A HISTORY OF GRID AND GROUP CULTURAL THEORY

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Introduction: What is Grid and Group Cultural Theory? How Useful can it be in the Modern World?

It is a pleasure for me to reflect on the history of Grid-Group. I first described the idea in *Natural Symbols* (Douglas 1970), a kind of necessary sequel to *Purity and Danger* (1966). I now realise that it was a simple idea presented in a complicated way. After a late start it has been radically redesigned by creative collaborators whose work I will describe.

Back in the 1960's social anthropologists still felt it was necessary to vindicate the intelligence of colonial peoples, then known as "natives" or "primitives." A major objective of teaching and writing in anthropology was to attack something described by Levy Bruhl as "primitive mentality," which seemed to mean "primitive irrationality." Malinowski had started in the 1920's showing that the Trobrianders had rational customs and laws. In the 1930's Raymond Firth was original in focusing on the "primitive economics" of the Polynesians and found that the basic laws of supply, demand, and price applied in the rustic economies he studied. Evans-Pritchard made a frontal defence of Azande rationality. After World War II, Nadel and Gluckman followed up with the complexities of Nubian and Barotse legal systems. The very idea that the concept of "jurisprudence" could apply to "the natives" was innovative. In the 1950's and 60's we continued to dismantle intellectual barriers assumed to distinguish "Them" from "Us."

Purity and Danger (1966) was a book in that mode. I reversed the direction of enquiry. Not concerned to show that the typical institutions of modern society can be traced in the most exotic societies, I set out to show that the famously primitive concepts of pollution and taboo were with "Us" as much as with "Them." Ritual defilement should be brought under the same rubric as the rituals of spring cleaning and other domiciliary standards of hygiene. I postulated a universal cognitive block against matter out of place. Unclassifiables, I said, provoke cognitive discomfort and reactions of disgust, hence negative attitudes to slime, insects, and dirt in general. It was a Durkhemian thesis:

classification underwrites all attempts to co-ordinate activities, any thing that challenges the habitual classifications is rejected.

After publication I had the luck to talk about it at length with Basil Bernstein. He reproached my universalism. Some people feel no anxiety about dirt and disorder. Take an artist passionately involved in his painting, he said, the only disorder he minds about is on his palette and canvas. He can't be bothered to go to the toilet; he relieves himself without a qualm in the studio sink even if the coffee mugs are standing there. So Bernstein teased me to go on to the work that he had begun. The obvious next stage would be to differentiate between weak and strong classification systems.

Classification, like symbolising, is the creation of culture, or equally one could say that culture is the creation of classifying processes. Therefore the next task ahead was to attempt a typology of cultures based on a people's need for classification. It would have to emphasise the division of labour and the organisation of work. With this object I produced a crude typology intended to account for the distribution of values within a population. The account would show the connection between kinds of social organisation and the values that uphold them. It started modestly in 1970 as a simple model of the distribution of values. I plotted the main varieties of social organisation borrowing Bernstein's two-dimensional scheme of family organisations, and then derived logically compatible values for each variety. The emphasis on classification which figured largely in *Natural Symbols* (1970) was the first thing to be dropped as the theory developed.

The only materials you need to set up this form of analysis are two dimensions. Group (meaning a general boundary around a community) shows on the horizontal axis; and Grid (regulation), on the vertical. Individuals are expected to move, or be forced to move, across the diagram, according to choice, or according to circumstances.

Figure 1. The Grid Group Diagram.

Isolate	Positional
Individualist	Enclave

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The group dimension measures how much of people's lives is controlled by the group they live in. An individual needs to accept constraints on his/her behaviour by the mere fact of belonging to a group. For a group to continue to exist at all there will be some collective pressure to signal loyalty. Obviously it varies in strength. At one end of the scale you are a member of a religious group though you only turn up on Sundays, or perhaps annually. At the other end there are groups such as convents and monasteries which demand full-time, life-time, commitment.

Apart from the external boundary and the requirement to be present, the other important difference between groups is the amount of control their members accept. This is supplied on the other dimension: grid gives a measure of structure. Some peoples live in a social environment where they are equally free of group pressure and of structural constraints. This is the zero start where everything has to be negotiated ad hoc. Moving along from zero to more comprehensive regulation the groups are likely to be more hierarchical.

Put the two dimensions together, group and regulation, you get four opposed and incompatible types of social control, and plenty of scope for mixing, modifying or shifting in between the extremes.

Figure 2. The Three Cultural Heroes, drawn by Christian Brunner.

The smug pioneer with his pickaxe, the stern bureaucrat with his briefcase, the holy man with his halo, they exemplify Max Weber's three types of rationality: bureaucracy, market, and religious charisma; at the same time as three of the grid-group cultures, positional, individualist, and sectarian enclave.

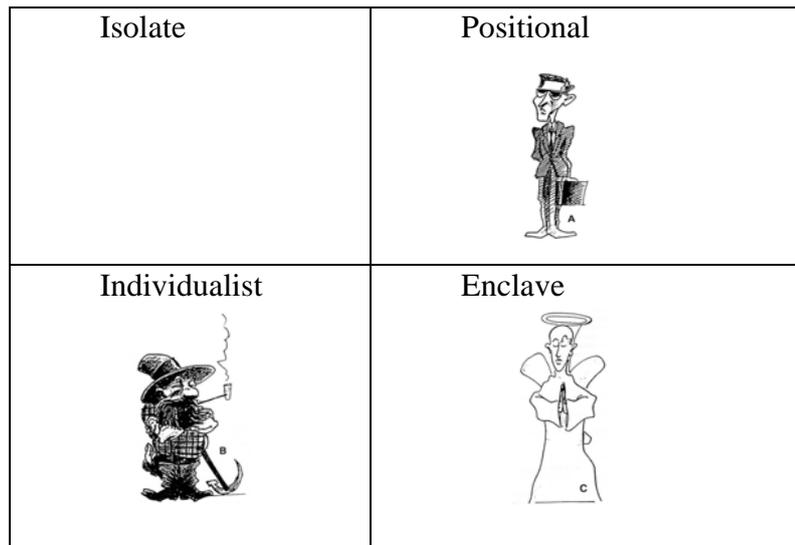| Isolate	Positional
Individualist	Enclave

Figure 3. The Three Heroes in their Grid-Group Slots.

At the extreme top right, strong on grid, strong on group, will be a society in which all roles are ascribed, all behaviour governed by positional rules, all the constituent groups contained within a comprehensive larger group. It is a hierarchy, perhaps despotic, perhaps consensual, the diagram does not show the political variables. Its cultural bias supports tradition and order. Roles are ascribed according to birth or gender or family, and ranked according to function and tradition. We originally called this sector "hierarchy" in the sense of a rational system. That word called forth so much flak from radical ideologists that I have switched to "positional" for a form of society that uses extensive classification and programming for solving problems of co-ordination.

Basil Bernstein used the terms "positional" and "personal" for two kinds of family control;[1] the first could apply to modern Japanese families, the second to British middle class families. In one type of family behaviour is controlled by reference to position. The rules would be based on gender, age and timing conventions. For example, at night there is no discussion about who goes to bed first. It depends on relative age. The youngest goes first, the eldest is privileged to go last. At meal times, each person has a set position at the table, they can't start to eat until everyone is seated. The time of day and the food are similarly classified. Household chores are allocated by age and gender, the eldest has the most responsibility; the boys do the rougher work, washing the car, emptying the dustbins, the girls do the bedrooms or ironing.

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[1] Basil Bernstein, *Class, Codes and Control*. London: Routledge, 1977.

In the other type, the children are entitled to demand explanations. They may challenge any rule, bedtime is negotiated individually, as everything else. Meal times are not fixed, seating is freely chosen, food is unpredictable. He called it "personal control" because justifications are based on personal feelings.

"Try to be quiet, Dad is feeling tired,"

"Don't squabble, Mum's got a headache,"

"Granddad will be sad if you refuse to kiss him,"

"If you were a worm, how would you like it if a little boy jumped on you?"

Bernstein found the positional system in working class or in aristocratic homes, the personal system in the middle classes. A number of excellent sociological studies of family structure have been based on this distinction, with grid-group measurements.

At each point, as we go round the diagram, we ask what sort of ideals, virtues and moral principles provide the motive to live in this strongly regulated way. It is certainly very effective for organising work, or fighting. In addition to its obvious efficiency, it usually has the appeal of rationality, balance, symmetry, and rewards for loyalty. On the cultural side its characteristic theory of justice takes status into account. This kind of society sustains itself with a cosmic theory of a hierarchical universe.

At the bottom right hand side, is a kind of community that also features a strongly bounded group. It has no ranking or grading rules for the relations between its members. This is given by the properties of the diagram. Who would want to live in such a society? What sort of motives would they have for organising themselves like that? We surmised that it would be suitable for a community of dissidents. A sect might be placed here on the diagram.

We always ask, "What would it be like to live in such a community?" At the beginning I thought that sectarian leaders are anxious to prevent individual defection and group fission. Field research has shown that this doesn't always hold (see below). Leaders of a sect support group boundaries by declaring all outsiders to be evil. Dealing with internal dissent is difficult for them: withdrawn from and outside the main society. They can't invoke the law to punish their offenders. Their only penalty for disaffection is expulsion but they don't want to use it. The danger of defection is why sectarian groups tend to have a black-and-white vision of the world.

The enclave community tends to be egalitarian because it repudiates the inequalities of the rejected outside world. Ranking and ordering are the usual ways of controlling jealousy. It is rash to try to organise an egalitarian community. Preferring

equality, such a group would be handicapped by problems of leadership, authority and decision making.[2] I will reserve to the end more about life in this quadrant as it has recently seen much theoretical development.

Extreme individualism, bottom left, is by definition weak both in group controls and in grid controls. The main form of control that is available here is by competition. Dominant positions are open to merit. This culture is bound to be at logger heads with the Positional culture and with the Sect. Individualism is where Max Weber's commercial society fits in, where the individual is only concerned with private benefit. Group commitment is weak here by definition. It is in principle an egalitarian society, but as it defers to wealth and power it fails to realise its egalitarian ideals.

One quadrant is still to be described. The extreme left hand top has strong grid controls, without any group membership to sustain individuals. Anyone who arrives here is a cultural isolate. Prisoners might be located here, or slaves and any strictly supervised servants, soldiers, or the very poor, or the Queen of England, hedged around as she is by protocol. Also, note that some individuals come voluntarily to this situation which avoids responsibility and pressure. The hermit or the monk may find it a benign culture to live in. They are free because they are alone. As far as public policy is concerned, Isolates attract no attention, no one asks for their opinion or takes them seriously in argument. Hence their reputation for apathy. Of this, more in connection with economic development.

This presents the first version of grid and group. It is coarse-grained; it is static and has no way of accounting for change. It rests on hidden assumptions. It had originally emerged from African ethnography as a way of trying to understand the distribution of ancestor cults, demons and witchcraft. So an early problem was how to adapt it for answering questions about modern society.

David Bloor showed the way in 1982 when he compared three types of universities in 19th-century Germany.[3] He examined the organization of mathematics departments, and found that the predicted correspondence between institutional forms and cultural values could also be traced in the choice of curriculum emphasis and selection of research topics. The various treatments of a famous mathematical anomaly depended on the sitting of the Mathematics departments within the grid/group typology

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[2] Mary Douglas, *How Institutions Think*, Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1986.
[3] David Bloor, "Polyhedra and the Abominations of Leviticus, Cognitive Styles in Mathematics." In Mary Douglas (Ed.) *Essays in the Sociology of Perception.* London: Routledge, 1982.

of cultures. With Celia Bloor, he followed on by using grid/group to compare attitudes to their work among twenty industrial scientists.[4]

In 1985 Steve Rayner worked with the mathematician, Jonathan Gross, to make a mathematical model of the relations between the elements of the model.[5] At the same time Gerald Mars was able to place dock-workers and hotel waiters and other occupations of industrial society on grid/group scales.[6] At this stage the main research focused on testing the strength of the hypotheses. Frank Hendriks extended the approach by applying it to public policy, He chose two cities with similar histories and backgrounds of industrialization, Munich and Birmingham. He compared their system of city planning and focused on traffic policy. The result was to use CT to explain why the citizens of Munich had more reason to be satisfied with the output of their planning than those of Birmingham.

These and other experiments have taught us that the research must work within a well understood empirical "world." Having chosen the time and place, and having regard to scale, the trick is to work out indicators of group and regulation while carefully observing the *ceteris paribus* rule.

At this point I must introduce Aaron Wildavsky's central contribution to the history of CT. In the sixties and seventies the western world was shaken to the core by anxiety about the dangers of nuclear power: the students revolted, the public protested against the pollution of the environment and against the Vietnam War. The anxieties were highly political. Sociologists were surprised at the anger against nuclear power. Only two decades ago public opinion had shown great confidence in nuclear fuels. Now they felt abhorrence. When Aaron Wildavsky, a policy analyst baffled by this topic became President of the Russell Sage Foundation in New York in 1976, he invited me to go there to work on culture.

I had a theory that applied to Africa. He wanted one to apply to political activists in modern California. By way of compromise we aimed at a general theory of culture,

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[4] Celia Bloor and David Bloor, "Twenty Industrial Scientists," In Mary Douglas (Ed.) *Essays in the Sociology of Perception*. London: Routledge, 1982.

[5] Steve Rayner and Jonathan Gross, *Measuring Culture*, New York, NY*:* Columbia University Press.

[6] Gerald Mars, *Cheats at Work: An Anthropology of Workplace Crime*. London: George Allen & Unwin *1982.*

and collaborated on the fashionable topic of risk.[7] The psychometric theories then in vogue explained perception of risk by reference to individual psychology. We responded by proposing the beginnings of grid-group as a tool for policy analysis.

Gradually, under Aaron's guidance, my originally intuitive theory unfolded to form a more explicit and better integrated idea of the relation between social organisation and culture. As it then stood, the diagram had nothing to say about power – which made it useless for politics. In 1982 Michael Thompson proposed to add a third dimension, to indicate the scope for individual manipulation (which I take as the dimension of power).[8] He also made room in the diagram for the "hermit," the reclusive person who survives without social ties.

The most important theoretical development by a long shot was based on the idea of each culture being self-defined by opposition to the others. In 1992 Michael Thompson and Aaron Wildavsky collaborated to produce a big textbook in which they examined the relations between cultures within the same community. They showed that any community has several cultures, and that each culture defines itself by contrast with the others. Those persons who share a culture maintain enthusiasm for it by charging the other cultures with moral failure. This was the point at which the title "grid and group" was superseded by Cultural Theory (CT henceforth).

The theory renamed and sharpened assumes now that four types of cultural bias are normally present in any collectivity. Each is based on a type of stable organisation that could not endure if the cultural underpinnings were eroded. All four will be at war with one another.

In the end, every type of social conflict is about types of organisation. Why do we settle for four types? Because this model is at once parsimonious and it is comprehensive. A hundred, or a million, types of cultural bias may be out there. But for explanatory value three, four or five types of social environment are enough to generate three, four or five distinct cosmologies. The brilliant stroke was to introduce the idea of competition between cultures. They compete for members, compete for prestige, compete for resources. What had started as a static mapping of cultures upon organisations was thereby transformed into a dynamic theoretical system. It made a double attack on

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[7] Mary Douglas and Aaron Wildavsky, *Risk and Culture: An Essay on the Selection of Technical and Environmental Dangers*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982.

[8] Michael Thompson, "A Three Dimensional Model." In Mary Douglas (Ed.) *Essays in the Sociology of Perception*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982.

methodological individualism and on philosophical relativism. It put cultural theory into the heart of policy analysis and ethical theory.

Benjamin Davy's philosophical book, *The Essential Injustice* (1997), illustrates the theme from disputes about disposing of nuclear waste. As the title suggests, it is essential for each culture to believe that the other cultures cherish wrong-headed concepts of justice, they are based on essentially immoral precepts. His analysis takes us far into the central theme of Cultural Theory, irreconcilable conflict.

Figure 4. French comment on cultural theory according to Christian Brunner (Prêtre, 1989): The dialogue of the deaf.

Figure 4. The Dialogue of the Deaf.

Here is a dispute between two who will never agree. No new facts will change the opinions of the pioneering individualist who cheerily asserts that all will be well, or those of the holy man who warns him of terrible dangers to be unleashed if he continues in his ways. Whatever information is tendered, their differences are irreconcilable. Current political contests between Christianity and Islam are in this class, so are the debates about global warming. For such important issues each side devotes large funds to research for new facts about the alleged dangers, but no new facts will resolve the issues. The views are irreconcilable because each party is speaking from a different cultural platform. The ideas exchanged stand for particular values embedded in interlocking institutions. Grid and group, or CT as it is now called, can deconstruct irreconcilable differences by identifying the particular type of civilisation which the culture upholds.

When the differences cannot be reconciled, the protagonists seem to be behaving irrationally. In cultural conflict compromise counts as betrayal. Opponents dismiss out of hand evidence from other kinds of institutions. According to CT, their intransigence is

neither irrational nor immoral. It expresses their loyalties and moral principles, and their responsibilities to other members of their society. The message for research is never to consider conflict of opinions without looking for the underlying conflict between institutional forms. Cultural attack and persecution are the spice of life for a community.

Culturally shared worldviews are steadied by supporting institutions. An isolated person can easily change an opinion because it is not stabilised by any strong loyalties. Ideas and values only become strongly entrenched when they are embedded in institutions.

Thompson and Wildavsky dynamized grid-group by introducing interaction between cultures. Their second basic innovation was to assume that any community is constituted by several cultures, probably all four. Their third innovation was a normative principle: they related the general well-being of a community to the extent to which all of its interacting cultures are recognized. Though one culture may be dominant, it must avoid excluding the other three from the public forum. A dominant culture should not drive the others underground or reduce any of them to silence.[9] If a sectarian Enclave is never allowed to publish its dissident views, it will make itself heard by violent attacks on its enemies; a counter-attack from the latter will rally the members of the excluded culture. (This has implications for the war against terrorism.) For example, if the Positional culture is unconstrained, it will oppress the lower levels of society. If the Individualist system is not held in check, it will install ruthless competition and be thrown into disorder by the problems of poverty it has created. If the Enclave culture dominates, closure of boundaries will become the order of the day. This indicates a general hypothetical discussion in which cultural theory is currently engaged.

To conclude, I mention two recent theoretical shifts. In the 1970's when this story takes off, the Enclave culture was not well-understood. We took our conception of the Enclave from two properties of the diagram: the strong boundary around the group, and an internal lack of regulatory controls. We assumed that personal relations being unregulated, freedom and equality would be exalted. A dissident minority group would presumably disapprove of the differentiation between persons based on wealth in the Individualist culture and of the entrenched inequalities typical of the Positional culture.

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[9] Michael Thompson, Richard Ellis, and Aaron Wildavsky, *Cultural Theory*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990.

It seemed safe to infer that life in the egalitarian sect or commune would be characterised by jealousy (this from some reading),[10] and that leadership and decision-making would be difficult. Research confirms the great difficulties in the way of instituting a truly egalitarian regime.[11] Because this form of organization is by its own constitution handicapped, I assumed that it was likely to fall into poverty, and that this disadvantage in relation to the outside society would give the younger generations an interest in escape. From here I went on to assume that the dominant concern of the leaders would be to prevent group fission or individual defection. Everything conspired to make the enclave inefficient in administration for the long term, and only good at making sharp forays of protest in the short term.

This picture of the fate of enclave societies is one of inevitable failure. Authority is unprotected, leadership is always challenged, decisions have no coherent institutional framework. It seems to have been confirmed in the rise of terrorist groups whose aim is to strike down their enemies and *not* to take over and reform the administration they criticise. Shaul Mishal and Maoz Rosenthal, from the Political Science department in the University of Tel Aviv, have proposed a typology of Islamic Terrorist organizations.[12] It is based on a comparative study of organizational behaviour patterns. The goals of Hizballah, Hamas, and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad are to liberate all of Palestine and Arab territories in Lebanon from Israel's control. Al-Qaeda's goal is more global and trans-national, "the overthrow of Arab rulers that do not adhere to the Islamic Sharia rules," and to destabilize the western world, especially America, Russia and Israel, so as to free the Islamic world from domination. Destabilizing and liberating are tasks which this kind of organisation is superbly well-adapted to accomplish.

However, something has happened to make terrorism much more effective. Radical activist groups were relatively ineffectual, as the early version of grid and group suggested. The new technology of communication has vastly improved their

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[10] Malcolm Calley, *God's People: West Indian Pentecostal Sects in England*. London: Oxford University Press, 1965;   Steve Rayner, "The Perception of Time and Space in Egalitarian Sects: a Millenarian Cosmology," In Mary Douglas (Ed.) *Essays in the Sociology of Perception.* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982.

[11] James G. Flanagan and Steve Rayner, "The Rules that Keep us Equal." In Flanagan and Rayner, *Rules, Decisions and Inequalities in Egalitarian Societies*. Avebury: Aldershot, 1989.

[12] Shaul Mishal and Maoz Rosenthal, "Al-Qaeda as a Dune Organization: Towards a Typology of Islamic Terrorist Organization," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 28(4), July/August 2005.

performance. They can now summon instant support from affiliate groups; they can combine for a well co-ordinated strike, do the damage, and then dissolve and disappear.[13]

Only when grid-group research went to Arab Palestine and Jewish Israel did we get a good theory of cultural interaction which includes the culture of the world outside the population under study. The correction came from studies of Israeli fundamentalist groups which are small, closed, religious egalitarian communities. They do not fit well to the CT typology of enclaves because they do not separate themselves morally from the mainstream of Israeli life. Their predicted weakness of organisation does not necessarily make them inefficient in their typically sectarian goals.

Emmanuel Sivan in S*trong Religion* adds a new, necessary, element to grid-group analysis – not just the internal organisation of a given set of community types, but also their external environment.[14] The new element is that the fundamentalist religious groups in Israel do not abjure the mainstream society, nor are they regarded s a danger to it. On the contrary, they are morally and financially supported by it. The young members get financial subsidies for their education, exemption from military service, and other advantages from the government. Their relation with each other is not hostile, but friendly. They give each other mutual support, especially in planning campaigns against their common enemies, sharing supplies and information, and if need be, increasing each other's fighting strength for particular raids. So the leaders' normal anxiety about defection, that played a large part in the early discussions of enclave, is not relevant. There is evidently a much bigger variety of enclave cultures than we had assumed. It is currently the most important of our four cultures, and obviously needs a restudy.

My other instance of information technology strengthening the Enclave in its political activities comes from the Far East. Dipak Gyawali, hydraulic engineer, ex-minister in the Nepalese government, and staunch CT theorist, gives a gripping account of the perplexities of national policy for Nepal's abundant water resources. His book, *Water in Nepal,* uses CT to explain the political conflicts around the geo-politics of water policy.[15] The Indian government was a huge potential customer. Industrial multinational companies were competing for contracts to build high dams, but political activists made an enclave to protest against such mega-projects. The business interest and the

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[13] Shaul Mishal and Maoz Rosenthal "Al-Qaeda as a Dune Organisation: Towards a Typology of Islamic terrorist organizations," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 28(4), July/August 2005.

[14] Gabriel A. Almond, R. Scott Appleby, Emmanuel Sivan, *Strong Religion: The Rise of Fundamentalism around the World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.

bureaucracies were allied in favour of high dams, the political activists' protest was against the forced relocation of populations, and the impoverishment of the marginal farmers in the surrounding area, and the loss of political authority for the traditional local government. Gyawali makes a comparison with China's modernisation controversies. "This same tension between two forces has existed in modern China since the 1950s, where the fight has been between the Maoists who promoted widespread micro-hydro development programmes controlled by the communes, and the Stalinists who went for heavy industry controlled by the bureaucracy…" (Dipak) (p. 49).

At these crises of decision the Nepalese political activists were the only pressure group defending the interests of the people. Two things had changed to make their stand more effective than the early, disparaging, versions of Enclave would have predicted. One was the new communication technology, as in the case of the Middle Eastern terrorist groups. But this time the communications went in a different direction, not within the nation, but trans-nationally to the new Human Rights programmes, NGO's, and many globally operative philanthropist organisations. Information technology made it easy for the activists to get quick support and worldwide attention for their views. They proved themselves to be the conscience of the nation, but the stakes were too high for them to be able to obtain any considerable compromise.

Dipak remarks that CT allowed him "to move away from the dualistic straitjacket of either individualistic free market or bureaucratic socialism by accepting that two other solidarities – the egalitarianism of committed activism and the resigned fatalism of the masses – also play crucial roles in any socially dynamic process such as water resources development" (p. 25).

Before I close I should mention the "fatalism of the masses" in the context of economic development. Fatalism or "apathy" is an attitude that the culture of isolates is apt to develop. A newly developing economy is redistributive, some of the population have been expropriated by new landlords, some are unable to work in the new industries. Formerly responsible and active, many are driven up-grid. With no options and no future, they may fall into the apathy of Isolates. This is where CT has lessons for unsuccessful attempts to encourage economic development in Third World countries. Too often the common failure to take opportunities for development is attributed by economists to the conservative influence of traditional culture. We should vigorously resist any

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[15] Dipak Gyawali, *Water in Nepal*. Katmandu: Himal Books, 2002.

interpretation based on the long arm of a dead culture. CT counsels a cultural audit that could show what present constraints are doing to the general morale.

The second lecture will be about grid-group and the problems of sects.