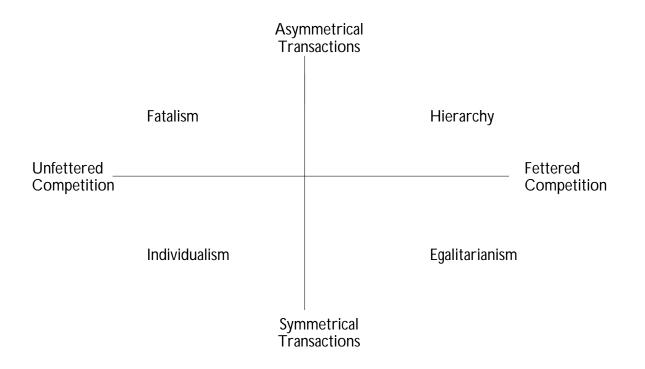# "Understanding Environmental Values:
A Cultural Theory Approach"

by Michael Thompson

"They will never agree," said the nineteenth-century wit Reverend Sidney Smith when he saw two women shouting at each other from houses on opposite sides of an Edinburgh street, "They are arguing from different premises." Cultural theorists, Michael Thompson explained in his October 2 seminar at the Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs, like to use this story as a way of coming to grips with the disputes that characterize environmental policy. The different premises in these disputes concern human and physical nature, and cultural theory maps them in terms of a fourfold typology of forms of social solidarity.

Two of these solidarities, individualism and hierarchy, have long been familiar to social scientists. Cultural theory's novelty lies in its addition of the other two solidarities,

egalitarianism and fatalism, and in its making explicit the different premises—the different social constructions of nature, physical and human—that sustain these four fundamental arrangements for the promotion of social transactions:

- For *individualists,* nature is benign and resilient—able to recover from any exploitation—and man is inherently self-seeking and atomistic. Trial-and-error in self-organizing, ego-focused networks (markets) is the way to go, with Adam Smith's invisible hand ensuring that people only do well when others also benefit. Individualists trust others until they give them reason not to and then retaliate in kind (the winning, "tit for tat" strategy in the iterated Prisoner's Dilemma game), and see it as only fair that those who put the most in get the most out (as in the joint stock company). Managing institutions that work "with the grain of the market" (getting rid of environmentally harmful subsidies, for instance) are what are needed.

- Nature, for *egalitarians,* is almost the exact opposite—fragile, intricately interconnected and ephemeral—and man is essentially caring and sharing (until corrupted by coercive and inegalitarian institutions such as markets and hierarchies). We must all tread lightly on the earth, and it is not enough that people start off equal; they must end up equal as well. Trust and levelling go hand in hand, and institutions that distribute unequally are distrusted. Voluntary simplicity is the only solution to our environmental problems, with the "precautionary principle" being strictly enforced on those who are tempted not to share the simple life.

- The *hierarchist*'s world is controllable. Nature is stable until pushed beyond discoverable limits, and man is malleable: deeply flawed, but redeemable by firm, long-

lasting, and trustworthy institutions. Fair distribution is by rank and station or, in the modern context, by need (with the level of need being determined by expert and dispassionate authority). Environmental management requires certified experts to determine the precise locations of nature's limits and statutory regulation to ensure that all economic activity is then kept within those limits.

•   *Fatalists* find neither rhyme nor reason in nature and know that man is fickle and untrustworthy. Fairness, in consequence, is not to be found in this life, and there is no possibility of effecting change for the better. "Defect first"—the winning strategy in the one-off Prisoner's Dilemma—makes sense here, given the unreliability of communication and the permanent absence of prior acts of good faith. With no way of ever becoming in sync with nature or of building trust with others, the fatalist's world (unlike those of the other three solidarities) is one in which learning is impossible.

These solidarities, in varying strengths and patterns of pairwise alliance, are clearly discernible in policy and research on climate change and on sustainable development generally. In creating a context that is shaped by its distinctive premises, each generates a storyline that inevitably contradicts those that are generated by the other solidarities. Yet, since each distills certain elements of experience and wisdom that are missed by the others, and since each provides a clear expression of the preferences of a significant portion of the populace, it is important that they all be given some sort of account of in the policy process. Indeed, policy processes can be assessed (and, cultural theorists argue, *should* be assessed) in terms of how far they fall short of this ideal.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), for instance, and other organizations working to develop scenarios of environmental change, demand rationally

derived numbers. They are loath to countenance the storylines and their underlying contexts that have, in fact, caused the numbers to come out the way they have. If bias is unavoidable then we should ensure that we do not exclude any of the "voices"; that is, we should incorporate the *requisite plurality.* We should take care not to detach any of these biases from the contexts and storylines that they are the expansions of.

This decontextualization (which is characteristic of the hierarchical solidarity) has resulted in the fact that those who work on climate change policy routinely rely on "hard" science to frame the problem and then bring in social science "down the line," as it were, to assess the impacts, policy responses, and so on. The result has been the foregrounding of the environmental limits and the backgrounding of the institutional limits. However, since this inevitably entails the selection of the environmental limits as *perceived by one solidarity* and the rejection of the others, social science is needed up front to understand why the problem has been defined in one possible way rather than in one of the others. In other words, it is the institutional limits, not (or not just) the environmental ones, that we should be looking at.

To help address these two concerns—the incorporation of the requisite plurality and the foregrounding of the institutional limits—Thompson offered an excerpt from Barry Schwartz's review of *Cultural Theory*:

> Each way of life [solidarity] undermines itself. Individualism would mean chaos without hierarchical authority to enforce contracts and repel enemies. To get work done and settle disputes the egalitarian order needs hierarchy, too. Hierarchies, in turn, would be stagnant without the creative energy of individualism, uncohesive without the binding force of equality, unstable without the passivity and acquiescence of fatalism. Dominant and subordinate ways of life thus exist in alliance, yet this relationship is fragile, constantly shifting, constantly generating a societal environment conducive to change.

If this is the sort of institutional turmoil that is going on all the time as we approach, hit or burst through the various environmental limits, then the policy challenge is to maintain and nurture all this dynamic plurality. Set-ups that succeed in doing this have been termed *clumsy institutions*. The terminology is deliberately tongue-in-cheek and counter-intuitive—clumsy institutions having all sorts of desirable features (the requisite plurality, for one) that are not exhibited by those seemingly elegant outfits (the IPCC, for instance) with their rationally derived numbers, their objective functions, their single metrics, their optimizations, and so on.
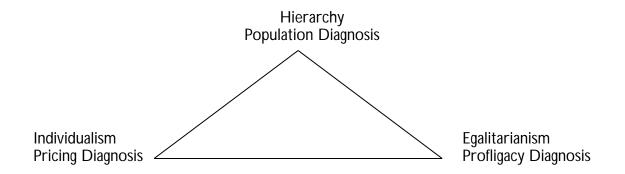
Clumsy institutions—or nascent versions of them—can be found at many different levels of interaction, from the global (the World Trade Organisation post-Seattle, Milan and Prague *may* be moving in this direction, and the World Bank is certainly trying to) through corporations and public sector organizations (such as hospitals), right down to the household. Some innovative firms, for instance, are now clumsifying themselves in order to become "pro-active": looking at their product development from the perspectives of the different solidarities (even those, particularly the egalitarian's, that are largely absent from the firm itself) and thereby avoiding the technological inflexibility and consumer resistance that are inherent to single-perspective (and even double-perspective) approaches. Even so, organizations moving themselves toward clumsiness are still the exception, and the sort of decontextualization that enables the IPCC to convince itself that it is dealing with rationally derived numbers remains the rule.

Cultural theory works to transform this institutional orthodoxy through a three-step process. First, there is the realization that people are arguing from different premises and that since these premises are anchored in different forms of solidarity, they will never agree. Second, in line with the "argumentative turn" in policy analysis, this contention, as well as being unavoidable, is all to the good: something to be harnessed through constructive and high-

quality communication. Third, though each solidarity has its distinctive model of democracy (and is thus able to claim that its solution will strengthen democracy, and that those professed by the others will weaken it), no one of them has the "right" model; the essence of democracy, rather, is in its contestation.

The contested terrain of climate change illustrates this process:

- There are three basic policy premises in this debate (three, because the fatalist solidarity has no voice; if it had it would not be fatalistic). In the population diagnosis, the problem is too many people, and since needs are seen as being standardized (given, as it were, by a country's level of development) the only solution is to reduce population, especially in the fast-breeding South. Education (especially of women) and family planning are seen as effective policy levers, as are technology forcing and technology transfer to reduce the greenhouse gas consequences of the rising needs that will accompany development. In the pricing diagnosis, the problem stems from the environment being treated as a free good when it is increasingly apparent that it is not. The solution is straightforward: "Get the prices right." In the profligacy diagnosis the problem is too much consumption and the solution is frugality, especially in the high-consuming North.

Hierarchy
Population Diagnosis

Individualism
Pricing Diagnosis

Egalitarianism
Profligacy Diagnosis

- Since each solidarity's problem is comprised, in large part, by the other two solidarities' solutions, this triangular "policy space" is irreducible. Each apex holds itself together by spinning the story (the policy argument) that is the logical and moral expansion of its diagnosis while, at the same time, rejecting the stories that are being spun at the other two apexes. Alliances, however, are possible—the "green consumer," for instance, springs from individualism and egalitarianism—and these alliances, as they form, gain strength, and collapse, impart an erratic momentum to the process. Because of the IPCC's unclumsiness, we have to look less at macro-levels for instances of constructive engagement. Northern individualists eating lower on the food-chain, in pursuit of healthy living and personal success rather than to save the world and equalize social differences (which is the egalitarian justification), is just one small example of a behavioral option being adopted by more than one solidarity, but for different reasons.

- Each story sets out a glorious future: one in which the prevailing transactional arrangements are significantly redressed. In the hierarchist's story, it is public goods that deliver the sustainability that neither markets nor grassroots community can provide; in the individualist's story it is the expansion of the private goods realm and the shrinking of the others that saves us all; and in the egalitarian's story it is the rediscovery of the commons that, by distancing us from both top-down imposition and ravenous commodification, brings us back into harmony with the natural world.

- Each of those transactional transformations, moreover, is seen as democracy-enhancing, thanks to each solidarity having its distinctive *model of democracy*. Hierarchists, siding with Plato and his philosopher-king, subscribe to the *guardian* model, in which it is only right that those with superior insight and virtue should do

their trustee-like duty and make all the decisions. Democracy should be indirect, majoritarian and representative, with the political class being given primacy over public affairs on the basis of popular elections every few years. Individualists see self-determination as crucial and dislike both paternalism and majoritarianism (which, they point out, can result in even quite large minorities being prevented from "carrying out their plans"). Theirs is a *protective* model and, siding with Locke, they see government's raison d'être as "the protection of life, liberty, and estate." Egalitarians are more with Rousseau, rejecting deference and seeing self-interest as something to be reined in, not amplified. They plump for the *participatory* model, in which the equal right to self-development is what matters, and this means that choice should be by broad and direct participation, ideally in a small-scale, face-to-face way and at a single level: the grassroots. Fatalists, too, have their distinctive, and characteristically unenthusiastic, model: a *non-model*, really. Despite the other solidarities' fine words about public goods, private goods and common-pool goods, fatalists know that these are all really club goods, from which they have been excluded. Hence, struggling to define who the decision maker should be is a waste of effort. It does not matter who you vote for, fatalists assure one another, the government always gets in!

Thompson concluded his presentation by pointing to the intellectual and practical benefits of abandoning the fruitless struggle to decide which of these models of democracy is the right one: a struggle that is inevitable if the mutual contradiction of the models is seen as something that needs to be cleared up. The clumsy institution argument is, first, that this clearing-up cannot be done and, second, that, since it would actually destroy that which it was striving to clarify, we would not want to do it even if we could.

If each model of democracy, like each of the climate change storylines, and like each of the sets of premises that those who speak with different voices are arguing from, is rooted in one of the fundamental forms of social solidarity, and if each of those solidarities needs the others if it is to remain viable, then it is *essential contestation*, not contradiction and confusion, that we are dealing with. In other words, if we have not got all the models and all the storylines, and all the diagnoses of the problem, and all the prescriptions for its solution—that is, if we fail to clumsify ourselves—then we have not *got* democracy.

<p style="text-align:center">*   *   *</p>

Following the presentation, participants pushed Thompson to elaborate on the following topics:

Instability

An essential component of cultural theory is recognizing the constant motion and shifts in transactions between solidarities. Only by maintaining plurality can one ride with the system. We should therefore embrace instability, hybridity, and contestation as essential to policy making.

Multi-Stakeholder Dialogue

In many UN discussions there is a real attempt to represent all stakeholders, as is the case in eco-tourism debates. However, when it comes to policy implementation the discussion is too often limited to UN policy bureaucrats. Thompson noted that at the level of policy implementation many bureaucrats are afraid of losing control, which is the highest risk from the hierarchical perspective. Yet, a benefit to that loss of control could be more public trust. Until that is recognized, however, the good intentions of those wanting to be inclusive will not carry over into actual policy implementation discussions.

Michael Thompson is Director of The Musgrave Institute in London and Professor and Senior Research Fellow at the University of Bergen in Norway. Thompson's work has focused on the development and application of cultural theory, much of it with the late Aaron Wildavsky. He has co-authored several volumes, including Culture Matters *(Westview Press, 1997),* Divided We Stand: Redefining Politics, Technology and Social Choice *(University of Pennsylvania, 1990),* Cultural Theory *(Westview Press, 1990), and most recently,* Cultural Theory as Political Science *(Routledge, 1999).*