Towards an Image-based language: the current socio-political function of metaphors

The implications of a pattern of cultures are more and more a challenge to comprehension. In order to clarify understanding of such complexity, statesmen make use of notions which are both simple and symbolic. "The House of Europe" and "European Space" are examples of this approach. Such metaphors serve as vehicles to suggest approaches with many strategic implications. They fulfill the function of codes to communicate among cognoscenti and as key phrases in the interaction with public opinion.

The fundamental problems of cultural integration raise the question of the extent to which metaphors currently used are of adequate richness to articulate strategic options which are both useful and viable. The dilemma remains the necessity, on the one hand, to reflect the richness of the complexity of which any cultural strategy must take account, and, on the other, to make available an integrative image capable of "enchanting" people seeking some sense in the development of their personal and professional lives. This dilemma is made all the more problematic by the multiplicity of cultures and schools of thought, as well the diverse marginal groups.

Why this emphasis on metaphors instead of relying on the language of models? In part this is because in the elaboration of strategic policy it seems less and less useful to employ the old language in which so many reports have been presented. Despite the level of expertise and the complexity of the models, such reports have tended to be "forgettable", in the words of the Economist in describing the recent South Report (1990). We are being overtaken by events.

Media communicability has become increasingly important to the life of political and social initiatives. It is the ultimate constraint in social and political transformation. It is therefore useful to note the developing role of metaphor in articulating or opposing social transformation. Boris Yeltsin chose to describe Mikhail Gorbachev's compromise reforms as a "marriage between a hedgehog and a snake". Such imagery, of which there are many examples, easily undermines the best of initiatives.

It would seem that the struggle has shifted from the world of ideas to the world of images. Commentators everywhere remark on the sterility of proposals in the eyes of the general population, and especially of voters. Instead of the "power of imagination", there is a bankruptcy of imagination.

The cognitive function of metaphors

Recent research has demonstrated the cognitive function and influence of metaphors in the most disciplined and rigorous thinking. Examples in the natural sciences, and even in fundamental physics, are cited. The same is true in the social sciences and notably in understanding of organizations and their management. It appears that metaphors, whether explicit or implicit, are essential to the ordering of cognitive elements. Furthermore it is now almost impossible to extricate them from the language of many disciplines. As examples the following may be noted: a "field" of study, the "direction" of research, a "line" of argument, a "target" audience, "mobilization" of resources. It has been shown that, beyond its rhetoric functions, the choice of a metaphor may be crucial to the kinds of communication which become possible or impossible. A recent study of the metaphors underlying the Gulf War even suggests that "metaphors can kill".

A new inspiration: the spiritual function of metaphors

All the religions use metaphors to render comprehensible the most complex and subtle notions. It is with the help of metaphors that people are most profoundly touched in relation to those hopeful factors which give meaning to personal and social life. And it is with the assistance of certain metaphors that new inspiration has been given to cultures fatigued by old formulas and received ideas.

The importance of keystones

It is not that models are ineffective or inadequate. The difficulty is rather in the incompatibility of models, however useful in different specialized domains, and in the weaknesses which emerge as a result in any supposedly integrated strategy. Suspicion concerning integrative models has become a wise precaution.
Beyond any structural modifications, the key to the success of future strategies appears to lie in the imaginative manner in which valid, but incompatible, initiatives are woven together. The challenge is highlighted by the absence of models adequate to the reconciliation of “centralized” and “market” economic strategies in the countries of Eastern Europe. There are no available models because the challenge to the imagination transcends the world of model builders by which strategies have been so influenced. It could be concluded that new and richer possibilities for cultural integration are to be found beyond the strategic incompatibilities in which visions of its future tend to become entangled.

It is metaphors which provide the imagination with “keystones” to balance the tensions between tendencies which, without such integrative elements, would appear incompatible. World governance in this sense is a question of “imagination building” rather than “institution building”. Governance of cultural evolution at the highest level (and if that indeed suggests an appropriate intent) should therefore focus attention on the emergence and movement of policy-relevant metaphors -- that are capable of rendering comprehensible the way forward through complex windows of opportunity. The challenge lies in marrying new metaphors to models to ensure the embodiment of new levels of insight in appropriate organizational form.

A transcendental cultural identity

The nature of cultural integration is thus closely associated with the “gene pool” of metaphors. From this the cultural community may draw fruitful metaphors in the formulation of responses to new opportunities and crises. Culture may be understood in terms of this gene pool.

This vision of cultural governance does not call for radical transformation of institutions. Rather it calls for a shift in the way of thinking about what is circulated through society’s information systems as the triggering force for any action. At present governance in the international community is haunted by a form of collective schizophrenia -- a left-brain preoccupation with “serious” academic models and administrative programmes, and a right-brain preoccupation with the proclivities of public opinion avid for “meaningful” action (even if “sensational”). This quarrel between models and metaphors could be transformed by focusing more effectively on the metaphoric dimensions already so vital to any sustainable motivation of public opinion.

Cultural integration should not be so closely linked to the seemingly impossible task of maintaining a consensus on particular responses to dilemmas as appropriate, and therefore “correct”. The collective insight to cultivate could well be detached from this level of short and medium term preoccupation. This focus favours tokenism and unimplemented resolutions which in turn reinforce cynicism, alienation and loss of credibility. In these times all simple solutions eventually become problems, just all problems are in effect unpleasant solutions. The creative opportunity is to cultivate instead an understanding of how incompatible solutions can be woven together as phases over time in a cycle of policies. It is metaphors -- such as crop rotation -- which make comprehensible and credible such a complex approach. It is at this level of conservation and generation of metaphors that may be found a dynamic cultural identity appropriate to a sustainable development.

How to proceed?

What approach should be taken to the possibility of choosing a metaphor to better articulate the diverse elements of cultural integration in such circumstances? Five criteria should be considered:

(a) Adequate to capture the variety of options: Clearly a metaphor must be rich enough so that each may find in it the dimensions to which he or she is sensitive. There is therefore advantage in highlighting those which reflect the most advanced thinking of our civilization -- those touching the frontiers of aspiration to explore our potential and articulating our comprehension of the most complex domains. But, although of necessary complexity, these metaphors must allow for simple comprehension, preferably permitting clarification by rich and evocative imagery.

(b) Opening options: A useful metaphor must avoid the problem of over-deterministic models which leave no “free space” for the imagination to explore and make discoveries. Better than static metaphors, those which embody a dynamic reality open more possibilities to the imagination. They lessen the impression of exhaustiveness and determinism -- having less of a function of a conceptual straitjacket. Such metaphors “seduce” and enchant the spirit. Their meaning can be “mined” according to people’s degree of need and curiosity.

(c) Recognition of limitations: As with every model, a metaphor can only give a partial image of a complex reality. And like a model, a given metaphor may not be to the taste of everyone. A metaphor has a limited audience (or a “market”) which may be a function of culture, education or age. Consequently any effort to impose a single metaphor is therefore destined to failure (even though this may be disguised to the extent that there may be resistance to the meaning carried by the metaphor, which is then seen as a sterile dogma).
(d) Dynamic system of complementary metaphors: The limitations of any given metaphor may be compensated, provided that it is seen as forming part of a set of complementary metaphors. Then the weaknesses of one are compensated by the strengths of others, and the dominating points any one metaphor is constrained or checked by the insights brought by others. In such a system of metaphors, each has more chance of finding an appropriate, and even seductive, perspective than through any single metaphor.

(e) Recursive nature of metaphors selected: A complex system is always a challenge to comprehension. This is also true in the case of a system of metaphors. Such metaphors should therefore be chosen on the basis of their individual capacity to provide some comprehension of the system of which they are part. This criterion guarantees, to some degree at least, the integrity and the coherence of the system.

In search of an adequate system of metaphors

In the advertising and media worlds, considerable sums are invested in research on the image of for a corporation or a brand. The choice of political or strategic metaphors is usually done with much less effort and without any "market research". What follows can only be considered a first selection of possible metaphors, with all the reservations that implies:

(a) Cultural integration as an ecology of options: An ecological metaphor implies a dynamic interplay of species, some in symbiosis others in competition for available resources. The "species" in this case may be understood as the political tendencies, factions, pressure groups, or strategic options -- from the most conventional to the most marginal. There may be thousands of species, from the largest to the smallest. It is up to each person to understand the nature of this ecology and its cycles of energy, to find in it the niches which can be occupied, and the appropriate dynamics with respect to partners and competitors. Of course an ecosystem can be enriched or impoverished by dynamic effects resulting from disequilibria in the shorter or longer term. The system of metaphors, or ways of thinking, may itself be understood as an ecology. This metaphor is better understood by those sensitive to the environment and to the management of its many aspects.

(b) Cultural integration as a physiology of interdependent organs: The State has often been compared to the human body. This metaphor may be applied to culture in its entirety. What are its organs -- the Member States, cultural institutions? Should the notion of an organ not be extended to all organisations, commercial bodies, and pressure groups? It is clear that what makes them interdependent is the circulation between them of different forms of energy and resources (notably information). The study of the physiology of this body, its respiration, its digestion, the elimination of its waste products, and even its development, may all be explored in terms of its regulatory systems (nervous system, hormonal system, etc). The system of metaphors, or ways of thinking, may itself be understood as a body of knowledge with its organs and physiology. This metaphor would be most fruitful for those sensitive to the notion of health, and especially to the health of the body as a whole rather than of its organs taken individually.

(c) Cultural integration as a nuclear fusion reactor: The great challenge for the technology of the future is to master the energy resulting from nuclear fusion. For many years all efforts have been focused on the way in which to constrain the energies released in order to create the most propitious conditions for the processes of nuclear fusion and the extraction of the excess energy engendered. The challenge lies in the appropriate configuration of elements which act as a container for the plasma -- a special form of energy facilitating the fusion process. As for the configuration of cultural structures and processes, the difficulty lies in the fact that if the new form of energy makes contact momentarily with the elements constituting the container, it is denatured and completely loses its force in an useless discharge. The cultural identity, sought as a generator of new social energy, suffers from similar constraints. It can only emerge in all its force to the extent that it is not subject to this or that national or Latin american structure -- structures which are, paradoxically, designed to create the conditions propitious for its generation. The system of metaphors, or of ways of thinking, may itself be understood as a configuration of elements, of which each is necessary but is also capable of completely denaturing (or "quenching") that form of comprehension which can only be based on the whole.

(d) Cultural integration as an organic molecule of variable geometry: The notion of variable geometry is part of the cultural discourse as a way of reconciling acceptance of different institutional structures. There are some organic molecules, notably benzene (key to organic life), whose stability derives principally from continuous alternation between a limited number (two to five) distinct geometrical forms. This phenomenon of resonance permits the existence of molecules in situations where the component structures are impossible, or require a level of constituting energy which makes their creation improbable. Such hybrid molecules, based on distinct geometries in resonance, require less energy to ensure their stability than their component elements. Is it not possible to envisage for Europe and identity, or its structuring, based on an analogous form of resonance between component structures which would otherwise be completely incompatible? After all, the cultural movement is based on the notion a structure appropriate to the whole would be more stable and more "economic" that the disorderly interactions between totally independent States. But such a structuring could only emerge through the dynamic between more limited structures. The system of metaphors, or ways of thinking, can itself be understood as based on a dynamic resonance between more limited
metaphors. This metaphor is more readily understood by those sensitive to the apparently improbable structures recognized by the natural sciences.

(e) Cultural integration as a pattern of circulating traffic: It is perhaps the network of roads and railways which represents the cultural identity of any region in the most concrete and experiential manner. Most of the population has acquired familiarity with traffic. Each is obliged to integrate, even at a neuro-muscular level, certain rules and behaviours necessary to survival in this network and in order to benefit from it. The movement of meaning throughout the cultural community may be understood as a movement of vehicles in a complex network linking both central points, known to all, and positions known only to specialists. From this perspective the main political schools of thought and action take the form of major motorways with provision for traffic in both directions, not to mention the so-called national or secondary roads. Each road thus represents a "preoccupation vector" or a form of collective action. But it is clear, in the light of the number of "accidents" and "collisions", that people are far from having achieved the insight appropriate to intersections and a "highway code" for the socio-political equivalent. This is despite the rich range of possible models, experienced on a daily and habitual basis: red lights, stop signs, traffic circles, priority systems, tunnels, etc). The system of metaphors, or ways of thinking, may also be understood as a configuration of distinct comprehension pathways. This metaphor offers insight to any user of the road.

(f) Cultural integration as a crop rotation cycle: Every peasant farmer understands the necessity of crop rotation in a field in order to avoid the accumulation of the negative consequences resulting from planting of an one species. The farmer knows that, to ensure the sustainable development of his field, he can grow one crop in that field for a period but must then replace it by a different crop to remedy the defects to the soil caused by the first. He may have to grow a third and a fourth species before finally returning to the first in his crop rotation cycle. It is the cycle which guarantees sustainability, not any particular crop. This well-tested approach suggests the possibility that no one policy in a given domain can be maintained beyond a certain period without accumulating negative side-effects. And it is therefore with a distinct and complementary policy that these effects may be partially counter-acted. Thus to guarantee any form of sustainable development, a cycle of distinct policies is necessary in which each compensates for the action of others. This is of course the implicit message of democracy -- but what political party would publicly recognize the need for the policies of others to compensate for the negative side-effects of its own? Any sense of cultural identity must necessarily emerge beyond the concepts and positions of parties which each contribute to its definition. It is at the level of the appropriately balanced cycle that the nature of such an identity may usefully be understood. The system of metaphors, or of ways of thinking, may itself be understood as a cycle of metaphors, each with its strong and weak points. It is clear that this metaphor will appeal most to those with agricultural concerns -- and especially those concerned with so-called organic agriculture.
Conclusion

How many complementary metaphors are necessary to sustain insight into the rich subtleties of cultural integration? Would it not be natural for a major metaphor to be associated with each domain with which a major policy or government ministry is associated -- or with each "general directorate" of cultural institutions? It would of course also be possible to understand cultural integration: as a system of navigation; as a collection of temples or ministries; as an interplay of cultural spaces; as a system of learning and development environments; as an olympiad of competitions; and as a building (as a way of exploring the positive implications of the notion of a "European fortress").

The challenge may involve not so much the use of one or more such metaphors but rather that of recognizing an appropriate set of metaphors such that each offers necessary and appropriate insights that the others may be unable to carry. It is designing such a set of metaphors, rendering it widely comprehensible and ensuring the appropriate checks and balances between the insights they imply, which is the concern. This "design" problem is itself an inter-cultural challenge.

Our verbal articulations of the situation we face are failing us. There is a need to draw more deeply on our cultural insights to reframe our windows of opportunity. In effect we need to design a new language that is more sensitive to appropriateness -- a language that more clearly protects diversity and facilitates fusion, as and when each is called for. There is a need to enable people to play more freely with the images of the world to which they are exposed, empowering them to reinvent their environments in ways which allow new forms of development. The clash, symbiosis and fusion of cultures can usefully be understood in terms of the possibilities of the emergence of new forms of order through cultural self-organization. A richer metaphoric language would enable all to participate in this process to the fullest.

REFERENCES (with bibliographies)


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