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Some Questions About The Theoretical Foundations of  
W. Foxs Transpersonal Ecology and Arne Naess Ecoso-  
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Warwick Fox's recent attempt to lay the foundations of a transpersonal ecology raises the question of whether the problem of self-identification is the right starting point for addressing the ecological crisis. By framing a transpersonal ecology in terms of three possible levels of self-identification (personal, ontological, and cosmological) Fox addresses a fundamental problem in the evolution of Western consciousness; namely, how to reestablish a deep sense of connectedness of the individual with the entities and life sustaining patterns that make up the natural world. Fox's ideal of a cosmological level of self-identification, where the sense of self is expanded through the deep awareness that all forms of life are interdependent participants in a "single unfolding reality," would resolve the problem of Western dualism by eliminating the individual as the epicenter of distinct worth and rational judgment. His formulation both of the problem and the solution (that is, that individuals have a choice in the critically important matter of self-identification and that scientific evidence now strongly supports a cosmological sense of being) seem to be a culturally conditioned argument.

To put the problem differently, Fox's focus on the individual as the starting point in dealing with the human aspects of the ecological crisis leaves out of the discussion the primacy and formative influence of culture. In effect, Fox's analysis of the conceptual baggage now associated with "deep ecology" and his arguments about advantages and disadvantages of the personal and ontological levels of self-identification reflect the Western cultural tradition of representing identity as a matter of individual choice. The intention behind his analysis, along with the appeal to consider the evidence of science, is to affect how individuals elect to constitute their own sense of self-identity. In Irene Bloom's fascinating paper, "On the Matter of Mind: The Metaphysical Basis of the Expanded Self," she notes that "in classical China, where persons were characteristically defined in terms of biological inheritance, identities and roles were not chosen but received along with the gift of life itself." 1 Her point is that culture (in this case, Confucian culture with its emphasis on the relational aspects of human existence) constitutes not only how persons will understand themselves, but also will privilege the development of attributes most essential to the expression of the cultural view of identity. A culture that stresses relational patterns will reinforce distinctive capacities associated with communication: respectful listening, rectified speaking, mindful use of the body as part of the message system, memory of the analogues upon which everyday life are to be based, and so forth. A culture that stresses the individual as the basic social unit, and thus as the primary agent of decision making, will reinforce attributes

associated with empirical observation, critical reflection, use of individually formulated ideas and values as the basis of action, and, at the deepest level, a sense of being comfortable with a highly experimental life style. Even the kinesthetic patterns that make the body such an important part of communication will be different.

The individually centered culture, as we can see, involves a double bind that does not characterize cultures that make themselves visible to their members through the authority of their traditions. For Western cultures (and theorists) that uphold the primacy of the individual, even when attempting to reconstitute it on a new basis, the rational approach continues to reinforce cultural patterns that frame culture out of the picture. Thus, Fox is not the only theorist caught in this double bind. My own attempt here to use the printed word as a means of influencing the reader to reflect on a different set of issues, and hopefully to choose to think and act in more ecologically responsive ways, serves to amplify cultural patterns that reinforce the invisibility of culture.

In the broadest sense, the question being posed here has to do with whether the rational process used to analyze both the causes and possible solutions to the ecological crisis is as efficacious in changing cultural patterns as many of us want to think it is. In suggesting that a viable approach to a transpersonal ecology must take account of the primacy of culture, I am aware that I am not escaping the problem Fox never quite comes to terms with: namely, how to move from a rational argument for a transpersonal ecology to affecting actual changes in cultural practices. Broadening the discussion may open up other pathways that can be explored, as well as help illuminate how our currently rooted cultural biases undermine our ability to learn from cultures that have evolved ecologically sustainable patterns. In effect, the challenge here is to suggest how Fox's rationalistic formulation can be expanded to take account of the constitutive role that culture plays in forming and sustaining patterns of human consciousness. While the word "culture" can be stretched to cover the entire range of human activity, and even be understood as interactive with the natural world, I shall restrict the discussion here to three aspects of culture that seem essential to an expanded understanding of a transpersonal ecology. These include the nature of cultural storage and reproduction, ideology, and the "reality" constituting and sustaining nature of semiosis.

In traditional cultures like that of the Hopi and Balinese the processes associated with storage, semiosis, and ideology cannot be separated from religion, myth, ceremony, technological practice, attitudes toward nature, and so on. The cosmology, as experienced by these cultural groups, is a seamless whole. But the audience Fox is addressing lives in a more fragmented culture; it is also one that has built up a set of guiding beliefs that now serve as the canon for the modern and progressive thinker. The terrible dilemma created by this canon is that challenging it often leads to being labelled a "reactionary thinker," but continuing to use it as the basis of personal/cultural life further undermines

the viability of the environment. By addressing the specific aspects of culture associated with cultural storage, semiosis, and ideology we can get a better idea of the cultural implications of Fox's proposals and a clearer sense of the leverage points for affecting change. Again, it must be emphasized that the three aspects of culture being addressed here involve the use of a metaphorical language that illuminates distinctive characteristics of the symbolic world of a cultural group, and hides others that seem less critical. Cultural storage is sustained by the processes of semiosis; and ideology both influences the codification of signs and the forms of knowledge that will be valued (and thus the forms of knowledge that will be devalued and lost). All three are aspects of a living mental ecology that remains largely hidden from the horizon of explicit awareness, but continues to guide human thought and behavior at the taken for granted level that characterizes most cultural knowledge.

## **Cultural Storage**

Cultural storage can best be understood in terms of Edward Shils' use of the word "tradition," which, according to his definition, is anything handed down from the past to the present. To quote him, "tradition is whatever is persistent or recurrent through transmission, regardless of the substance or institutional settings." 2 While some traditions may be more enduring than others, and even be sustained by people long after they have ceased being viable, traditions represent all the ways in which knowledge has been encoded in social practices, technologies, and ways of thinking and communicating. These include conventions that govern human practices that range from body language, the design of buildings and the layout of streets, to the metaphorical constructions of language. In a short, tradition is the historical dimension of the mental ecology we refer to as culture. What is particularly germane to Fox's arguments for changing the basis of self-identification is that the mental/cultural processes of the past, and now encoded in the multiple forms of communication that characterize a culture, exist prior to the individual's entrance into the world. As infants learn the languages of the cultural group (the language of music, the use of the body as a powerful form of metacommunication, spoken and written discourse, architecture, and so forth) they become socialized to the schemata of mostly tacit understandings that enable them to act, think, and communicate with other members of the cultural group.

These patterns or schemata serve as the initial basis for how the infant will make sense of the world, and they have particular relevance for Fox's way of framing the process of self-identification. The primacy of the cultural group's symbolic maps, which may or may not be useful guides for making sense of the territory of the human/environment relationship, can be seen in Alasdair MacIntyre's account of how the personal identity is framed by the shared narratives of the group. The key question for humans, he writes, "is not about their own authorship. I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer

the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself part of?’<sup>3</sup> But as the vocabulary necessary for articulating the problematic aspects of self-identity may not be made available by the keepers of the narratives, the ability to constitute a new self separate from the narrativized communal images of self may not exist. That the individual has a choice in the matter of self-identification may not be part of the reality constituting narratives of the group. Fox’s formulation of a transpersonal ecology, as beginning with the rational judgment of the individual, can be seen as problematic when we consider the identity formation process in cultures that do not have an anthropocentric orientation. Should we follow Fox’s lead by urging that the members of Hopi and Balinese cultures (two cultures that have worked out the human/habitat relationship in a manner that has proven sustainable over the long term—which is the ultimate test of a successful culture) decide their own basis for cosmological self-identification? As I read Fox, the Hopi or Balinese individual might even choose to base it on scientific evidence, which Fox claims is “equal to any mythical, religious, or speculative philosophical account in terms of the scale, grandeur, and richness of detail.”<sup>4</sup> Or is Fox’s book relevant primarily to the modern Western reader who already takes for granted the myth about the primacy of the individual (which is the source of the double bind that Fox wants to correct yet remains caught in)?

There are other aspects of cultural storage (tradition) that need to be taken into account by any theorist who wants to bring about radical changes in human thought and behavioral patterns. Perhaps the most important is the way in which language encodes the metaphorical thinking of earlier people who were, in turn, influenced by the metaphorically based schemata of still earlier people. While philosophers, linguists, and people working in the sociology of knowledge have effectively explained how we have mistakenly understood language as either having a direct correspondence to the thing named or as a neutral conduit through which individuals communicate their ideas and information, it has been the work done in the area of the metaphorical nature of the language/thought connection that has illuminated how language both stores and reproduces a cultural group’s cognitive schemata. The recent writings of George Lakoff, Mark Johnson, and Donald Schon, in particular, have brought out different characteristics of metaphorical thinking that quickly move us out of the rarefied atmosphere of theory and into the contextualized and taken for granted world of culture. Cultures, it seems, are based on root metaphors (or what can also be called meta- narratives, world views, and now, paradigms—though this term seems to be more appropriate to a Kuhnian type discussion). The root metaphors (plural in the case of Western cultures) have changed over time; and if we examine various periods of Western history we find that the creation myth of the Book of Genesis served as a root metaphor that had profound influence on subsequent cultural patterns (even on current attitudes toward human/nature relationships), and that the machine was used as the root metaphor that framed modern cultural developments—including our political institutions, approaches to work, and even architecture. If we consider the root metaphors of other cul-

tural groups, particularly traditional cultures less given to making a virtue of syncretism, the connection between root metaphors and all the other levels of metaphorical thinking (reflected in their art, technology, rituals, and patterns of social interaction) stand out more clearly.

For our purposes here, it is important to stress that our primary purpose is to clarify how metaphorical thinking works as a process of cultural storage, reproduction, and (because thought is metaphorical) re-working old patterns into “new” (in the weakest sense of the word) ones that will be conceptually coherent with the dominant root metaphor of the cultural group. To return to Fox’s attempt to reformulate the basis of self-identity, a strong case can be made that his arguments are an example of analogic thinking where, instead of thinking of self as autonomous and thus as an observer of the external world (an example of “as if” thinking) he wants to substitute a new analogue—e.g., associate self-identity with “experiences of commonality with all that is.” Both the image of personal identity he wants to overturn and his image of a cosmologically based personal identity are framed by the cultural (Western) root metaphor that represents every person as possessing a sense of agency—that is, the person as the basic social unit and as having the freedom (and thus responsibility) to choose their own identity and destiny.

The point here is that the meta-narratives encoded in the root metaphors frame the process of analogic thinking whereby the old schema of understanding is mapped on to the new situations that pose the existential problem of needing to be both understood and brought under control. On one level, the process of analogic thinking can be seen in the process of thinking of the environment “as like” a natural resource, the computer “as like” an artificial form of intelligence, and deep ecology “as like” Arne Naess’ analogue of deep questioning and Murry Bookchin’s characterization as “eco-la-la.” Analogic thinking, where the new is understood in terms of the familiar, involves both cultural storage and extension. In a culture such as ours, where there are competing root metaphors, analogic thinking can also be understood as a political process where the analogues that prevail over others (both old and new) become over time taken for granted and encoded in iconic metaphors.

Words such as “data,” “individual,” “intelligence,” “nature,” and so forth, are examples of iconic metaphors. The image (schema of understanding, mental template, conceptual model) is taken for granted, even though it encodes the schema building process worked out in an earlier and politically successful process of analogic thinking. The encoding process also reflects the influence of the prevailing root metaphors that frame the nature of the analogues that are considered as appropriate. The way in which iconic metaphors like “individualism,” “freedom,” “environment,” and so forth, encode the cognitive schema worked out in earlier processes of analogic thinking creates the special problem that Fox (or any other theorist who is challenging current ways of thinking) has to deal with. That is, in order to establish a new iconic metaphor that

will become a taken for granted part of public discourse he has to establish a basis for accepting a new root metaphor that will give legitimacy to his process of analogic thinking. It is interesting to note that he uses science as the root metaphor that gives authority to understanding reality as “a single unfolding reality.”

In effect, the cognitive schemata that represent the Western form of cultural storage are a constant problem for Fox. They are both present in the words that represent the view of reality he is against, and in his use of words that constitute the “new basis” of understanding. This process of cultural storage and reproduction, even when challenged by a highly reflective person like Fox, is a reminder that the symbolic foundations of a culture both precede and remain an integral aspect of the “individual’s” choices and ways of understanding. The major question posed by this aspect of the human condition relates to how the root metaphors of a cultural group can be changed. The root metaphor that represents the individual as possessing a will (the Christian meta-narrative) and the reworking of this root metaphor by Cartesian thinkers in a way that strips the individual of any group (cultural and historical) identity dictate the scenario that Fox followed so faithfully. That is, the root metaphor dictates that a rational approach be taken to establishing a new root metaphor— even though the root metaphor that dictates this approach was not the outcome of a rational process, but rather of more complex forces associated with powerful evocative experiences and mythic narratives of Western cultural groups.

The recognition that cultures are based on different root metaphors leads to another problem not addressed by Fox; namely, that his articulation both of the problem (human impact on ecosystems) and the solution, (transpersonal ecology) may be understood in entirely different ways by members of other cultures. A Hindu from India, a Muslim from Iran, and a Confucian from rural China would each in their own way put a different interpretation on the human/environment relationship. To take a specific example of how daunting the cultural factor is, we can take the example of how Indo-European languages involve the use of count nouns (which parenthetically characterizes Fox’s desire to work out an abstract definition of the self), and how Chinese involves the use of mass nouns. Ron and Suzanne Scollon, in interpreting Chad Hansen’s research into the language/ontology differences that separate Chinese from Indo-European language communities, summarize the distinction as follows:

The two crucial aspects of count nouns are that they take pluralization (‘a horse,’ ‘the horse’). Given the philosophical problem of determining what is a horse, to take an example not at all at random, to the Platonic mind no particular horse has all and only the characteristics of ‘horseness’.

The use of pluralization and articles to frame nouns, so the argument goes, leads to “definition by analysis, description, proto-type, observation, nihilism” —

-where the real world is understood as examples of abstract forms. In contrast to this epistemological orientation, with its emphasis on member and set distinctions that characterize abstract/theoretical thought, the Scollons' (following Hansen's analysis) argue that "what is significant about a mass noun (which characterize Chinese) is that matter is conceived as extended 'stuff.' The crucial questions which arise, then, are not regarding the ideal characteristics which define the stuff, but the boundaries between one kind of stuff and another kind of stuff. "In other words," conclude the Scollons, "Hansen believes that Chinese mass nouns have given rise to an ontology of form and substance rather than an ontology of idea and prototype." 5 This fundamental difference in use of count and mass nouns that separate the two language groups leads to a Chinese ontology characterized by "definition, by example, discrimination, boundary marking, interpretation, Taoism." 6 Without going into how these differences get played out in terms of how Chinese understand the human/environment relationship (which, according to the Scollons, is profoundly different from the Western romanticized view of Chinese people as being at home in nature) it is sufficient to present this as an example of the challenge facing any attempt to work out a transpersonal ecology that does not take account of differences in cultural epistemologies.

## **Ideology**

The connection between ideology and culture is brought out in Clifford Geertz's definition: "Cultural patterns-religious, philosophical, aesthetic, scientific, ideological—are 'programs'; they provide a template or blueprint for the organization of social and psychological processes, much as genetic systems provide such a template for the organization of organic processes." 7 Ideology, when understood as a schema of understanding reproduced through a discursive formation of language, consciousness, and social practice, brings out the more political aspects of the symbol systems that constitute a culture. Thus, the political cannot be separated from the exercise of power, which in its most rudimentary sense involves, as Michel Foucault puts it, "an action upon an action...[that] structures the possible field of actions of others." 8 An ideology, following Foucault's way of understanding, is the regime of Truth used to legitimate beliefs and practices. It also frames what will be attended to and what will not be seen, and provides the language that aligns individual thought and action with the ideology's mapping of reality.

Keeping the earlier warning in mind about the multiple expression of culture, and thus ideologies, I would like to bring into focus the ideological issues raised by Fox's transpersonal ecology. Arne Naess' "Ecosophy T" will be brought into the discussion because his more fully elaborated social/political views raise in a more immediate way the question of alignment between writings on ecosophy and the contending ideological traditions that have been most visible during the period of modernization in the West. Although each tradition has had many

mutations on the themes and assumptions of the parent ideology, it would be safe to identify them in two distinct discourses: liberalism and conservatism. Although both academics and the general public often introduce confusion into political discussions by mistakingly using the term “conservative” when they are actually referring to ideas and values that have their roots in Classical Liberalism, it is essential for reasons I shall bring up later to identify the schemata of understanding that separate these two positions.

Stephen Toulmin’s identification of modernity with the written, universal, general, and timeless, and the pre-modern (and I would argue, post-modern) with the oral, particular, local, and timely, is one way to represent the basic differences that separate liberal from conservative ideologies. 9 For our purposes, the most fundamental distinctions can be framed in terms of a somewhat different set of characteristics. If we consider the expressions of liberalism (technocratic and emancipatory varieties that have dominated the discourse within the field of education, and the various interpretations that have guided the use of the state and technology to achieve social progress) a shared set of core assumptions stand out. These include a linear view of time that has been fused with the assumption that change is progressive, a view of rationality as an individualistic activity that has as its primary purpose the demystification of embeddedness in tradition, a view of the individual as autonomous in the sense that the realization of freedom requires not being bound by responsibilities to place and to a community of memory, and finally, it is the judgment, perspective, and interpretation of the individual that has ultimate authority for assessing the evidence and moral norms. In a word, liberalism emphasizes an experimental approach to life, with the expansion of the individual’s sense of freedom and personal meaning being the ultimate manifestation of progress.

The core beliefs of liberalism are now a taken for granted aspect of modern consciousness, and thus treated as culture-free. They are also based on an anthropocentric view of the world. As a schema for organizing both psychical self-identity dimensions of everyday life, as well as the patterns that regulate relationships and uses of technologies— to return to Geertz’s way of connecting ideology with culture—it becomes important to raise the question of whether one can embrace simultaneously both Fox’s formulation of a transpersonal ecology and the core beliefs of liberalism. To put it another way, if we begin to consider the actual cultural patterns that would be consistent with Fox’s transpersonal ecology would it become necessary to abandon the core beliefs of liberalism? An even broader formulation of the question would be: can the ecological crisis also be understood as a crisis of liberal ideology? Will a sustainable form of culture in the West require the adoption of a more conservative set of ideological principles?

As Fox provides few clues as to the cultural patterns that would encode and thus reproduce a life style that represents the principle of personal identification with all life, it is necessary to turn to Arne Naess’ articulation of what he calls

“Ecosophy T” in order to get an answer to the above questions. Several of Naess’ statements suggest that Ecosophy T would lead to the rejection of one of the most fundamental tenets of liberalism—the autonomy of the individual. Writes Naess: “the identity of the individual, ‘that I am something’, is developed through interaction with a broad manifold, organic and inorganic. There is no completely isolatable I, no isolatable social unit.” 10 And in the following statement the self, as a distinct entity with a will and rational capacity for self-direction, nearly disappears entirely: “the ecological outlook is developed through an identification so deep that one’s own self is no longer delimited by the personal ego or the organism.” 11 The articulation of the logical norms that guide Naess’ own version of Ecosophy T frames self-realization as “the higher the level of Self-realisation attained by anyone, the more its further increase depends upon the Self-realisation of the other” and finally, “complete self-realisation of anyone depends upon that of all.”12

Naess’ arguments for adjusting technological and economic practices, as well as other patterns of community life, to the principles of ecosophy suggest that cultural sustainability might require a conservative ideology—one that might be called cultural/bio-conservatism in order to separate it from the anthropocentric forms of conservatism characteristic of Western thinking since the time of Burke. Naess’ statement, for example, that “self-reliance...is only possible within a coherent, local, logical, and natural community” suggests that the social practice of ecosophy would be nearly identical with many of the cultural characteristics of bio-regionalism. The cultural praxis of bio-regional groups, whether we are using traditional cultures like the Hopi or the writings of contemporary advocates of bio-regionalism like Gary Snyder and Peter Berg, appear to be based on essential values and assumptions that can only be described ideologically as conservative. But there is another dimension to Naess’ thinking that suggest a continuing commitment the basic tenets of liberalism.

The ideological ambivalence can be seen in how he reframes the reader’s relationship with the arguments he lays before them:

We study ecophilosophy, but to approach practical situations involving ourselves, we aim to develop our own ecosophies. In this book I introduce one ecosophy, arbitrarily called Ecosophy T. You are not expected to agree with all of its values and paths of derivation, but to learn the means of developing your own systems or guides, say, Ecosophy X, Y, or Z. Saying ‘your own’ does not imply that the ecosophy is in any way an original creation by yourself. It is enough that it is a kind of total view which you feel at home with, ‘where you philosophically belong’. Along with one’s own life, it is always changing. 13

The statement that “you are not expected to agree...but to learn the means for developing your own systems or guides, say, Ecosophies X, Y, or Z” (italics

added) reflects the liberal assumption that decisions should be based on the free choice and rational judgment of the individual. Locating the ultimate authority for this decision within the individual would be totally inconceivable in cultures based on pre-modern cosmologies. The templates for the “organization of social and psychological processes” would be encoded in the language patterns used to communicate about relationships—and they would be learned at a taken for granted level.

The approach of Naess and Fox to the problem of how to create a new basis of social life that will be ecologically in balance privileges the ideology of liberalism in another way. Both rely upon rational thought and a literacy based form of discourse—which are cultural amplifiers of a form of liberalism (particularly a de-contextualized pattern of thinking and the privileging of the individual’ interpretation) that has contributed to the degradation of the environment. That is, they are attempting to establish the foundations upon which a new culture can be built. But the mixing of ideological genres has the effect of putting Naess and Fox in a double bind where their very similar approaches strengthen the very cultural orientations they want to replace.

As these preliminary observations suggest, the relation of ideology to a fully developed ecosophy needs to be addressed more directly. My own sense of the matter is that the translation of the central principles of ecosophy into practices people can recognize and identify with will require acknowledging the cultural/ideological dimensions of these principles. This, in turn, may enable us to ground the cosmology that situates humans within the larger ecosystems of daily practice—in much the same way as Native American and other traditional cultures worked it out. But it will involve being clearer about the ideological traditions that are most consistent with living within the sustaining capacities of the Earth’s ecosystems. This guiding ideology, I suspect, will turn out to have many of the characteristics of philosophical conservatism. But it will be framed in terms of a root metaphor that is closer to what Fox and Naess are attempting to articulate in their more rational way. Indeed, sustainability suggests a conserving rather than an experimental-change oriented schema of understanding; it also suggests the primacy of the community (expanded to include the biotic community) rather than that of the autonomous individual. Lastly, it also suggests more emphasis on oral traditions, both as a means of expanding participatory relationships and as a means of transmitting to the next generation the moral sense of order that has enabled the culture to exist on a sustainable basis. These are the essential principles of conservatism, but not of the distorted form of conservatism that, in actuality, has its roots in Classical Liberal thinking.

The question of what constitutes the most appropriate ideological framework for addressing the cultural patterns threatening the viability of the Earth’s ecosystems is particularly relevant to the issues raised by Fox and Naess. The segment of the population most likely to think seriously about the implications of the ideas of Fox and Naess will not be, for the most part, the people who are

already living in the kind of cultural/bio-conservative communities that Wendell Berry and Gary Snyder write about. Instead, they are more likely to be university educated and thus deeply imbued with the modern liberal mind set—with its emphasis on the authority of theory, the progressive nature of change, and the need to center authority in the judgment of the individual. The irony is that many of these more politically conscious and activist people in the environmental movement are attempting to use this liberal ideology as the basis for addressing how to live in a sustainable relationship with the rest of the environment. The solutions, when they are not reflective of the technocratic liberal's penchant to use the legislative authority of the state to affect change, serve to reinforce the core assumptions and values of the liberal ideology that has helped to put us on our current environmentally destructive pathway. That a form of cultural/bio-conservatism may be more suitable in the decades ahead may become more obvious if the writings on ecosophy would contextualize theory through the use of cultural analogues—like using traditional groups who have evolved cultural patterns that represent the “individual” as morally obligated to respect the other patterns of life that make up an eco-system. More clarity about the ideological principles that are compatible with living sustainable lives may also help people bridge the gap between the highly abstract formulations of Fox (and to a lesser extent, Naess) and everyday practices.

## Semiotics

Fox's formulation of a transpersonal ecology and Naess' Ecosophy T help to clarify the conceptual implications of situating the person as an integral part of a larger whole, but whether this logocentric approach, by itself, will have a significant influence on the course of human behavior is indeed problematic. Without denying the importance of their respective efforts I would like to again suggest that the most powerful leverage points for affecting change are at the level of culture, and that while rational arguments may be an important part of the change process, the message systems that characterize a culture play a more significant role in constituting and sustaining people's sense of “reality.”

Semiotics and the sociology of knowledge represent two areas of inquiry that have evolved somewhat different vocabularies for illuminating the “reality” constituting processes of culture. Because semiotics seems to provide the more useful vocabulary for understanding the relation between sign, codes and messages, I shall frame the following discussion under its banner, even though the language of the sociology of knowledge is more suited for addressing other aspects of the “reality” constituting process. By incorporating insights from the latter I will be able to avoid the lack of cultural contextualization that the reader encounters in the more standard treatments of semiotics, such as in Umberto Eco's *A Theory of Semiotics*. A key insight of the sociology of knowledge (the Alfred Schutz, Peter Berger, Thomas Luckmann stream, that is) is that what the person experiences as “real” is constituted, sustained, and renegotiat-

ed through the multiple forms of communication that, collectively, characterize a culture. In effect, the person is able to think and communicate with others as her/his intersubjective self becomes grounded in the same symbolic systems that significant others in society take for granted. From a sociology of knowledge perspective, there can never be an autonomous person in the sense of knowing an unmediated world or creating her/his own self-identity. Communication, according to the sociology of knowledge theorists, is the ongoing process that reinforces, with occasional lapses and disruptions that create social moments of liminality, both a self-identity and the taken for granted attitude toward the socially acquired interpretative frameworks of understanding. Clifford Geertz's way of understanding culture ("the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood and their world view—the picture they have of the sheer actuality are, their most comprehensive ideas of order") simply provides a more grounded texture to the more theoretical and de-contextualized insights of the sociology of knowledge. To summarize the key insights of the sociology of knowledge that will help frame the following discussion of semiotics; (1) the person's taken for granted sense of "reality" is socially constituted; (2) what is "real" is dependent upon multiple pathways and patterns of communication; (3) the cognitive schemas acquired through communication with significant others become internalized as the individual's intersubjective self; and (4) the socially shared typifications, assumptions, and categories that provide the schemas necessary for thought and communication are also part of the self-identity process.

With its emphasis on the constitutive role of the signifier, semiotics helps to illuminate the communicative process in terms of the coded messages in texts. In terms of culture, semiotics help us recognize how culture—the preparation of a meal and the setting of a table, store windows and walkways, the design of houses, the noises of public spaces, and so forth—communicate encoded messages that, in turn, become meaningful to the person who has been unconsciously educated to be open only to these particular messages. In effect semiotics help us to recognize that communication is more complex than spoken, written, and bodily systems. The tone of voice, color of a billboard, positioning of the body on a television commercial, number of available ice cream flavors, patterns of forest clear cutting, etc., are "texts" that communicate messages that are far more complex and formative in terms of the person's behavioral/thought patterns than what is grasped at the level of conscious awareness. This plethora of signifiers reproduce the cultural codes that reflect, like in the process of analogic thinking, an earlier mental ecology with its signifiers framed by the categories and assumptions that make up its symbolic world.

When culture is understood in terms of the multiple processes of semiosis that help to constitute what the person experiences as real (both in terms of the meaning of the context and self in relation to context) it becomes quite evident that addressing the cultural aspects of the ecological crisis will require more than the rational articulation of how to understand the identity of self as part

of a larger process of “Self- realization.” The reader can be convinced on a rational level that both Fox and Naess have, in their own ways, laid out convincing arguments; and they can finish reading the latest State of the World fully convinced that the evidence of changes in ecosystems indicates serious trouble ahead. But in moving from one modality of communication, which involves its own distinct system of signifiers and formative codes, to others—such as the shopping mall, freeway, or television program— a totally different set of messages will be encountered. Even for the person who accepts the evidence of environmental degradation, the “reality” reinforced through the other everyday patterns of semiosis is that of plentitude—even an excess that must be consumed if society is to create the optimum conditions for further advances in technology. Supermarkets, television commercials, and new car lots are “texts” organized to communicate a sense of reality that reinforces consumerism. Aside from the use of “green labelling” in some supermarkets there are no signifiers that might lead to an awareness that the “products” were created through the use of technologies that further weaken the viability of the soil, put more toxins into the environment, and further destroy old growth forests. For persons who have not read Fox, Naess, and the Worldwatch Institute reports, and who generally regard media coverage of ecological disasters as a further threat to accustomed forms of employment, the most prevalent patterns of semiosis will help sustain as “real” a world of abundance that requires only that the paycheck keep coming in.

Addressing the individual/cultural aspects of the ecological crisis requires a careful study of the “reality” constituted through the various modalities of semiosis, and consideration of how to affect changes at the level of cultural communication. In effect, the reality constituting messages of the everyday world should more accurately reflect the actual conditions of the environment. A second reason for turning attention to understanding culture from a semiotic perspective is that signifiers can be utilized to construct a world of meanings and relationships that can lead to a major shift in the orientation of a cultural group. A study of the Balinese, for example, indicates a culture highly developed in the areas of art, music, dance, drama, and storytelling. J. Stephen Lansing’s film, “The Three Worlds of the Balinese” and Clifford Geertz’s essay on “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight,” to cite two examples that deal with different aspects of their highly complex symbolic world, bring out the patterns of semiosis that frame all the cycles of existence as moral in nature. The aesthetic richness of their lives contrasts sharply with their lack of interest in technological innovations. Unlike in our cultural settings, machines are simply not part of the semiotic systems they encounter through touch, sight, smell, and sound. But this lack of emphasis does not mean they are lacking in technological knowledge. The way in which the ceremonies associated with the water temples that regulate the complex system of irrigation of the countryside, allowing for a stable agricultural practice that has lasted for hundreds of years, suggests otherwise.

The challenge here is not to transform ourselves into a copy of the Balinese, but

rather to develop the cultural patterns of semiosis that will expand our sense of meaning and participation in a manner that does not contribute to the further destruction of natural systems. An awareness of culture in terms of a semiotic perspective may help us affect changes at a prereflective level of awareness and meaning that is beyond the reach of the printed word. Thus, the real challenge is to broaden the approach to ecosophy in a way that takes into account the primacy of culture—in all its dimensions.

## Notes

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