makes it possible for people to make themselves immune to luck—to "what just happens to a man" as opposed to "what he does or makes."8 Culture promises control: control of self, for instance, of bodily processes, of society and of nature. And this is how we understand technology.

Ultimate control would mean the overcoming of all contingency and of death. In the boastful list of human achievements, Sophocles had to leave out death. Since the time of Sophocles, despite all that technique has been able to accomplish, contingency and death remain to haunt us. Luck still counts. Things still "just happen to us." We are far from exercising total command over our own fate. In a modern technological society, the gambler's dice may be found to swing under the mirrors of souped-up automobiles. In the White House itself, that ultimate symbol of power and control, safety and predictability remain elusive and had to be sought in the stars.

All humans have culture, all therefore have technology. Technique, in its original Greek meaning, is a focused knowing.9 Know nature—know how things really are—and then bring what is inherent in them into the open. Language is technique, a method of calling things into being. Objects thus

9 George Steiner, Martin Heidegger (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 137–141.
addressed come into their own, as though freshly created. Hunter-gatherers, with limited material means, are nonetheless able to create a deeply humanized world by naming things and telling stories about them. This naming, narrowly interpreted, is an implement of control over economic resources. Named objects in the environment usually serve an economic function. Yet things may also be named and stories told about them that have no obvious economic use. With language as the empowering tool, a people of simple material culture such as the Yanomamó of Brazil can construct an elaborate mental edifice in which to live.\(^{10}\) Is there an element of excess—of hubris—in such mental constructions? The Iglulik seem to think so. When the Danish explorer Knud Rasmussen pressed them for a full articulation of their worldview, they refused on the grounds that such an attempt would be pretentious and fanciful. In their opinion, it is not given to humans to know, except in patches.\(^{11}\) "One step enough for me"—that famous phrase in Cardinal Newman’s hymn—probably makes sense to Eskimos, as indeed it probably did to most people throughout the world in premodern times.

Rituals are a technique to create meaning out of the ordinary circumstances and experiences of life. A whole, almost palpable world can be called into existence by ritual gestures and evocative words. Western man has often been criticized for his arrogance—his self-importance in the scale of things. An arrogance based on the presumed availability of almost unlimited technological power may indeed be characteristic of modern Western man. However, not unique to the West is a people’s sense of their centrality or the presumption that what they do in a tiny corner of the earth can affect for good or ill the whole cosmos. For instance, in a Navaho ceremony everything must be done correctly. Whether one of the eagle feathers of a mask has been taken from the shoulder or the breast of the bird makes a difference, because the harmony of society and of the universe itself is at stake. In China the centrality of man has always been more or less assumed. An emperor who, perhaps unknown to himself, transgressed against a rule of propriety may be the cause of a devastating flood or drought. The emperor was not by any means the sole person who could have such overwhelming effect. During the T’ang dynasty, the Chinese believed that if too many prisoners felt the injustice of their punishment their bitterness could disturb the whole cosmos.\(^{12}\)

**Idea of Progress**

Technique in its root sense is a human universal. But technology, a modern derivative of technique, has a much narrower meaning. Technology

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is that which separates modern from premodern society, the developed Western world from the less-developed non-Western worlds. I now turn to this second, more commonly accepted notion of technique or technology, and I do so under two guiding ideas. One is the idea of progress, and the other is the idea of rational, all-embracing control that includes the possibility of radical innovation. The two ideas are closely related.

With regard to progress, I subscribe to the widely held viewpoint that it is a uniquely developed faith of Western civilization and that it reached a peak of influence in the period from the eighteenth century to the decade before World War I. Historians contend that the idea also appeared in Greco-Roman antiquity and in non-Western civilizations.13 Perhaps so. Nevertheless, I do not think that it has ever attained the power or status of a reigning concept until the modern period. Let me illustrate what I mean with a brief sketch of the case of China.

The idea of progress presupposes a more primitive and less happy state from which a people have moved by their own effort. It cannot exist if either an original Eden or a golden age is postulated. In China, the Taoists have postulated an original Eden. The Huai-nan-tzu speaks of an era of Great Purity during which men, genuine and simple, sparing of speech and spontaneous in conduct, were united in spirit to the yin and yang and enjoyed harmonious relationship with the four seasons. Then came hunting and fishing, the chopping down of trees to build houses, and the mining of mountains for minerals. As a cultural world emerged, the quality of life paradoxically declined, because nature itself turned less accommodating, and people had to work harder to earn a livelihood. Taoism objected not only to the emergence of a materialist way of life but also to the new, analytical mode of consciousness that existed nowhere else in nature. This mode has a fatal power to isolate the parts so that they lose their proper places within the unity of the whole. In isolation, the parts become the irresistible allurements of sensual pleasure, wealth, honor, power, and even individual moral perfection. When people strive for these separate and often incompatible goals, they create all the artifacts and artifices of society.14

Confucianism, in contrast to Taoism, was committed to civilization. To Confucius, the golden age was not nature but the early political states of antiquity—the Hsia, the Shang, and the Early Chou. He even suggested that the Chou represented a higher realization of the Tao because it could benefit from the experience and accomplishments of its two predecessors.15 Chinese thinkers such as Mencius and Šsu-ma Ch‘ien were able to find good things

to say about the economic wealth generated by merchant entrepreneurs. Nevertheless, civilization was not conceived in material terms; not even for Mo-tzu, who emerged from the artisan class. Mo-tzu, whose imagination was bold enough to postulate the existence of universal love, did not envisage and would not have wished for a world of material abundance. He spoke of the sage kings of the past as having built houses high enough to avoid the damp and sturdy enough to withstand the onslaughts of nature. Houses, in other words, were erected from necessity and to sustain a moral life, not for show. Civilization for the Chinese, as for the Europeans, was civility—good manners and the arts rather than the construction of a dominant material world.

To a geographer, a surprising feature of cultures and civilizations is their reluctance to recognize the extensive landscapes that they have created. I refer here to cultivated fields, terraces, villages, and towns. Rarely does a society show pride in having transformed so much of nature. Indeed, the cultural landscape is more often viewed as nature—a given, essentially unchanging reality—rather than as culture, a product of human work and ingenuity and subject to cumulative change. Even today, the countryside evokes nature despite the ubiquitous human imprint. Why is this the case? Two reasons come to mind. One is that fields and farms are associated with the peasantry, a class branded with the stigma of powerlessness. The other reason is that harvests, before modern times, have never really been dependable. Powerlessness is demonstrated by the lack of a clear causal relationship in agriculture between effort and yield. As John Calvin wrote, “Nor do we believe, according as a man will be vigilant and skillful, according as they have done their duty well, that they can make their land fertile; it is the benediction of God which governs all things.”

Premodern civilizations, however splendid, have never been able to discard the ageless fear of the greater power and potency of nature. A sense of dependence and vulnerability remains, despite the proud creation of cities and empires. There persists an awareness that Nature or God is not mocked. Technique is focused knowing, the bringing forth of what is already there. Humans are not so much creators as solicitous midwives. Their proper attitude is one of attention and care. By contrast, the modern attitude is one of mastery. Technique is still focused knowing, but the knowing is only the necessary first step to, if possible, total mastery and control; from such mastery humans feel that nature is plasticine to be molded in whichever ways are useful to them or catch their fancy.

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17 Schwartz, footnote 14 above, 154.
This familiar tale is neatly captured in language differences and their changing forms of expression. Consider the aggressiveness of the active voice in Indo-European languages: "I see him," "I kill him," or "I throw it away" as distinct from the Greenland Eskimos' "he happens to me," "he dies to me," or "it flies away from me." Or consider the difference between the Latin form "it dreamed itself to me" and the English "I dreamed." Or the Old English expression "it remembers me" and the modern "I remember." It boggles the mind to contemplate a future when we shall have achieved such total mastery over rainfall that we will not need to say "it is raining," but simply "I rain." What conclusions are we to draw from this shift toward seeming mastery? A sense of ease continues to elude us. Even as technical expertise takes us into outer space, astrology continues to exercise its magic. Although human life is more secure now than in the past and life expectancy continues to rise, we have not conquered contingency and death.

Communication

The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote of forms of life. Geographers write of ways of life. Commentators of the social scene use the term styles of life. Style of life suggests something superficial that one can put on or take off as fashion changes. Indeed, an influential school of sociological thought posits that social reality consists of nested performances. We are all, as it were, on stage, and presumably we can change roles as we wish. At the opposite extreme, Wittgenstein's forms of life are barely commensurable. The geographer's ways of life occupy an intermediate position: genres de vie have commonalities and yet, in an ultimate sense, they too are unique. As unique entities, they cannot be compared, much less ranked. Both extreme views—forms of life and styles of life—have their strong supporters today. Curiously both views may derive from the same sense of rootlessness. Life as performance is common experience to rootless cosmopolites throughout the world. On the other hand, this same sense of rootlessness can induce a longing for a well-defined form of life to which one belongs by rights of birth and upbringing. The key components in form of life, as understood by geographers and social scientists, are family, community, local place, a people, and their distinctive culture. If style of life projects an image of superficiality, form of life—not as a philosophical idea but as nostalgic human ideal—betrays an undercurrent of fragility and anxiousness.

That life is a mere style, something like fashion, seems untrue to me: ways of living are so deeply rooted in history and geography that one cannot simply select one way rather than another as one would the dresses in a closet. The idea that forms or ways of human life are incommensurable, or

that they are like endangered species to be protected against foreign influence, seems to me at best a partial truth and a misleading belief for the following reasons.

Firstly, forms or ways of life rarely exist in total isolation. Cultures that appear to be isolated turn out not to be so when their products are examined with care. Almost always they show evidences of alien influence, perhaps from peoples far distant. Quite often exchanges of commodities and ideas with outside groups have occurred. There may not be such a thing as a truly indigenous culture; if such a culture exists it is likely to be impoverished. The fact that trade occurs, that alien products and ways are accepted, shows that people are able to appreciate things beyond those familiar to them and of their own world. They can recognize superiority even if it is not of their own making.

Secondly, many cultures, including some famed for their chauvinism, harbor legends of the admirable stranger or of a wonderful distant country. Imaginative constructions of this kind are not really surprising, because life is rarely perfect anywhere. No matter how deeply attached people are to their own place and ways, the dream of a more perfect abode elsewhere can be a recurrent haunting. The Incas and the Aztecs as well as some African and Pacific island groups are known to have legends of the stranger-savior. The Chinese have consistently seen themselves as the center of the world. Yet when rumors came to them of a distant country, the Roman Empire, the Chinese named it Ta Chi’in, that is, Greater Ch’in or Greater China. Recall how the philosophes of the European Enlightenment were prepared to see Europe as a blighted core of superstition and authoritarianism surrounded by a rim of light, the home of the unspoiled Pacific islanders, New World Indians, and the sophisticated Chinese. Both China and Europe willingly absorbed foreign ways, and significantly their civilizations were more inclined to do so when they were themselves self-confident and at the height of their power. Absorption of foreign ways did not necessarily dilute local culture. To the contrary, they could make local culture seem even more distinctive. Thus Chinoiserie in Europe, by drawing attention to its alien uses and contexts, threw European culture itself, hitherto accepted unconsciously, into the limelight.

Thirdly and lastly, consider the importance of indirect experiences in human life. Of the various attempts to characterize what is special about humans, such as toolmaking or language use, I prefer the one that sees them as dependent on and taking delight in indirect experience. Humans, unlike other animals, are not circumscribed by that which is directly accessible to their senses. The world I know by virtue of my own space-time trajectories is small compared with the one I really live in, which has been enormously

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enlarged by sympathy, that is, the power to place myself in the shoes of another and see what the world might be like from there. A moral universe is impossible unless sympathy is a fairly common occurrence in human intercourse. Listening is a key element of sympathy. When we listen to other persons' tales, we absorb into our own lives realities that we have not personally encountered. In literate societies, such extensions can go much farther. Historical and geographical texts reach beyond conversational swapping of proximate worlds to worlds distant in time and locality. The presumption is that a young person in Wisconsin can become, in imagination, a Roman general in the reign of Hadrian or a peasant-entrepreneur in contemporary China. Liberal education is founded on the possibility that we can live in other times and places.

Swapping tales and thus extending our cultural-intellectual horizons is both pleasant and useful, and we do it all the time. Such tales tend to deal in commonplaces and differ little from one another; the exchanges, although they stretch our world a little, do not greatly enlarge it. However, tales can be extravagant. Many cultures have colorful legends and myths that enable their listeners to dwell briefly in worlds distant from day-to-day experience. Imaginative flights can occur despite limited direct contact with reality. Children's experience is limited, yet they are by no means indifferent to faraway peoples and places. At about the age of five or six, children take to alien cultures and worlds as though they were natives there in a previous incarnation. Indeed, it may be easier to interest young Americans in China than in their own county or state.25

True understanding between individuals, even under favorable circumstances within the same culture, can be very difficult. No matter how great the sensitivity, one person's life remains opaque to another, and misunderstandings can happen even among intimates; otherwise novelists would have little to write about. This hard fact should not deter us from acknowledging our well-known ability to apprehend realities not our own, and if an American child, bounded by direct experience to home and day-care center, can leap into China, why do we sometimes take the position that men are incapable of understanding women, or whites cannot hope to understand blacks, or vice versa?

**Conclusion**

The domination of the rest of the world by the West during the past century has prepared the ground for a strong contemporary reaction, one form of which is to elevate cultural difference and cultural pluralism into popular ideologies. Under their influence, we learn to contrast the evils of the arrogance of power, the threat of a world that is becoming uniform, and the destruction of nature, with the goodness and beauty of local pride and

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local customs. Put thus, no one can doubt as to who the good and the bad guys are. We are all in favor of pluralism and opposed to standardization, in favor of modesty and opposed to arrogance. However, the current populist-pluralist ideology also has a shadowy side. Pluralism, when it takes a form so extreme as to be indistinguishable from separatism, seems at times more driven by envy and resentment than by a love for the tender, multiplicitous growths of native genius; it may find itself elevating limitation and mediocrity into a virtue; it may so fear intercultural understanding that it pronounces such understanding impossible or illusory rather than a matter of approximation and degree. Finally, the cult of particularity and difference hinders the development of any large, liberating vision that encompasses the stranger.

It does not seem to me good that we abandon one extreme, deplorable state of affairs only to embrace its opposite, which too is a betrayal of what humans can do and be. Let us by all means promote local culture, but not fetishistically. Promote technology too, but not in lust for total control and insatiable material abundance; rather we can try to do so in the name of that older sense of technology or technique, which is a focused knowing and the liberation of matter. And let us by all means guard jealously our own personal and regional identities, but less as hoards with which to inflate our sense of self-importance than as wealths unique to specific times and places, which we should wish to conserve and to make available for the enjoyment of ourselves and others.