

Powerful Memes from 1957 – Footprints of Conscious Evolution?

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Will social historians of the future track the paths of memes¹ from generation through generation, as today's scientists track genes? If they do, there's one amazing 20th century conference that's bound to attract their attention.

It had a star-studded cast. Initiated by historian Pitirim Sorokin and chaired by psychologist Abraham Maslow, the 1957 conference brought together professors of physics and philosophy, psychology and mathematics, anthropology and theology – even a Zen master.² Its purpose was to determine whether a science of human values was possible. Its lasting impact may be immeasurable.

Most participants were born outside the USA. Many had lived through wars or revolutions and were deeply committed to peace and "the sane society". Inevitably, as they explored human values, they were discussing the fundamentals of humanity itself. The conference report, published as a book called *New Knowledge in Human Values*³, makes fascinating reading. But rather than reviewing the conference itself, I want to speculate about the journeys of the memes created on those autumn days in Boston.

As conference participants carried them back to their institutions, these fresh ideas would have cascaded into the vibrant student bodies of the late 1950s. Soon they must have spilled into the wider community, a community about to become engaged in the social transformation movements of the 1960s.... peace, human rights, women's liberation, civil rights and more. How hard would it be to follow the trail?

The conference was born of Sorokin's conviction that love – creative altruism – was the only hope for a successful future for humanity: "Without a notable increase of ... creative unselfish love in man and in the human universe, all fashionable prescriptions for prevention of wars and for building of a new order cannot achieve their purpose." The hippie movement said "make love, not war". Coincidence?

The professor's belief in creative altruism made a powerful partnership with Maslow's desire to understand human motivation, especially our astonishing ability to ignore what we know. "Throughout history, learned men have set out before mankind the rewards of virtue, the beauties of goodness, the intrinsic desirability of psychological health and self-fulfillment. It's all as plain as ABC, and yet most people perversely refuse to step into the happiness and self-respect that is offered them," Maslow wrote.

It seems unlikely that the professors would have expected to transform modern American culture with their conference. But is it just another coincidence that since the late 1950s there have been deep and widespread social shifts in the US? Shifts that, according to researchers Paul Ray and Sherry Ruth Anderson, have been unusually fast? In spite of the shadows threatening global politics today, Ray and Anderson's work suggests that the kind of transformation that Sorokin and Maslow saw as essential to human progress could be on the way.

"Since the 1960s, 26 per cent of the adults in the United States – 50 million people – have made a com-

prehensive shift in their worldview, values, and way of life – their culture, in short," they wrote.⁴ "These creative, optimistic millions are at the leading edge of several kinds of cultural change, deeply affecting not only their own lives but our larger society as well. We call them the Cultural Creatives."

The timing of this shift is interesting. As recently as the early 1960s, less than five per cent of the population was engaged in making these momentous changes – too few to measure in surveys. In just over a generation, that proportion grew steadily to 26 per cent. That may not sound like much in this age of nanoseconds, but on the timescale of whole civilizations where major developments are measured in centuries, it is shockingly quick.

"And it's not only the speed of this emergence that is stunning.... Officials of the European Union, hearing of the numbers of Cultural Creatives in the United States, launched a related survey in each of their fifteen countries in September 1997. To their amazement, the evidence suggested that there are at least as many Cultural Creatives across Europe as we reported in the United States."

A later study by Richard Florida, Professor of Economic Development at Carnegie Mellon, notes a similar shift. He counts his "creatives" at 38 million people, or 30 per cent of all employed Americans.⁵ His special focus is the connection between social change and community development: "why cities without gays and rock bands are losing the economic development race."

Other studies suggest shifts like these may be a manifestation of growing maturity, to be expected from the learning journey of "adult development". George Valliant's report on ageing⁶ identifies the emotional maturing that often accompanies the ageing process. Don Beck and Chris Cowan, building on the work of Abraham Maslow and Clare Graves, promote the rainbow concept of *Spiral Dynamics* to describe progress through stages of values. Other stage development theorists, from Piaget on, also track the journey of human maturation. If we tie these ideas to today's ageing populations in the west, it is tempting to hope that the

ugliness of current world politics could be overtaken by a much more compassionate approach to global leadership. But don't hold your breath: Ken Wilber argues that "boomeritis" is hijacking the maturing process with the massive egocentricity and narcissism of the boomer generation.

Back in the economy that many see as the real world, the cultural shift is sufficiently visible to win attention from advertisers and marketers who track changes that affect consumer behaviour and the memes they call brands. What they found led to the birth of "viral marketing" – a concept that explores how ideas (or memes) flash through markets by contagion – like fires or epidemics. Malcolm Gladwell's book, *The Tipping Point: how little things make a big difference*⁸, explains this concept, and looks at why certain pathways are more effective than others in spreading ideas. It's one of a growing number of reports on the behaviour of living networks that will be essential reading for those future researchers studying the history of memes.

But there's still a paradox. On the one hand, agency strategists are tracking the "luxury creep" of the affluent society and advising their clients on ever more aggressive ways to promote ever more indulgent products and services (cosmetic surgery on feet and genitals, diamond-studded pens). On the other, these bellwethers of the consumer society are reporting massive value shifts in the other direction, toward social conscience and environmental responsibility.

Madelyn Hochstein, president of the Daniel Yankelovich research group, told a New York audience last year that the US is entering a new era "which will see new behaviours, aspirations, employee expectations, public issues, business thinking... and new trends." From the high-tech crash through 9/11 to corporate scandals, suddenly America shifted from feeling "triumphant" to feeling uncertain. Yet for all the uncertainty and distrust, the mood was not pitch black: according to Hochstein, new conditions plus social learning have created a search for significance: "I make a difference."

Yankelovich tracked socio-historical steps from "Moving Up" (1940s - 1960s), through "Moving Out" (1960s and 1970s) to "Quality of Life" (1980s-1990s) and now to "The Valuable Life" (near future). In this imminent period, they say, goals include adding meaning to life – people want to be significant; to make a difference; and to preserve life – to find security. Implications for organisations include a demand for higher ethical standards from companies, recognition of the importance of "trust equity" for brands and businesses; the growing importance of a reputation for innovation; a need to help stakeholders cope with uncertainty; rising populism; and a new employee agenda.

All these social changes are, of course, paralleled by shifts in what we see as success, and how we measure it. Future historians will find rich material in the causal relationships between the changing values and the changing performance measures of early 21st century western society – aided by the untiring efforts of futurists like Hazel Henderson. The UNDP launched its Human Development Index in 1990, the World Bank its Wealth Index (which included non-economic measures) in 1995; and by 1998 fifteen new sets of indicators had been introduced around the world. The United Nations inaugurated its own global reporting initiative in April 2002 (www.globalreporting.org).

John Elkington's notion of the "triple bottom line" – the idea that organisations should report their social and environmental performance as well as their financial performance – has caught on fast in the corporate environment, even if we suspect more rhetoric than reality, here and there. At the national level, the shift from economic rationalism toward emerging "hope and happiness" measures is gathering speed. The Australia Institute's annual Genuine Progress Indicator, for example, takes account of much broader measures than the GDP and, with the Institute's assistance, the Australian Bureau of Statistics is beginning to collect new data.

In the UK, University of Warwick professor of economics, Andrew Oswald, said that he expects happiness surveys and job satisfaction surveys to become a central part of British life.

Researchers in Europe and Asia are exploring similar shifts in the way we measure our prosperity and wellbeing, with the word "happiness" appearing more often. Even the *New Scientist* recognises happiness as a new science, in a special feature (October 4 and 11, 2003): "Over the past decade, the study of happiness...has morphed into a bona fide discipline. You can find 'professors of happiness' at leading universities, 'quality of life' institutes the world over, and thousands of research papers."

Is this new? Or the recycling of ancient wisdom?

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Professor of Psychology at the Peter F. Drucker School of Management at Claremont Graduate University and director of the Quality of Life Research Center, argued that the pursuit of happiness is not a wheel that needs to be reinvented. Like Maslow, he points out that there is much knowledge accumulated in culture, ready to help people extract patterns from the order achieved by past generations that will help them avoid disorder in their own minds and lives.

"Great music, architecture, art, poetry, drama, dance, philosophy and religion are there for anyone to see as examples of how harmony can be imposed on chaos," Professor Csikszentmihalyi says.⁹ "Yet so many people ignore them, expecting to create meaning in their lives by their own devices."

He says that to do so is like trying to build up material culture from scratch in each generation. "No one in his right mind would want to start reinventing the wheel, fire, electricity and the million objects and processes that we now take for granted as part of the human environment. Instead we learn how to make these things by receiving ordered information from teachers, from books, from models, so as to benefit from the knowledge of the past and eventually surpass it. To discard the hard-won information on how to live accumulated by our ancestors, or to expect to discover a viable set of goals all by oneself, is misguided hubris. The chances of success are about as good as in trying to build an electron microscope without the tools and knowledge of physics."

In a later book, Csikszentmihalyi develops his own evolving meme.¹⁰ Like Sorokin, he suggests that the path to a better world is through individual transformation. Based on key principles of evolution, he sees this as a path towards greater complexity – more differentiation with more integration. This is an idea that scales from the micro to the macro: "The Soviet Union, however large, was not a complex society primarily because its monolithic central administration and ideology stifled personal initiative and diversity, and hence it imploded because of insufficient differentiation. The United States, in contrast, is highly differentiated; the threat to its complexity comes from the opposite direction: an erosion of common values and norms of conduct that may result in a society that disintegrates for lack of integration."

Moral choices usually involve complexity, he says. What we consider right brings about harmony, while the wrong choice causes chaos and confusion.

"In every human group ever known, notions about what is right and what is wrong have been among the central defining concerns of the culture.... every social system must develop memes to keep the intergroup harmony that genes no longer can provide. These memes constitute the moral system, and generally they have been the most successful attempts humans have developed to give a desirable direction to evolution."

The professor discusses the evolutionary struggle of memes for attention in people's minds: "it could be said that without realizing it, people have been engaged all along in *eumemics*" (a combination of the Greek for "good" and for "imitation"). He notes that the great moral systems across the world, Buddhism, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Zoroastrian are congruent in essential respects and reflects that all of them could recognize and sympathize with the concept of a guided evolution toward complexity if they were able to see beyond the superficial differences between their creeds.

"Contemporary psychology has not progressed far beyond these insights from tradi-

tional religions....this general pattern fits Abraham Maslow's 'hierarchy of needs', Jane Loevinger's theory of 'ego development', Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of 'moral development', George Valliant's 'hierarchy of defenses' and most other accounts of how people can cultivate a more complex self. In each case, progress means freeing oneself from genetic commands, then from cultural constraints, and finally from the desires of the self," he wrote.

"All ethical systems – religious or psychological – are efforts to direct evolution by channeling thought and behavior away from the past and into the future. The past – represented by the determinism of the instincts, the weight of tradition, the desires of the self – is always stronger. The future – represented by the ideals of a life that is freer, more compassionate, more in tune with the reality that transcends our needs – is by necessity weaker, for it is an abstraction, a vision of what *might* be...."

"If we are to direct evolution toward greater complexity, we have to find an appropriate moral code to guide our choices. It should be a code that takes into account the wisdom of tradition, yet is inspired by the future rather than the past; it should specify right as being the unfolding of the maximum individual potential joined with the achievement of the greatest social and environmental harmony."

Is this a new generation meme that will help individuals on their own life journeys to make the changes hoped for by Sorokin and despaired of by Maslow? Individual and social transformation via ever greater complexity? And has it evolved "eumemically", as Csikszentmihalyi implies, through generations that track back to Maslow and the Russian professor and their war-torn colleagues, and to the ancient wisdom from which all of them would have drawn?

There'll certainly be no shortage of material for those future researchers to explore.

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Notes

1. The word "meme" was introduced by the British biologist Richard Dawkins (*The Selfish Gene*) to describe cultural information that gets passed from one person to another and distributed through social systems, much as genes are distributed through human biological systems. It comes from the Greek word mimesis (imitation) because cultural instructions are passed on by example and imitation. Csikszentmihalyi defines a meme as "any permanent pattern of matter or information produced by an act of human intentionality. Thus a brick is a meme, and so is Mozart's Requiem."
2. Participants and the posts they held at the time of the conference were as follows: Gordon W. Allport, Professor of Psychology, Harvard University; Ludwig von Bertalanffy, Director, Biological Research, Mt Sinai Hospital; Jacob Bronowski, Director of the UK Coal Research Establishment; Theodosius Dobzhansky, Professor of Zoology, Columbia University; Erich Fromm, Psychoanalyst and Professor, Michigan State University; Kurt Goldstein, Professor of Psychology, Brandeis University; Robert S. Hartman, Professor of Philosophy and Research Professor, National University of Mexico; Gyorgy Kepes, Professor of Visual Design, MIT; Dorothy Lee, Leader of the Cultural Anthropology Program, the Merrill-Palmer School, Detroit; Henry Margenau, Professor of Physics and Natural Philosophy, Yale University; Abraham H. Maslow, Professor of Psychology, Brandeis University; Pitirim A. Sorokin, Director of Harvard Research Centre in Creative Altruism, Professor of Sociology, Emeritus, Harvard University; Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, Philosopher and Professor Emeritus, Otani University, Kyoto; Paul Tillich, Professor, Harvard University; Walter A. Weisskopf, Professor of Economics, Roosevelt University, Chicago. Bertalanffy may be of special interest to futurists as the father of "organismic biology" (which, "in contrast to the then-dominating mechanistic view, emphasised the necessity of investigating an organism and its laws as a whole"), the theory of open systems and more.... another set of memes to follow?
3. *New Knowledge in Human Values*, Abraham H. Maslow, Ed., Henry Regnery Company, Chicago 1959 Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 58-11051 ISBN 0-8092-6136-7. Gateway Edition (1970) with Harper & Row, Publishers.
4. *The Cultural Creatives: How 50 Million People are Changing the World*, Paul H. Ray, Ph.D., and Sherry Ruth Anderson, Ph.D., Harmony Books New York 2000, ISBN 0-609-60467-8.
5. *The Rise of the Creative Class: How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community, Everyday Life*, Richard Florida, Basic Books, 2002, ISBN 0-465-02476-9. See also www.creativeclass.org
6. *Ageing Well*, George Vaillant, Scribe Publications, Australia with Little, Brown & Co., NY 2002 ISBN 0 908011 64 4.
7. *Boomeritis: a novel that will set you free*, Ken Wilber, Shambhala Publications, Boston 2002 ISBN 1-57062-801-7.
8. *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Make a Big Difference*, Little, Brown & Co., 2000 ISBN 0-316-31696-2 (HC) 0-316-54662-4 (PB).
9. *Flow: the psychology of optimal experience*, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Harper & Row, 1990 ISBN 0-06-092043-2.
10. *The Evolving Self*, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, HarperCollins 1993 ISBN 0-06-016677-0. See also *Good Business* by the same author, Penguin 2003 ISBN 0-670-03196-8.
11. *Social and Cultural Dynamics*, P. Sorokin, American Book Company, 1937.
12. *Reconstruction of Humanity*, P. Sorokin, Beacon Press, 1948.

How it began....

The state of valuelessness... has come to its present dangerous point because all the traditional value systems ever offered to mankind have in effect proved to be failures (our present state proves this to be so). Furthermore, wealth and prosperity, technological advance, widespread education, democratic political forms, even honestly good intentions and avowals of good will have, by their failure to produce peace, brotherhood, serenity, and happiness, confronted us even more nakedly and unavoidably with the profundities that mankind has been avoiding by its busy-ness with the superficial.

We are reminded here of the 'neurosis of success'. People can struggle on hopefully, and even happily, for false panaceas so long as these are not attained. Once attained, however, they are soon discovered to be false hopes. Collapse and hopelessness ensue and continue until new hopes become possible.

We too are in an interregnum between old value systems that have not worked and new ones not yet born, an empty period which could be borne more patiently were it not for the great and unique dangers that beset mankind. We are faced with the real possibility of annihilation, and with the certainty of 'small' wars, of racial hostilities, and of widespread exploitation. Specieshood is far in the future.

The cure for this disease is obvious. We need a validated, usable system of human values, values that we can believe in and devote ourselves to because they are true rather than because we are *exhorted* to 'believe and have faith'.

And for the first time in history, many of us feel, such a system – based squarely upon valid knowledge of the nature of man, of his society, and of his works – may be possible.

Abraham H. Maslow

...the moral transformation of man and the man-made universe is the most important item on today's agenda of history. Without moral transformation in altruistic directions, neither new world wars and other catastrophes can be prevented nor a new – better and nobler – social order be built in the human universe. Without a notable increase of what we call creative unselfish love in man and in the human universe, all fashionable prescriptions for prevention of wars and for building of a new order cannot achieve their purpose.

For instance, one such fashionable prescription is a political reconstruction of all nations along the lines of American democracy. Despite the popularity of this belief, it is questionable. Tomorrow, hypothetically, you could have all nations reconstructed politically along the lines of the American brand of democracy; and yet such a reconstruction would neither prevent nor decrease the chances of new world wars or of bloody internal revolutions. Why? Because study of all the wars and important internal disturbances from 600 BC to the present time reveals that democracies are no less belligerent, no less militant, and no more orderly than autocracies.¹¹

This conclusion is unpleasant. Nevertheless, it is true.

Another favorite prescription against wars and bloody strife is more education and more schooling. Again, hypothetically, tomorrow you could have all men and women at the age of sixteen and over miraculously transformed into Ph.D.'s and super-Ph.D.'s. And yet, such a miraculous increase of education would not increase the chances of either civil or international wars. Why? Because the prevailing forms of education and the growth of science and technology do not curb or even decrease wars and bloody revolutions. From the tenth century up to the present time, the number of schools, beginning with kindergartens and ending with universities, the percentage of literacy, the number of scientific discoveries and technological inventions, have been continuously increasing, especially during the last two centuries. Despite this enormous educational, scientific, and technological progress the curve of wars (measured wither by frequency of wars or by the size of armies or by the amount of casualties per million population) has not gone down during these centuries. If anything, with great fluctuations, it has also gone up. The same is true of revolutions and revolts.¹² We are living in the most scientific, most technological, and most schooled century; and the same century happens to be the bloodiest of all the preceding recorded twenty-five centuries.

The same is true of other popular prescriptions against world wars and internal disturbances – such panaceas as the establishment of a universal capitalistic or communistic or socialistic economic organization. Even the so-called religious factor has failed to alter the pattern – if, by religion, we mean just a set of beliefs, dogmas, and rituals. Among the proofs for this statement we mention here our study of 73 converts of popular American and English evangelists. We wanted to know if the conversion of these 73 persons had changed their minds and, particularly, their overt behavior in altruistic directions, by making it nearer to the sublime precepts of the Sermon on the Mount? The result was not cheerful. Out of these 73 persons, only one has shown a tangible change of his personality and overt behavior. About one-half of the converts changed somewhat their speech reactions: instead of profanities they more frequently began to pronounce the name of 'Our Lord Jesus Christ' and so on, but their outward behaviour did not change at all; and the remaining half of the converts did not change even their speech reactions.

Pitirim Sorokin

