

## Theorizing Leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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### *Introduction*

Leadership is distinguished from management by a hieratic obligation implicit in the title “leader”. The leader is concerned not merely with the quotidian oversight of organizational elements; the leader also mediates the interaction between the practical world and that metaphysical intangible we call Vision. Vision might be defined as the ideological and interpretive framework that structures the components of an organization and their relationship with the exterior world. It can be as small as the philosophy of a family business or as grand as the *Weltanschauung* of a civilization.

But in order to motivate the novel mediation required of the 21<sup>st</sup> century leader, I must frame the problem demanding such a radical solution. Hence I first explore the world of ideologies from which Visions are drawn, and attempt to put this world on a more tractable footing using the metaphor of memes. A discussion of memes provides the tools needed to diagnose the profoundly disturbed condition of 21<sup>st</sup> century society—ultimately schizophrenic—and this diagnosis allows the prescription of new models of leadership as therapy for society-wide psychosis.

### *On Memes and Meaning*

The concept of memes—of cultural genes—may seem heavy ontological baggage to assume for the question of how leadership must change to address the problems of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. To seduce the reader into taking up this conceptual burden, I want first to introduce the related Problem of the Sign. By Sign I mean any mark, utterance, or symbol that *refers*; one might imagine the spoken word, or the written words of this essay. The Problem of the Sign is, simply put, the difficulty of assigning unambiguous reference to any utterance. How can we be sure of the meaning of the Sign—or of the meaning *intended* by its Author?

My preferred solution to this problem is a radical empiricism of the Sign, a form of interpretive positivism first introduced by Stanley Fish. Since we can have no firm hold on the Sign, can have no direct knowledge of its meaning or its producer, we are left only with its effect on our mind—its

cognitive observable. In this sense the Sign and its Author become theoretical entities, fabricated by the conscious mind to *explain* and interconnect the cognitive observables about which we can have confident knowledge. To elucidate this point with a metaphor, all we can attribute with reality, in this epistemology, are the “footprints” of the Sign, the impressions left by it on our minds. The foot—the Sign—whose tread leaves these prints becomes a story we tell to ourselves, as does the Author of these prints, whose feet place them in the mud of consciousness. The Author and Sign are hence properly viewed as constructions of consciousness, supplying intention and direction and *meaning* to the cognitive observables. It is now clear that Sign and Author are nothing but Myths creating coherence from our experience; and that the sum total of these Myths constitutes an interpretive framework or hermeneutics.

But now I can further problematize this apparent solution. As a scientist, I am in no way suggesting that the objective world has no existence; merely that we as observers access this world indirectly, and create with interpretive tools an internal representation of the world that organizes our experience. Then the question becomes—if our interpretive tools are personal and idiosyncratic, how is it that any meaning aggregates? How do observers agree on so many of the details of the world? And how do observers select their interpretive tools in the first place?

This is where memes come in. Richard Dawkins introduced the meme in *The Selfish Gene* as the cultural analogue of the gene. It is a replicator—a snippet of tune, a concept, a jingle, a slogan—the goal of which is to pass on as many copies of itself as possible. The environment of these memes, of course, is the sum total of human minds and the related cultural apparatus (i.e. the various media). Many of these memes are simply parasitic; but some memes succeed not merely because of their skill at propagation, but because they convey adaptive advantages to their hosts. These symbiotic memes—what we would previously have labeled interpretive strategies or even ideologies—are subject to Darwinian selection, and the criterion for selection is the fitness they confer on their bearers in navigating sociological, ideological, and indeed physical landscapes. The critical theorist would call this fitness *Power*, and indeed human agents seem to adopt memes causing Power to flow to them. Reflexively, the adoption of the meme causes Power to flow into it (the more adherents the meme has, the more reality will be structured in accord with its hermeneutical contours). So the relationship runs something like this: as much as we take up memes, or interpretive strategies, along with their associated Power, so much are we taken up by them, molded by them so as to reinforce their existence

and lead to their preservation.

Culture, in this view, is nothing more than the sum total of these symbiotic memes—in other words the ideological spheres that create a series of interlocking interpretive communities and mediate their internal and external interactions. But this is of course exactly what we mean when we speak of an organization's Vision—Vision is the Master Meme that constitutes the organization, governs its internal dynamics, and frames its interpretation of the rest of the world. It is important to note that a corollary of our radical positivism is the status of all observers as Signs; in dealing with other human beings, we have no epistemic access to their “authentic” intentions, only to the impressions their utterances and various metacommunicative cues leave on our conscious minds, and hence other humans are subject to the same rigmarole of interpretation as any element of our experiential world.

### *Our Schizophrenic Post-Modernity*

With the theoretical tools developed in the previous section, I can now attempt a diagnosis of the post-modern condition. The derangement of our present world is manifest in a variety of symptoms identified by Gregory Bateson as schizophrenic. For example, individuals at all levels of education indulge various conspiracy theories, astrological conceits, belief in alien abduction, and so forth, characteristic of a paranoid mental state. As another example, consider the withdrawal of (sometimes the same) individuals into extraordinarily atomized modes of life, and their construction through the mediation of technology of a personal world in which interactions are exclusively through impersonal channels (email, blogging) and the barrier between the “real” and “experienced” world is rigorously policed (the “I-Pod people” who only interact with their personal soundtracks rather than facing the natural sonic landscape of city life).

How did this schizophrenic situation come to be? Bateson in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* proposes that the schizophrenic condition arises from a so-called “double bind”. The double bind is generated in any relationship between a (representative of) authority and a victim, in which the authority (usually a parent in the individual schizophrenic patient) places a number of contradictory demands on the victim. In Bateson's theory, communication between two parties occurs on multiple channels, at various degrees of abstraction. The primary communication is accompanied with a series of metacommunicative cues (body-language, tone of voice, context) that aid in the interpretation of the primary utterance, indicating for example that it is meant as a joke, or a metaphor, and so on. In the

double bind, the primary utterance may express some rule for behavior, but through another communicative channel the interpretation of this utterance is undermined and contradicted. For example, if the child is commanded *not* to do something, there may be a non-verbal cue indicating that this utterance is not to be obeyed. These situations of course arise routinely in everyday life, and usually prompt disorganized responses—a conscious or unconscious misinterpretation of the meaning of the original utterance, an effort to force the original utterance into an inappropriately literal or metaphoric sense, etc. Schizophrenia is induced from a lifetime of these double binds, which completely deranges the victim's interpretive strategies and leaves him or her unable to respond appropriately to the metacommunicative cues of others, or to issue coherent metacommunication. Usually the schizophrenic would fall into some consistent pattern of misinterpretation as a defense mechanism; for example, the paranoid tendency to interpret all statements as metaphor, concealing some inimical meaning, or the catatonic tendency to withdraw completely from the interpersonal field.

Since we have observed this symptomatology in post-modern society, it is natural to query its origin. Here memes and the double bind come to our aid. In application of the double bind thesis, we must identify the two agents involved. The authority is, in this case, society itself, through its many channels of communication—both individuals (parents, leaders, bosses, and other authorities) and more abstract agents of the mass media (television, cinema, advertising, etc.). The victim is now not the preschizophrenic of clinical application but any member of society. The double bind arises from the increasingly contradictory system of demands placed upon the individual by society as a whole. We are taught, for example, to celebrate difference and diversity; at the same time, deviation in attention, erectile function, or happiness is medicalized and we are to seek the “norm” through pharmaceutical intervention. Our leaders harp constantly on the values of our free and liberal society, yet to protect that freedom we are expected to tolerate incremental intrusion of the state into our everyday lives through surveillance, national identity cards, and so on. These double binds can be located in any corner of the social field, and consequently it is unsurprising that the interpretive strategies of the individual in post-modernity are utterly deranged. Hence the symptoms of post-modernity outlined above—atomization, paranoia, etc.—arise from the double binds in which we are routinely placed by the demands of our social condition. The social condition of post-modernity *is* schizophrenia.

The meme thesis, in turn, explains the emergence of this contradictory field of social demands.

Recall that memes are, as replicators under the influence of natural selection, in competition with each other for our attention, loyalty, and cognitive resources. In the pre-modern age, the difficulty of long-distance travel made the diffusion of systems of memes slow, and their confrontation infrequent. Further, these diffusions and confrontations were inextricably tied to population movement or diaspora. As the human population has exploded, and mass transit and media have opened the floodgates to near constant memetic interaction, memes are now able to cross the globe at a moment's notice; clicking on a hyperlink can almost instantaneously send a meme from England to Japan. Thanks to the brute facts of faster transmission and more hosts, memes now enjoy a much less competitive ideological environment. Further, the capacity for an individual to tolerate the cognitive dissonance of several contradictory memetic systems has increased enormously; this I would attribute to the acquisition of a “relativism” meme as a co-adaptive component of most memetic systems, wherein instead of entering into confrontation the memes allow other memes to co-exist in an individual or society, so long as these memes reciprocate with their own “relativistic” adaptations. Culture as a result is hopelessly fractured into a patchwork of partially overlapping, often incompatible, interpretive systems.

The logical conclusion of these trends is the post-modern condition. Because individuals and the societies they constitute now “believe” in a vast number of different memes, or interpretive strategies, they automatically inflict on their fellows a relentless sequence of contradictory demands, thus creating a field of double binds rendering the individual subject a hopeless schizophrenic forced to respond with the suite of pathologies—in actuality defense mechanisms—we now take as an inevitable part of contemporary life.

### *Leadership Reinterpreted*

It would, of course, be gross exceptionalism to suppose that this moment in History is in some way *unique*—that cultures have never before experienced dislocation, confusion, contradiction, or collective madness. Indeed, within the Hegelian dialectic one could suppose schizophrenia to be the natural companion of the synthetic process. In the past, the resolution of civilizational madness has usually been accompanied by large-scale social upheaval and bloodshed; one might suggest the First and Second World Wars as local examples of this process. The goal of my particular intellectual enterprise is to avoid these negative side-effects of synthesis through the successful diagnosis of the problem in its symptoms and causes; this then permits some prescription for its resolution, through a

form of cultural psychotherapy.

What we have now—and what our forebears lacked—is a scientific theory of culture and cultural change (memes) and an understanding of the mechanism by which cultural madness is induced (the double bind). So I would suggest that what we need in 21<sup>st</sup> century leadership is nothing less than a massive effort in memetic engineering: the development of memes and meme systems—of Visions, in other words—capable of resolving the current crisis and instituting a more coherent interpretive framework for the challenges of the future. This is of course a tall order; so for the remainder of this essay I want merely to outline potential components of this project.

The first component is an emphasis on pragmatism. While Derrida and his apostles have been roundly criticized for instituting the “anything goes” mentality of relativism, it is important to note that the concept of *bricolage*—the use of whatever tools are at hand for attacking an intellectual or societal problem—does not exclude the practical consideration of what tools best do the job. Indeed, in *Structure, Sign, and Play* Derrida emphasizes this pragmatic element. So in constructing our interpretive framework for the future, we must first consider: what techniques best make sense of the experiential data we encounter? What techniques lead to a coherent and consistent interpretation of the world? What hermeneutics allows observers in a given community to agree on the maximum number of features of the world? Our fragmented post-modern culture, with its mish-mash of strategies unordered by any practical desiderata, clearly fails this test, and hence must be actively subjected to a rigorous selection process guided by practical considerations of economy.

To frame the next component, we must anticipate the nigh-inevitable technological achievements of the coming century. While the 20<sup>th</sup> century brought unprecedented control over the elements of the physical world—achieving apotheosis in the Trinity test of 1945—the 21<sup>st</sup> century will almost certainly supplement these powers with control over the biological world. Our present ability to create new elements and new materials through physics and chemistry foreshadows an ability to create new life and new forms of life, even new orders of being—if the promises of genetic engineering and artificial intelligence are realized. That we not repeat the Faustian pattern of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—in which the gifts of science were squandered on exploiting the natural world and on destroying our fellow humans—the binaries of Human/Nature, Nature/Technology, and Technology/Human that dominated previous thinking must be dissolved into an organic and ecological understanding of the

place occupied by the Human and the Technological in the Natural world. It is only if the Human is viewed as somehow *beyond* Nature that Technology—the Human fashioning of something new out of Nature—thus implies something *unnatural*. Once the Human is—as in our memetic picture—totally bound by natural forces, then by analogy the process of creating entities out of natural material becomes a process of generating Nature from Nature, by Nature. Then the Technological is merely an extension and refiguration of the natural world, and it is by the force of this argument that the binaries are naturalized and neutralized. This ecological approach to the natural sciences—a “countermeme” to the mechanical philosophy of the past—forms the second component of our memetic project.

I have argued that the relationship between humans and our memes must be governed by *pragmatism*—by a sort of psychic hygiene wherein we apply strict practical considerations to our adoption of interpretive strategies—and that the relationship between humans, our technology, and nature must be governed by *ecology*—an understanding that humanity and technology is inextricably embedded and subject to the natural world, and that this embeddedness carries with it notions of interdependence and responsibility. For the third and final component of the memetic project, I must suggest some principle governing our relationship with each other. I would propose for this principle *compassion*, by which I mean an understanding of and empathy for the situation of others, and a recognition of our common humanity, history, and destiny. The human animal is fundamentally a social one, and it is incontrovertible that our development, growth, and achievements depend upon interaction with other humans—depend upon our location in a social environment. Our morality and ethics—the guidelines for our interaction with each other and with society—follow immediately from recognizing the imperative inherent in the promotion and cultivation of this social field.

### *Conclusion: New Vision*

The novelty in 21<sup>st</sup> century leadership is then a vast increase in its scope. It is no longer sufficient for leaders to draw on and modify the extant ideologies—or Visions—to guide whatever organizations they happen to lead. Rather, 21<sup>st</sup> century leaders must have a deep and rigorous understanding of the cultural processes generating and governing these ideologies—must understand the emerging science of memes—and must apply this understanding to combat the pathologies plaguing post-modernity. The resources that have served successful leaders so admirably in the past—intelligence, judgment, honesty, and courage—will remain a necessity. But now leaders must be

prepared not merely to mediate between the world of ideology—of Vision—and the practical world; we must create new worlds of ideology, New Vision—to save the World. The rest will be, as the saying goes, History.