

# Cultures as learning, learning from cultures

Presentation at Spirit of Place, a conference held by  
The Council for Eco-philosophy  
and supported by the Directorate for Nature Management  
in Arran (Sami cultural heritage center) at Drag  
in Nordland, Norway  
Saturday July 31<sup>st</sup> to Tuesday August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2010

Torbjørn Ydegaard©, senior lecturer  
University College Southdenmark  
Lembckesvej 3-7  
DK-6100 Haderslev  
tyd@ucsyd.dk

## **Abstract**

*On a foundation of Popperian critical-rationalism the paper put forward a tentative theory claiming that the West can learn from more nature-friendly cultures in order to change and innovate its ways of dealing with the environment. Through examples from Inuit-cultures in Greenland, Sherpa-cultures in Nepal and the eco-history of Denmark the tentative theory is discussed – and more or less falsified, as it turns out that the Western culture in itself is probably the best fitted culture for changes and innovation.*

## **The Problem**

The problem that the conference is facing is this: How to foster a nature-friendly way of living in the coming society.

The problem is of course very important today – as it always have been, ever since man started to cut down the forest and plough the ground. But today mans impact on the natural environment might have global effects and not just local ones.

We are therefore facing a common task: How to change our way of living in a way where we not any more put our own survival at risk? That is:

How can we come to live in greater harmony with nature?

How can the Spirit of Place help us change in ways that enables us to honour one or both of two possible strategies:

1. To change our way of living in order not to contribute further to the climatic changes
2. To change our way of living in order to adapt to the climatic changes already here and changes to come no matter how we fulfil the first strategy?

### **Tentative Theory**

As a critical rationalist I will in this paper look for answers by putting forward a tentative theory to be examined:

- (1) We (the Western cultures) can learn from more nature-friendly cultures

Let me explain some of the concepts in this statement before going to the analysis:

### **Culture**

Culture is seen as both:

1. Patterns of behaviour – as descriptions of what people are actually doing
2. Patterns for behaviour – as prescriptions of what people are expected to do

In both ways cultures are based on understandings of the environment into which they are dwelling (Nils Faarlund: "The Nature is the Home of Culture"). These understandings will often be in the form of narratives – of stories. All cultures have such narratives about creation of the world, the role of human beings in relationship to one another and the environment, and so forth.

Take the narratives of creation as an example:

In the Indian Mahabharata Vishnu swallows the sea and in its place lays Mother Earth. But the demon Hiranyanksha rapes her in such a brutal way, that her body is broken and levered up and thus forming the Himalayas<sup>1</sup>.

Modern geology tell a story about huge tectonic plates which drift the surface of the earth, crashing together and creating



---

<sup>1</sup> Cameron 1984

mountains and deep waters, earthquakes and volcanoes. And it tells that India in this way have collided with Asia, lifting up the Himalayas.

The concept of narratives can be illustrated in this way:

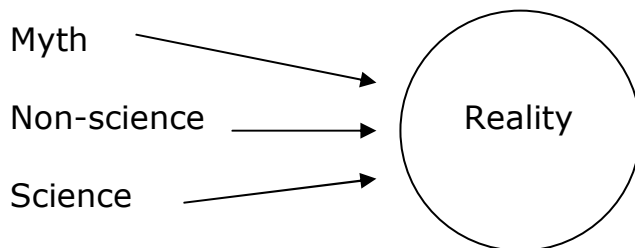


Figure 1. The narratives tell in different ways about the reality.

One important thing to point out here: At this stage all narratives are equal in explanatory power. They give the best possible answer to the questions about the past, and at the same time they give draft for future possibilities and actions.

To further analyse the narratives of cultures we can use the theory of World 1, 2 and 3 developed by Karl Popper<sup>2</sup>:

World 1 is the real world of physical phenomena (including nature), but also of human actions and cultural expressions. World 1 is 'patterns of behaviour'.

World 2 is a concept for the consciousness of the individual human being – that is the *subjective knowledge* based on 1) individual thinking, emotions, dispositions and so on, and 2) perceptions of World 1 filtered through the narratives of the culture as they are found in World 3.

World 3 is the *objective knowledge* of the culture – the narratives told from generation to generation through rituals and actual living, and through books and electronic media. World 3 is the world of individual representations of World 1 made objective, made common, for all the individuals of the culture to grasp as best they can. World 3 are 'patterns for behaviour'.

So from World 1 emerge World 2, and from World 2 emerge World 3. But also the other way around: The 'pattern for behaviour'-system of World 3 guides the World 2-consciousness of the individual members of a culture. And being so guided, the individual will in World 1 act and percept in ways acceptable to the culture.

---

<sup>2</sup> Popper (1979), p. 74.

## Learning

The theory of the three worlds shows us that learning takes place both in the meeting between World 2 and World 1, and in the meeting between World 2 and World 3 – that is: in the meetings between the individual and the world of realities and the world of narratives.

In these meetings learning (creation of subjective knowledge, World 2) takes place as a hypothetical-deductive process described by the equation:

$$(2) \quad P1 - TT - EE - P2^3$$

When we are facing a problem (P1) – a phenomenon of the nature, the content of a ritual, the narratives told by a storyteller, explanations given by a teacher on the blackboard or by an author in a textbook – we try to solve it by using whatever subjective knowledge we already have or by using our imagination (but also imagination gets its fuel from subjective knowledge). That is: We try to solve a problem by putting forward tentative theories (TT). "Solving" actually means "testing": Will our theory be sufficient to solve the problem, or will we have to change our theory or maybe even to eliminate it (EE – error elimination)? Confirming, changing or eliminating our theories is learning<sup>4</sup>.

What happens when our tentative theory (either it is solely a subjective World 2-theory or an objective World 3-theory) is falsified in the meeting with World 1? We can react in two ways: We can either turn the blind eye to the situation in some sort of faith in our theory – which will typically happen in many cultures under strong religious or traditional regime. Or we look out for new solutions, discuss them critically (here I use the concept 'critic' in quite another sense than it is used by the Marxists to whom it means critic of the society. To me critic is focused on ideas and theories), eliminate those we doubt will work and go on refining and criticising those we believe can solve the problem. In this way falsification leads to a process that eventually might bring learning to the participants.

In this article I presuppose that cultures can learn in the same way as individuals learn.

All this means that my tentative theory (1) now can be discussed, first in some examples and then in an analysis.

## Examples

For Western cultures to learn from more nature-friendly cultures – cultures that in some way connect to 'The Spirit of Place' in a way no

---

<sup>3</sup> Popper (1989), p. 406.

<sup>4</sup> This concept of learning is very basic and is best described as 'mild constructivism'.

Western culture could ever do – we will have to put these cultures to a test: Will specific cultures show us behaviours and ways of living that we can learn from in reference to the two strategies mentioned above.

When it comes to solutions for more nature-friendly ways of living the cultural examples probably are *legio* – nearly all traditional cultures that have survived for a period of time are adapted to the environment they are a part of; that be from the jungles of the Amazon and the bushes of Australia to the deserts of Central Asia. From among all these cultures there might be techniques, artefacts and behaviours from which we can learn. And we should learn from them.

When it comes to adapting to new situations let us explore the abilities of two traditional cultures – cultures that I have personal experienced.

### **The Inuits of Greenland**

South of Ilulissat/Jakobshavn in the Disko-bay area of Greenland lays Sermermiut. Sermermiut is a lovely place: Situated close to the Icefiord the small inlet is too shallow for the huge icebergs to enter, the sandy beach is easily accessible by qajaq and umiaq and the land is green and fertile. An ideal place for inuit hunters going for seals and whales. Archaeological excavations have shown that Inuits have lived here for the last 3.500 years<sup>5</sup>.



But the research has also shown that the different Inuit cultures at Sermermiut – the Saqqaq-, the Dorset- and the Thule- cultures – did not succeed each other continuously. Between each of them there are layers with no cultural artefacts at all.

This means that Inuit cultures came to Sermermiut, stayed there for a period of time and then disappeared again, leaving the country without human inhabitants. The people left or died away when circumstances – climate and by that the animals to hunt – changed because they could not

---

<sup>5</sup> Frier og Fisker (1984)

adapt. Conclusion: From the Inuits of Greenland we can learn nothing about surviving under changing situations!



To underline this perspective one can look at the wooden cross above the altar in the church of Maniitsoq/Sukkertoppen. It is made of driftwood that from the forests of Siberia reaches the Greenlandic coastline and in former days supplied the Inuits with materials for house-building and hunting gears. On the cross is carved a rose as a symbol of the compassion, grace and forgiveness of Christianity that, like the driftwood, came to the shores of Greenland and freed the Inuits from the harsh taboos of the animistic beliefs of traditional life – taboos that actually made life in the Arctic more difficult than needed. In the Tasiilaq-area in East-Greenland they nearly eliminated the population by the end the 19<sup>th</sup> century had it not been for the Danish colonization to hinder it!

### **The Sherpas of Himalaya**

Often travelling in the high Himalayas I am acquainted with the traditional dress of the Sherpa women – their long sleeveless dress, blouses and multicoloured aprons. Once I went there with a Danish group of students of textile and fashion. We wondered why the aprons were made of three pieces of woven cloth sewed together – why not just make the fabric wide enough for the purpose?

The answer: The weaves of the Sherpas are very small and just capable of producing fabrics of about 15 cm across. Therefore they have to make the aprons out of three pieces of cloth!



Next question: Why are the weaves so small?

The answer: Because the Sherpas 500 years ago lived in Tibet where the trees are few and small – and so where the weaves. And although the Sherpas for centuries have lived south of the Himalayan Range in forestland with huge trees they never thought of changing their weaves and make the production of aprons simpler and easier. The idea of innovation never reached them!

Another example: A group of Sherpas came to visit me in Denmark. The first they asked me



where if I could help them with something smarter than a sickle for harvesting their fields. Here at least they had the idea of doing things in an easier and less laborious way. But they were not able, by themselves, to come up with attempted solutions. Well, they returned to Nepal with a scythe!



Again the conclusion is that even though the Sherpas are representatives of nature-friendly cultures, they don't have ideas of innovation, of doing things in other ways than the traditional one. With a very negative-sounding concept, I sometimes call it "copy-cultures" because they copy the culture from generation to generation. Therefore they can not inspire us when it comes to learn to change or adapt our own culture.

### **The Danish Revolution**

The third example I will bring forward in this paper comes from my own country – Denmark. As the guillotines were at work in France, beheading the royalties and everybody else in opposition to the rulers of the day, a much less violently revolution took place in Denmark<sup>6</sup>:

For centuries an ever growing population and an expanding fleet of both commercial and navy ships had resulted in a total destruction of all forests in the country. In many places the heather covering the moors were taken for fuel and the grasslands were over-grassed by cattle leaving the land open to drifting sand. Huge dunes were forming all over, and moving by the wind, covering former fields and borrowing farms, villages and churches. In between the dunes the water was trapped, creating



un-farmable wetlands. At the time of the French Revolution (which was due to social unrest partly caused by nature: by failed farming because of ashes from the Laki-eruption in Iceland in 1783) Denmark was as near to an ecological smelt-down as ever seen, both before and after. So when Lord Nelson took

---

<sup>6</sup> Kjærgaard (1991)

the Danish fleet in 1801, we had no trees for rebuilding the navy vessels. Instead trees were planted at many places – trees that now have reached a size fit for shipbuilding!

Denmark was at the rim of a catastrophe, but survived. From the Renaissance and the Enlightenment we had learned the art of innovation and change. By using the new scientific understandings of farming and nature, and by hard labour, the total ecological collapse was prevented and the situation of the landscape was actually turned 180° around: By planting trees we got hold of the sand. By digging thousands of kilometres of ditches and canals we learned to regulate the water. And by introducing new types of crops (mainly of the pea family) and by changing farming methods we re-established a fertile land as basis for a growing agrarian economy.

None of this could have been done without the scientific ideas that evolved during the Enlightenment<sup>7</sup> – ideas that are described in the learning-equation of Popper.

### **Science versus non-science**

This brings us back to Figure 1 and the narratives.

In Figure 1 we saw that the different narratives in the first instance were of equal explanatory power – often they could tell the same story just by different words. The traditional narratives related to myth and non-scientific views are very seldom critical to their own stories – you don't change the creational myth of Genesis even though facts of World 1 (geological findings etc.) make the 6-day creation a very unlikely story!

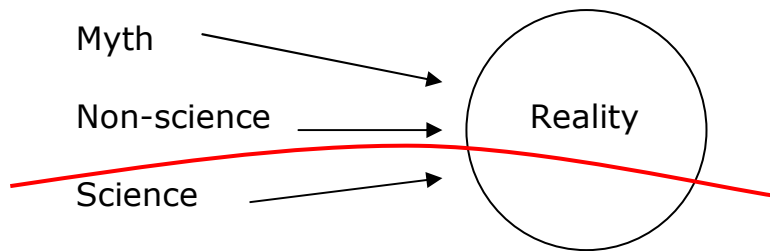
On the other hand is science exactly an opposite activity: The whole idea of science is to look for truth, not to claim the Truth. And in this search for truth criticising one's own and others' ideas are essential.

In the second instance this makes the demarcation between scientific and non-scientific approaches, as seen in Figure 2:

---

<sup>7</sup> It is thought-provoking that the Romanticism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century idealized this landscape of ecological devastation and the poor people living in it. And even more: This Romanticism is the foundation of both the Nordic 'friluftsliv'-tradition and the view that "wild" people – Inuits and Sherpas for example – hold the Truth of how to live through The Spirit of Place!





*Figure 2. The demarcation between the scientific and the non-scientific narratives.*

When I concluded that the Inuit and Sherpa cultures could not inspire us for the needed ability to change and adapt the reason lays here. They are based on narratives claiming the Truth, or at least not based on the ability to criticize and thereby change neither the 'patterns of behaviour' nor the 'patterns for behaviour'.

On the other hand The Danish Revolution, as an example of the Western culture, showed a great ability to learn and to change. This is probably due to great impact of the scientific thinking that emerged in Europe during the periods of Renaissance and Enlightenment.

In theoretical terms one can say that World 3 gets qualified through the critic taking place within science. The World 3 of the West is always changing, always knowing about itself, that it does not hold the Truth. But at the same time it is always looking for the truth. And it is always in search for a better way of living – and thereby admitting that it is not yet good enough.

### **Conclusion**

I might not have falsified my tentative theory (1), but on the background of only three examples and a rudimentary presentation of the theory of Karl Popper, I so far must conclude that the best chances we have to fulfil the strategies outlined in the beginning of this paper are through cultures relating to scientific views. And the only such culture, as far as I know, is the Western culture.

Actually it seems relevant and correct even to turn the tentative theory around and put forward another tentative theory that to fulfil the strategies we all – both the West and other cultures – have to learn from the inherent innovative structures of Western learning and research tradition.

There are strong supports of the view that we have to do something like this to find ways to fulfil the two strategies outlined in this paper:

Worldwide there is an agreement that funds have to be raised to help the developing countries adapt to the future climate<sup>8</sup>. Huge sums are needed for this purpose: Estimates run between 10 and 100 billion \$ per year. Lots of money is already given by the developed countries, but still only few percentages of what is needed.

Besides the money there need to be agreements of plans for climate-adaptations and for their implementations. And the implementations have to be integrated into the country-driven development policies and planning. And more than that, I would add: The plans have to foster the abilities for change, which means focusing more on 'hearts and minds' than on technology. Put in a simple way: The developing countries have to learn to innovate – have to learn to use the Popperian equation of learning!

Irin News told in January 2010 how research into climate-proof food plants might help feed a growing population under pressure from the climatic changes. Two British scientists created a mutant plant that had lost its ability to sense temperature correctly and that therefore grew as if the temperature were optimal all the time. This is just one example of how the scientific approach can support the fulfilment of the strategies.

Support for the innovative view can even be found in the new book by James Lovelock, the father of the Gaia-theory<sup>9</sup>: It is correct that the Earth is one coherent system guided by feedback-mechanisms, always trying to return to equilibrium. This thesis gave birth to the 'tipping point' theory, saying that a few degrees increase in temperature could tip the whole eco-system and in a self-reinforcing process end in uncontrollable heating up of the Earth. But now Lovelock says that the tipping point is actually very far away from current equilibrium. We are no way near that point yet. And when the climate tip, it does so very dramatically, not in a slow continuously process. Better than talking about climatic cosmetics like windmills and electric cars with little or no effect we should, Lovelock argues, prepare ourselves for the changes to come: New agrarian systems, climatic-refugees etc. – change our way of living in order to adapt to the climatic changes already here and changes to come no matter what we do.

### **Postscript**

This paper is not an apology for the West or for the ways the West has used and still is using the natural environments and resources of the Earth. There have been and there still is a lot of wrong-doings. These wrong-doings have to be turned into searches for a better world.

---

<sup>8</sup> Irin news 11.2.2010

<sup>9</sup> Knudsen (2009)

But what I try to emphasise is this: The best place to look for inspiration when it comes to changing the society in more nature-friendly ways and ways more in line with the Spirit of Place is actually in the West itself. The West is not only the problem, it is also the solution.

### **Literature**

- Cameron, Ian (1984): *Mountains of the Gods*. Century Publishing, London.
- Frier og Fisker (ed.) (1984): *Ilulíssat/Jakobshavn*. Nordiske Landes Bogforlag, Uummannaq.
- Kjærgaard, Thorkild (1991): *Den Danske Revolution 1500-1800. En økohistorisk tolkning*. Gyldendal, Copenhagen.
- Popper, Karl (1979): *Objective Knowledge*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Popper, Karl (1989): *Conjectures and Refutations*. Routledge, London.
- Knudsen, Anne (2009): *Gaia udrydder os*. Weekendavisen, 4.-10.12.2009.
- *Climate-proof food plants are coming*. [www.irinnews.org](http://www.irinnews.org), 15.1.2010.
- *Climate change and adaptation funding equally unpredictable*. [www.irinnews.org](http://www.irinnews.org), 11.2.2010.