Designed Culture

An Intellectual Basis For Culture: Geometry Under Every Stroke Of The Brush

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Contents

This is part of a series of thought experiments regarding the creation of an endogamous community. Endogamous does not mean inbred, although the community would need to be fairly large to prevent such a thing.

1 What is Culture?

Culture is mostly made up of a myriad little things you do without thinking about them. Why did you make coffee instead of tea? Why do you speak English rather than Italian? Why do you count

in base 10 rather than base 20? You might pause and think about these things, but most of the time they happen on autopilot. Basic preferences and deeply ingrained social norms are more than simple habits. Most of them were never consciously learned and consciously transmitted, and insofar as it was a deliberate process, alternatives were never considered.

The usual analogy with genes works well on this memetic soup, because most of it is transmitted from parents to children:

- Most of the existing variation is neutral with regards to the ability of a person to reproduce, and thus it is susceptible to memetic drift. This explains a lot of the seemingly random variation in some aspects of culture.

- Random change is more likely to be negative than positive, even though in this case not all change is random.

- Negative change is progressively weeded out by natural selection, although other routes of transmission can allow memes to be transmitted even as they impede the ability of their host to reproduce.

Actually, they are most comparable to symbiotic bacteria. Many bacteria are good for us and live in our bodies. They are transmitted from parents to children, and so the information they carry along can be thought of almost as a part of our genome, since our reproductive interests and theirs are almost aligned.

Some bacteria are parasitic, and while immune systems and evolved 'behaviors' (like fever, coughing, sneezing) in their hosts do create a selective pressure making them less harmful over time, they can never become completely harmless to us unless they become symbiotic bacteria – and the tickets on that train are sold out. Their metabolism requires energy to sustain itself, and that energy has to come from somewhere. Even if it was possible for parasitic bacteria not to generate any immune reaction or visible symptoms in a host (it's not), it would still need to consume sugar, break down fats or do something of the sort to survive, thus taking away energy from the host or its symbiotic bacteria. Of course, our hypothetical asymptomatic, immuno-neutral parasite would quickly kill any compatible host, since being able to gorge itself on energy sources with no repercussions would allow it to multiply so quickly it would burn through its supply in no time.

2   Memetics

Memes are competing for real estate in the information space of our minds. Unlike bacteria in a body, they cannot proliferate (create identical copies of themselves) in a single mind. For a meme to reproduce, it requires a fresh mind, although there is a huge amount of available space for a variety of different memes in a human mind. Some memes can be thought of as conscious knowledge, but most of them lie below conscious awareness. Most memes lodge themselves in our brains without us noticing their presence.

That subconscious memetic soup is what we call "deep culture". Some memes are passed down in families, and those are mostly beneficial because their content is regularly trimmed by the process of natural selection, like the DNA of symbiotic bacteria. If such a meme mutates in some of its hosts and reduces their fitness, natural selection will eliminate the mutated versions. If the mutated meme increases the fitness of its hosts, they will proliferate, and so will the meme.

3 The Fashion | Tradition Dichotomy

Some memes are acquired through exposure outside of the family sphere, and those are only modified indirectly by natural selection creating resistant hosts, which in turn selects for less harmful versions of the memes – similarly to how the immune system creates a selective pressure on parasitic bacteria. This process takes longer[1], and a parasitic meme can never be made completely harmless because just like a bacterium needs energy, a meme needs a slot in a mind. In other words, even a relatively harmless **fashion** is probably taking the place of a useful **tradition**.

This is the crucial part of the fashion vs. tradition dichotomy: all memetic systems evolve over time, but they are under different selective pressures depending on their main mode of transmission. Roughly speaking, there are two modes of transmission that create significant differences in how ideologies evolve: adult-to-adult or adult-to-children.

Adult-to-adult transmission is what is called a fashion: over time, it will acquire characteristics that make it better able to spread in human minds, because variants that plug better into the human psyche tend to "reproduce" better and become more common. Given enough time, a successful fashion will seamlessly acquire a victimhood narrative, villains, aesthetics, outrage-inducing taboos, persuasive rhetoric, etc. In principle, a fashion doesn't have to harm its host to exist, but in practice it often does, because it is beneficial for a fashion to be able to "take over" the host and make them spend time and energy promoting it. It also competes with other, potentially more useful memes. In this regard, a fashion behaves a lot like a transmissible disease, which is why I compared them to parasitic bacteria.

Adult-to-children transmission is what is called a tradition. The characteristics a tradition acquire over time also make it good at infecting minds, but in addition to that, it tends to favor high fertility in its hosts. A tradition is better able to spread if its hosts have lots of children, since it is mostly transmitted from parents to their kids. Hence, traditions evolve more slowly as they are being passed down through generations, but they win out in the long run (in a stable environment) because they do not destroy their hosts: their 'interests' are, to some extent, aligned with the genetic interests of their hosts, and so they are not progressively weeded out by their hosts evolving psychological immunity. They tend to acquire fertility-promoting traits such as: homophobia, sexual contracts (marriage), valuing children, resistance to change. They are most comparable to symbiotic bacteria.

This is a rough model to understand culture, not an endorsement of traditionalism or conservatism. Every tradition began as a fashion, and as an adult reading this, you can no longer acquire traditions. Adopting a tradition as an adult means that, to you, it is a fashion – chosen for its persuasiveness.

More on fashions and traditions can be found on the blog The Wayward Axolotl whose author came up with the dichotomy.

4 Engineering A Culture

I'm not saying you should replace all your memes with those of the oldest tradition you can find. For one thing, it doesn't work like that: traditions are handed over to you by your parents. If you

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[1]It can take an extremely long time. By way of analogy, smallpox maintained a TFR of 30% after millennia of infecting humans.

acquire one as an adult, to you it is a fashion. Moreover, all traditions start as fashions, and virtually any fashion can potentially become a tradition if it ends up being transmitted from parents to kids. This essay is about engineering culture, i.e. how to create fashions for our community that can seamlessly turn into traditions, and help us along the way.

That brings us back to the original topic. As I said, not all cultural change is random: many memes and memetic systems (ideologies) were created intentionally, to various ends. Mohamed did not understand memetics, but he certainly intended to create a religion, or at least a movement. So, unlike the genome, a lot of our culture is designed (not necessarily with the intent of increasing survivability or fertility) and the history of memetics is far from being a strictly evolutionary process. Evolution is non-random selection repeatedly operating on random mutation. Memetic evolution is non-random selection (of a different type) repeatedly operating on **semi-random** mutations.

Designing culture is both useful and risky. You need to do it with a clear goal in mind and a solid theory of how the cultural elements you implement will bring about the effects you want.

5 The Goal Of An Optimal Culture

So what is our collective goal? The first one should be maintaining the existence of the community. What are the immediate instrumental goals to that end? Encouraging loyalty, survivability and fertility in members.

I'll go over each one of these instrumental goals, and suggest easy to implement cultural elements to support them, adapted from real-life examples. I'll use the ones I know best: LDS, Muslims, Catholics, Chinese Syncretism.

I also want to emphasize that this is about setting up seemingly arbitrary traditions and then forgetting about them in day-to-day life, while still harnessing their benefits. For example, having a culture where people are consciously prepping is a desirable thing, but that isn't what I'm after here: I want a culture that naturally prepares people, even those of them who aren't aware of it.

This is about cultural capital, rather than intellectual capital.

6 Loyalty: A Meme To An End

The guiding principle for fostering loyalty should be: no self-sacrifice for the collective, or as little as possible. People are loyal to a group when it is easy to be loyal, or beneficial in the long run. In a minority group, too many restrictions either push people away, or make them unable to compete with mainstream society. Both of those outcomes are counterproductive.

However, loyalty is by definition a self-imposed restriction. Loyal people, given the choice, will decide not to jump ships. They will decide that their interests are aligned with those of their community. In an endogamous community, they will decide not to outmarry. (unless the relationship is sanctified by the community, and there needs to be cases where this is so) They will decide to hire people from their community. In an intellectual movement, they will decide to voice their disagreements privately rather than publicly. Some of those choices involve passing up opportunities for the sake of the collective, in other words self-sacrifice. The riddle we need to solve is the following: how to make loyalty profitable for individuals?

6.1 Increasing The Cost Of Abandoning Loyalty

You can increase the cost of jumping ships. People naturally don't like 'apostates' and think of them as turncoats. In order to reinforce that effect, you can shame apostates by calling them short-term thinking idiots, and using a tailor-made, scary-sounding set of vocabulary to refer to them. For example, you could call apostates "kinless". You could refer to lineages leaving the community as "diluting" into mainstream society. For this to work on someone, it requires most of their social circle to be part of the community, so it's going to be hard to implement in the beginning, but in the long run social pressure is what works best.

Another way to make changing allegiances more costly is to have habits and practices that set you apart from mainstream society: clothing, dietary habits, taboos are the most common ones. Since the individual feels "normal" in their own community and "weird" in mainstream society, this makes the community into a low pressure chamber that prevents outwards flow.

Worth mentioning: having a very high level of trust and cooperation within the community naturally increases the cost of leaving, since by doing so an individual forfeits access to that privileged network, for them as well as their offspring.

6.2 Minimize The Cost Of Loyalty

You can minimize the cost of loyalty. For example, it is more common for a community to impose (passive) *restrictions* rather than (active) *habits*. Eating fish every Friday is a harder habit to maintain than not eating pork, since you have to go out of your way to buy fish every Friday, while you can just not pick pork at the supermarket. Many successful communities have simple dietary restrictions that are not difficult to maintain in day-to-day life, but basic enough that they have the desired effect of creating a rift between the community and mainstream society. The Mormons achieve that with restrictions on coffee and tea (and alcohol, but unlike hot beverages this isn't easy to implement), Muslims and Jews with a taboo on eating pork.

6.3 Allowing Others To Join

As mentioned before, even the most basic, defining rule of an endogamous community (no out-marriage) needs to have special cases. This is important for two reasons: you don't want to pass up opportunities to recruit exceptional individuals from mainstream society, and it makes the perceived future cost of loyalty lower: even with very high standards for outsiders, leaving a small opening for the possibility of outmarrying means that your potential pool of 'applicants' is everyone rather than a small subset of the population.

Generally speaking, having a tight-knit community makes being loyal easy. If each generation is socialized together through collective homeschooling and other activities, individuals will never have to make hard, costly choices for the sake of loyalty. People marry, hire, or break bread with people they know in the first place.

6.4 Loyalty Must Have Advantages

You can compensate for the cost of being loyal. You don't want to compensate simply by giving more status to loyal people, or you risk ending up in a situation where people sacrifice themselves for the sake of the collective out of virtue signaling. You want to give them real advantages: a business owner who shows loyalty by hiring people from the community should be rewarded with

customers. An individual who chooses to marry within the community should be rewarded with opportunities and preferential cooperation. In other words, harness our natural tendency to signal virtue by allowing people to do it through supporting loyal members of the community.

7 Survivability: All Prepped Up And Ready To Go

Over a long enough period of time, say three generations, difficult times are almost guaranteed to come up. Survivability doesn't seem very important to most of us right now, and indeed a long period of abundance like the one we've had can make any community forget the value of being prepared. Even though you were born in a peaceful and wealthy era, it is likely that your own kids, or grandkids, will not. Short of the community being very well prepared, they will know extreme poverty, die of avoidable sickness, or serve as cannon fodder in a war.

We need to have cultural habits and practices that make us into "natural preppers" even as we forget the hard times during times of abundance. I'll go through the main risks we'd benefit from being prepared for: aggression, exodus, famine, malnutrition, poverty, disease, accidents, power cuts, helplessness.

- **Aggression**: let's get this one out of the way. You need a culture that promotes physical fitness, and the way it naturally happens in communities is through playing games, or in other words collective sports. I know this is a tough sell in what might initially be an intellectual group, but the only way to get most people in a community to reliably exercise without thinking about it twice is to make a particular team sport into "our thing".

    - Might seem like a detail, but besides being fit, you need relatively short hair and contacts rather than glasses, at least for men. Whatever it is we define as a traditional look (there can be more than one), it should therefore include these.

    - Finally, having a couple weapons and ammo in a safe is a good idea. Having dozens of guns and going to the range every weekend has diminishing returns: it is by and large a waste of time and money, but having a gun in the house and going to the range once a year or so to make sure you still know how to use it will come in handy, if not to you then to one of your descendants. This can be promoted with sayings and proverbs like "a chest of grain and a bag of lead" (patent pending, lol).

- **Exodus**: being able to quickly skedaddle from a certain area is often the best line of defense. I have two suggestions for cultural traits that can achieve this result:

    - Like in traditional Jewish communities, having a reserve of small valuables makes you able to pack up and leave quickly, and still land on your feet. People in general already like small, shiny bits of rock, so it is an easy to encourage tendency, and it makes for a nice birthday present for your partner anyways.

    - Having traditions that involve visiting each other a few times a year and sleeping over will naturally make people better equipped to take care of refugees from the community should the need arise. Plus, think of all those sweet social gains.

- **Famine**: hands down the community that preps best for this eventuality is the LDS. They have, for "religious reasons", one to three months worth of rice under the bed, at all times. This is incredibly cheap to set up, and will save many a Mormon's life in the future, so I think we should take note.

- A small, easy improvement is adding a few bags of dried beans to this. Rice + beans or lentils is a complete protein, and all are very cheap.

- **Malnutrition**: most communities have a few staple foods that they recognize as theirs. This is a good opportunity to sneak in nutrients in order to prevent commonly found nutritional deficiencies, both modern and ancient (since those could come back). For instance:

  - A fish-only meal, say once a week, can prevent both iodine deficiency and vitamin d deficiency.

  - Having a fruity drink like cider or juice instead of beer or coke as a common beverage can provide vitamin c.

- **Poverty**: although they have a lot of kids, trad Catholics rarely become destitute, because they are just not all that frivolous. I'll go over some of the things they do:

  - They eat out all the time, but not in restaurants: rather, they tend to go to each other's houses. That way, money that would otherwise be wasted is instead invested in a form of food based gift economy.

  - They frown upon egregious displays of wealth, and don't like to brag about money, unless it's money well spent. (like buying a house)

  - Parents often pay for their kids' mortgage down payment, so those don't have to spend a decade paying rent before being able to buy a house.

  - They're overrepresented in careers that don't require long studies like the military or the farming sector.

- **Disease**: no handshakes and no hugs/kisses outside of close family members is a no-brainer, makes it harder for disease to spread in the community. Foods that are often the cause of sickness or poisoning (like mushrooms, or oysters) can be natural candidates for dietary restrictions.

- **Accidents**: short of having extreme restrictions (like not using cars), this is probably the hardest category to prepare for. There is only one thing I can think of that could be easily implemented: rules for buying or building a house. For instance: the building should be made of stone (not wood), and should be more than 7 meters (20-25 feet) above water level. Common sense stuff, really, but defining the characteristics of a traditional home in that way might come in handy.

- **Power Cuts**: if you want to be indirectly prepared for power cuts, the best way to do it is to have a week every year when you don't use technology (except for emergencies). This could be justified as a commemoration of some important event, and be an important moment in the social life of the community.

  - As a byproduct of this, people will have alternatives on hand for cooking (gas stove), for staying clean without hot water (like a washcloth), for heating (many options) etc.

- **Helplessness**: having practical knowledge and skills is invaluable in times of crisis. You want to give higher status to tradespeople, and to encourage individuals to pursue those careers.

  - Trades are a reliable source of employment/income, and generally don't require long studies. Tradesmen can also set up their own businesses once they know the market

well enough. Not everyone is fit to learn a trade, of course, but this needs to be a valid, high status option within the community.

8 Fertility: The Mainspring Of The Great Machine

We want a culture that supports high fertility in members, without losing sight of the reasons why we're creating it in the first place. So we need to keep the following points in mind:

- We can't rely on dumb women. We want a community with foresight, which is to say we need smart people, which is to say we need smart women.

- We can't rely on a pre-modern agricultural lifestyle, because that doesn't solve the problem of population collapse in the face of energy/resources scarcity.

- We can't rely on parasitism, because exploiting the rest of society to prop up our own fertility rates can only end up with our demise or that of the host society (and thus indirectly ours). Acting like a cancer on society is short-term optimization, not long-term planning.

- We can't rely on individuals being smart and willful enough to understand explicitly why high fertility is inevitable, and act on it. We should encourage this kind of explicit understanding, but we can't expect it to be enough to support a high fertility culture in and of itself.

I've talked about this a bit in my Rational Feminism article. Most of what can be done to encourage high fertility, has to do with women's culture and status: a community of smart women living in abundance will tend to value intellectual, economic and artistic endeavors over housework. The best way to painlessly solve this problem is to build a culture around it: make housework unnecessary, make having kids high status, make it possible for mothers to pursue intellectual, economic and artistic endeavors as much as possible.

I'm not going to repeat everything here, but I'll mention a few other things existing communities do to increase fertility, knowingly or not.

9 Contraception

This is a tough one: you want to discourage people from using contraception, but you don't want to make into a religious taboo, since you can't have EPC (Eugenic Population Control) without contraception.

This might be a bit hard to justify, but you could have a rule against using passive contraception like the birth control pill or an intrauterine device (IUD). This type of contraception is different from active contraception like condoms in that you take it or put it on in a calm, long-term thinking moment, and don't have to think about it at the moment of sex.

By contrast, you have to actively put on a condom every time you have sex, which is more cumbersome. It also makes the decision to have a child easier and more "in the moment", as opposed to waiting a week or so for fertility to come back after being on the pill, or getting a doctor's appointment to take off an IUD.

Creating a dichotomy between regular contraception (between bodies) and "invasive" contraception (within bodies) can achieve that. It's not a complete solution, but it's a start.

10 Early Marriages

Chinese internet shitposters casually describe unmarried women over the age of 27 as "leftover women". No one thinks this is a nice or polite thing to say, but it does have the effect of pressuring women into marrying before becoming too old.

This is easy enough to copy, and can be cranked up: you could have a culture where the optimal age to marry is during your studies (20-24) for both men and women, then right after, then if you're not married by 28 you're considered a "leftover".

You can also support earlier pregnancies with the same kind of derogatory terms. If you don't have your first kid or pregnancy within two years of getting married, you're in a "sterile marriage".

Maybe this is too harsh, and I can see how it would be a turn-off. It might work as a tradition, but not as a fashion, which is a problem.

11 Conclusion

This post feels like a constellation of unrelated ideas, and to an extent that's what it is. Some of the things I proposed are unrealistic, but most of them come from existing, real life examples, so I don't think they're that much of a stretch.

This is about designing a culture with a particular purpose in mind, which to my knowledge is uncharted territory. Cultural traits that rely on social pressure/shaming and status truly kick in when the community is already quite big, but cultural habits and holidays can be implemented from the get go, so there is no need to wait. In my next post on this topic, I will propose actual cultural habits and holidays we can adopt, with no social cost since it can all be passed off as family traditions.