

THE ROLE OF ORGANIZATIONAL CLIMATE AND CULTURE IN THE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PROCESS: A REVIEW OF THE KNOWLEDGE BASE*

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Abstract

The professional knowledge base is replete with theoretical postulations, research findings, and practitioner reflections on school improvement, school climate, and school culture. However, surprisingly little has been written that explains the complex role that school climate and culture can play in the school improvement process. The purpose of this article is to synthesize the professional knowledge base regarding the constructs of school climate and culture and to answer the following questions: How can leaders assess their school's climate and culture? How do climate and culture affect, and how are they affected by, the school improvement process? and How can school leaders help to shape or develop cultures and climates that contribute to school improvement?

NOTE: This MODULE has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and sanctioned by the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a scholarly contribution to the knowledge base in educational administration.

The Importance of School Climate and Culture in the School Improvement Process: A Review of the Knowledge Base

It is essential to recognize that large-scale organizational improvement does not occur in a vacuum or sterile environment. It occurs in human systems, organizations, which already have beliefs, assumptions, expectations, norms, and values, both idiosyncratic to individual members of those organizations and shared. As this article attempts to explore, these shared cultural traits and individual perceptions of climate can greatly affect, and be affected by, the school improvement process.

Deal (1985, p. 303) referred to organizational culture as “the epicenter of change.” Harris (2002) believed this so strongly that she asserted, “Successful school improvement can only occur when schools apply those strategies that best fit in their own context and particular developmental needs” (p. 4). Similar claims on the need to consider school climate and culture as part of the organizational change process are made by many of the leading authorities on school improvement, including Deal (1993), Deal and Peterson (1994), Hargreaves (1994), Harris (2002), Hopkins (2001), and Sarason (1996). Berman and McLaughlin (1978), Hopkins (2001), Rosenholtz (1989), and Stoll and Fink (1996) all demonstrated the pronounced effects

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of school climate and culture on the organizational change process. Deal and Kennedy (1982) and Deal and Peterson (1994) illustrated how dysfunctional school cultures, e.g., inward focus, short-term focus, low morale, fragmentation, inconsistency, emotional outbursts, and subculture values that supercede shared organizational values, can impede organizational improvement.

However, not everyone agrees that organizational climate and culture are keys to organizational improvement. Barnard (1938) even challenged the rational existence of organizational culture, regarding it to be a social fiction created by individuals to give meaning to their work and to their lives. Deal (1993) viewed school culture and school improvement as contradictory, whereas the function of organizational culture is to provide stability school improvement implies large-scale change, which introduces disequilibrium and uncertainty. This disequilibrium, in turn, can cause organizational members to question the meaning of their work, as well as their commitment to the organization. As such, it is not feasible to consider large-scale school improvement without either working within the confines of the existing organizational climate and culture or attempting to modify them. However, some authorities in the field have questioned the extent to which it is possible to change the culture of an organization through careful planning (e.g., Quinn, 1980). Yet others (e.g., Allen, 1985) have allowed that although organizational climate and culture may be important to some organizational improvement processes, they are not particularly relevant to others. Finally, others (Sathe, 1985; Wilkins & Patterson, 1985) have questioned the extent to which attempting to make a major cultural change is worth the time, costs, and risks associated with that process. Overall, though, most modern theorists and reflective practitioners of school improvement recognize the important roles played by organizational culture and climate in the change process.

In order to assess the alignment of the existing school culture with the contemplated improvements or to attempt planned cultural interventions, it is first necessary to understand well the constructs of organizational climate and culture. The sections that follow provide a brief introduction to these complex and much-debated constructs.

Definition of Organizational Climate

Although the Merriam-Webster On-Line Dictionary (2005) provides no definition of climate that could reasonably be linked to organizations, Owens (2004) related it to such terms as atmosphere, personality, tone, or ethos (p. 178). The foundational work in school climate is generally recognized as that of Halpin and Croft (1963), who roughly related their definition of climate to morale (p. 6), but admitted that time constraints restricted their consideration of that construct to the social interaction between the principal and the teachers (p. 7). Their research examined teacher disengagement from the teaching-learning process, the extent to which the principal burdens teachers with routine duties and demands, teachers' perceptions that their personal needs are being satisfied and they are accomplishing positive things in their work, teachers' enjoyment of friendly social relations with each other, principals' aloofness and reliance on rules and policies rather than informal contacts with teachers, closeness of supervision of teachers by the principal, teacher perceptions that the principal is working to move the organization in positive directions, and teacher perceptions that the principal treats them humanely. All of these factors combine to help define the climate of a school.

Many authors, including Schein (1992), have drawn sharp lines of demarcation between the constructs of organizational climate and culture. Rousseau (1990) differentiated between these two constructs on the basis of climate being the descriptive beliefs and perceptions individuals hold of the organization, whereas culture is the shared values, beliefs, and expectations that develop from social interactions within the organization. The boundaries between organizational climate and culture can appear to be artificial, arbitrary, and even largely unnecessary.

Tagiuri's systemic model (as cited in Owens, 2004) offers an interesting means for integrating these two constructs; he presented culture as one of four components of organizational climate, along with ecology, milieu, and organization or structure. Within his construct of organizational culture, he included assumptions, values, norms, beliefs, ways of thinking, behavior patterns, and artifacts; this definition seems to parallel closely many of the prominent authorities in the field. However, his construct of organizational climate tends to be more encompassing than that of many of his peers. Within the sub-component of ecology, he included buildings and facilities, technology, and pedagogical interventions. Within milieu, Tagiuri subsumed the race,

ethnicity, socio-economic levels, and gender of organizational members and participants, their motivation and skills, and the organization's leadership. His organization or structure construct includes communication and decision-making patterns within the organization, the organizational hierarchy and formal structures, and the level of bureaucratization. Although this definition is so comprehensive as to resemble French and Bell's (1998) organizational systems model and can somewhat blur the core definition of organizational climate, it serves as a good reminder of the interrelatedness of all these factors with organizational climate and culture. It also illustrates the broad range of organizational issues that must be taken into consideration when planning for large-scale organizational improvement.

Definitions of Organizational Culture

At culture's most global level, Merriam-Webster's On-Line Dictionary (2005) provides the following definition:

the integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behavior that depends upon man's capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations; b : the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group; c : the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes a company or corporation.

As the focus narrows to organizational culture, there are seemingly as many definitions as there are authors attempting to define this construct. Probably the greatest overarching issue concerning the definition of an organizational culture centers around whether culture is a root metaphor or merely one aspect of the organization; in simpler terms, is culture what the organization is or is it something the organization has (Rousseau, 1990; Sathe, 1985; Thompson & Luthans, 1990)? The preponderance of opinion seems to fall on the side of culture being something that most organizations have.

Kilman, Saxton, and Serpa (1985b) provided an apt analogy that helps to illuminate the nature of organizational culture: "Culture is to the organization what personality is to the individual – a hidden, yet unifying theme that provides meaning, direction, and mobilization" (p. ix). As such, it is emotional and intangible (Connor & Lake, 1988), individually and socially constructed (Hall & Hord, 2001; Rousseau, 1990), and evolves over a period of years (Wilkins & Patterson, 1985), especially as organizations find acceptable and unacceptable solutions to internal and external problems or threats and attempt to integrate more effectively internally (Schein, 1985a, 1992). This culture can also be developed and learned by organizational members through the connection of behaviors and consequences and through multiple reinforcement mechanisms and agents (Thompson & Luthans, 1990). It can be learned through the reduction of anxiety and pain or through positive rewards and reinforcements (Schein, 1985a).

A fairly common, simplistic definition of organizational culture is "The way we do things around here." Although this statement appears in many books and articles, the earliest of such entries found by this author was by Deal (1993, p. 6). Deeper discussions expand this definition to cover such issues as the basic assumptions and beliefs shared by members of the organization regarding the nature of reality, truth, time, space, human nature, human activity, and human relationships (Schein, 1985a; 1985b). It also consists of the philosophies, ideologies, concepts, ceremonies, rituals, values, and norms shared by members of the organization that help shape their behaviors (Connor & Lake, 1988; Kilman, Saxton, & Serpa, 1985b; Owens, 2004; Rousseau, 1990). Among the norms it includes are task support norms, task innovation norms, social relationship norms, and personal freedom norms. Among the rituals are such issues as passage, degradation, enhancement, renewal, conflict resolution, and integration (Connor & Lake, 1988).

Organizational culture embraces such organizational needs as common language, shared concepts, defined organizational boundaries, methods for selecting members for the organization, methods of allocating authority, power, status, and resources, norms for handling intimacy and interpersonal relationships, criteria for rewards and punishments, and ways of coping with unpredictable and stressful events (Schein, 1985a). This shared culture helps to create solidarity and meaning and inspire commitment and productivity (Deal, 1985).

Culture may operate both consciously and sub-consciously in the organization (Rousseau, 1990; Schein, 1984, 1985a, 1985b; Wilkins & Patterson, 1985). At the surface level, culture can be observed through examination of behaviors and artifacts, including such things as the physical setting, rituals, languages, and stories. At a slightly deeper, less conscious level, organizational culture is defined by the unwritten rules and

norms of behavior, often conveyed by stories, rituals, language, and symbols. At the deepest levels, often totally sub-conscious, lie such things as the fundamental assumptions and core values of individuals, groups, and the organization (Connor & Lake, 1988). It is at this deepest level that the organizational culture can be most tenacious and most powerful (Wilkins & Patterson, 1985).

Culture is experienced differently by members of the organization (Rousseau, 1990). Sub-cultures may arise within an organization as small groups share values, perceptions, norms, or even ceremonies that differ from those of the wider organization (Cooper, 1988; Louis, 1985; Thompson & Luthans, 1990). For example, in many high schools, coaches of male athletic teams form a sub-culture within the faculty; they typically sit together at faculty meetings, generally at the back of the room. They often miss faculty meetings and are unable to participate in general faculty activities due to their coaching obligations immediately after school. They can often be observed commenting and joking among themselves at times when other faculty members are more attentively engaged with the content of the faculty meeting. Similarly, new faculty members may form a sub-culture somewhat distinct from those who have been in the school for a prolonged period of time.

Culture is also contextually influenced. It is the interaction of an organization's people variables with physical and structural (ecological) variables (Hall & Hord, 2001). For example, many high schools are built in a design in which hallways radiate from a central hub; in these schools, it is very common for the teachers in each hallway to build a culture slightly different from the culture of teachers in hallways with whom they have less personal contact. School culture can be influenced by such physical surrounding variables as noise, heat, and light (Thompson & Luthans, 1990). The open classroom designs popular in the late 1960s and early 1970s promoted more sharing and contact among teachers than fully-walled individual classrooms. Learning cultures among students in the Southern and Southwestern United States have changed significantly with the addition of air conditioning to classrooms.

As far back as 1932, Waller noted that "schools have a culture that is definitely their own" (p. 103). Waller went on to describe the rituals of personal relationships, the folkways, mores, irrational sanctions, moral codes, games, ceremonies, traditions, and laws that were so very similar in many schools and which define what happens in schools. This perspective of a shared culture among schools has been commented on by many observers of the sociology of schools, including Deal (1993), Sarason (1996), and Swidler (1979). From this author's conversations with educators and students around the globe and observations in schools internationally, there is a basic culture of schooling that transcends national, ethnic, and socio-cultural borders. International exchange students often express how similar their host school is to their school in their native country. In this author's experience, in developing nations there is often a greater cultural similarity between the private schools serving the more wealthy students and sub-urban schools in the U. S. than there is between those private schools and the public schools serving their nation's poorer children. However, as Deal (1993) and Maehr and Buck (1993) commented, each school also possesses individualized, unique cultural aspects. Schools have distinct personalities, highly unique ceremonies, and varying discipline norms. Some schools revere their athletic teams, whereas in other schools art, music, or drama programs are given great attention; in yet other schools, academic achievement is at the apex of community respect. Organizational culture can be a highly powerful force in the school improvement process; given this definition of culture, it stands to reason that, as Owens (2004) noted, it may often be the most powerful determinant of the course of change in an organization (p. 191).

Equipped with an understanding of the basic constructs of organizational climate and culture, the next challenge facing the leader of a school improvement process becomes the assessment of his or her school's climate and culture. As Schein (1999, p. 86) noted pointedly, assessment of organizational climate and culture must be done in the specific context of some organizational problem or set of circumstances. Consequently, the assessment of the school's climate and culture must be done specifically in the context of the proposed change(s) and improvement process. The section that follows provides some methodological insight into that assessment process.

How Can One Assess an Organization's Climate and Culture?

It is generally agreed that assessment of an organization's climate is a relatively straight-forward process, especially when compared to the methodologies needed to assess the organization's culture. As climate is defined as individuals' perceptions, quantitative survey instruments have become the most widely accepted

means of gathering and analyzing organizational climate data. The same is not true for the assessment of school culture; in fact, various authorities in the field (e.g., Schein, 1999) assert that it absolutely cannot be measured quantitatively through surveys or questionnaires.

Assessment of school climate. A great variety of instruments have been developed to measure organizational climate. The first of these to gain wide acceptance was Halpin and Croft's (1963) Organizational Climate Description Questionnaire (OCDQ, Form IV). This 64-item climate assessment tool is comprised of 8 sub-scales relating teachers' behavior to that of the principal: (a) disengagement, (b) hindrance, (c) spirit, (d) intimacy, (e) aloofness, (f) production emphasis, (g) thrust, and (h) consideration. In examining the climates of 71 schools, Halpin and Croft found that their scores clustered into six major climatic types: (a) open, (b) autonomous, (c) controlled, (d) familiar, (e) paternal, and (f) closed.

Perhaps the most widely used school climate surveys are those published by the National Study of School Evaluation (NSSE) (2005). One reason for the widespread popularity of these surveys is the fact that NSSE will also tabulate, analyze, and report on their results, saving the building level administrator or district staff from these time consuming, and somewhat confusing, processes. Also, these surveys are available in both paper and on-line formats, allowing the school to choose the most appropriate technology for the participants being surveyed. Comparable forms exist for elementary school students, middle school students, high school students, teachers, English-speaking parents, Spanish-speaking parents, and community members. The surveys are predominantly Likert scale-based, but also allow for minor amounts of open-ended input.

Another major set of climate assessment instruments comes from the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP). Their Comprehensive Assessment of School Environments (CASE) School Climate Surveys (1987) collect data on ten sub-scales: (a) teacher-student relationships, (b) security and maintenance, (c) administration, (d) student academic orientation, (e) student behavioral values, (f) guidance, (g) student-peer relationships, (h) parent and community-school relationships, (i) instructional management, and (j) student activities. The information gathered through this instrument is supplemented by separate satisfaction surveys for parents, teachers, and students. Much of the information on these satisfaction surveys is comparable across groups (e.g., questions on student activities or school buildings, supplies, and upkeep), but some of it is unique to the specific group being surveyed (e.g., parents and teachers report on their satisfaction with the administration of the school, whereas students report on their satisfaction with the teachers). As with the NSSE instrumentation, NASSP offers scoring and reporting services for these surveys, including allowing the school to ask "what if" questions related to the six sub-scales, e.g., "What would it take for any school to raise student satisfaction by 10%?" (NASSP, 2005).

Assessment of school culture. Unlike the assessment of school climate, which is generally accepted to be a straightforward quantitative process, assessment of school culture is far more complex. Two basic schools of thought exist regarding appropriate means of assessing school cultures. On one hand, Schein (1999) categorically refuted that culture can be assessed through written questionnaires or surveys, asserting that the assessor would neither know what to ask nor be able to judge the reliability or validity of the responses. Rousseau (1990), on the other hand, allowed that such quantitative tools as Q-sorts and questionnaires can legitimately be utilized, in conjunction with structured interviews, to assess organizational culture.

Such quantitative survey instruments for assessing organizational culture are readily available, e.g., Kilmann and Saxton's Culture Gap Survey (1991). However, these instruments tend to be superficial and are incapable of probing the depth and uniqueness of an organization's culture. As Rousseau (1990) commented, the uniqueness of each organization's culture prevents outsiders from forming valid a priori questions. Schein (1984) further noted that using surveys to assess culture violates ethical research procedures in that it puts words into the mouths of respondents rather than captures their own words. Also, such instruments summarize and aggregate responses, possibly misrepresenting the respondents' true views.

Because organizational culture is a multi-layered phenomenon, different data gathering approaches may be necessary to assess the various layers. Rousseau (1990) identified five basic layers of organizational culture, proceeding from the most superficial and observable to the most profound, yet least revealed or discussed. These layers were: (a) artifacts, (b) patterns of behavior, (c) behavioral norms, (d) values, and (e) fundamental assumptions. Connor and Lake (1988) discussed the same concepts but classified culture into three layers, rather than five.

At its shallowest levels, school culture is open to assessment by observation of behaviors and interactions, listening to stories, participating in rituals, and examining artifacts and written communications. To understand the shared values, common understandings, and patterns of expectations, it is necessary to probe more deeply and into subconscious areas by examining the authentic responses of organization members. Rousseau (1990) and Schein (1999) advocated the use of structured interviews to gather these data. Schein noted that small group interviews are both more valid and efficient than individual interviews. However, to get at the deepest levels of shared culture, assumptions and beliefs, intensive individual interviews are probably the most appropriate approach.

As with all qualitative research, it is essential that organizational leaders set aside their own conceptions and values as they attempt to discern the shared values and beliefs of others in the organization (Rousseau, 1990; Schein, 1999). However, the leader's observations of behaviors and artifacts can legitimately provide the initial entry point that leads to a deeper investigation of the underlying shared values, norms, beliefs, and assumptions.

With these definitions of organizational climate and culture and some insight into how to assess these constructs, the leader's next challenge is to forecast how the school's culture and climate will interact with the school improvement process. The section that follows explores various possible patterns of interaction.

Interaction of School Climate and Culture with the School Improvement Process

A school's culture and climate can interact with the school improvement process in many ways and in all phases of that improvement process. Figure 1 illustrates a typical school improvement process, which progresses from a planning phase to implementation, and eventually to institutionalization of the desired changes. As Beach and Lindahl (2004b) discussed, in reality, school improvement processes are not as linear as diagrams such as Figure 1 suggest. However, the basic phases of the model offer a useful structure for examining potential interactions between the process and the school's climate and culture.

Interactions in the Planning Phase

The initial step in the planning phase of the school improvement process involves identifying an organizational need and making a conscious decision whether or not to attempt to address that need. Both the climate and the culture of the school can have considerable influence at this stage. For example, if the current climate of the school is one of high disengagement, high hindrance, and low esprit (Halpin & Croft, 1963), it is unlikely that the school will voluntarily opt to engage in a significant school improvement process; if forced to, it is unlikely that the effort will succeed. Similarly, if the school's culture is one of cultural malaise (Deal & Kennedy, 1982), it is unlikely that the school improvement process will progress beyond this initial step. Conversely, healthier climates and more positive cultures with a history of successful large-scale organizational change will greatly enhance the probability that the school will opt to move ahead with the school improvement plan.

The next step in the planning phase is to consider the nature of the changes inherent in the improvement process. It is essential that the school improvement process, and even the specific improvements and reforms being contemplated, match those climates and cultures (Hopkins, Harris, Singleton, & Watts, 2000; Sathe, 1985), for culture affects organizational behavior and performance, thereby shaping the impact and direction of changes (Kilman, Saxton, & Serpa, 1985a). If the changes contemplated are not in good alignment with the current culture and climate of the school, e.g., the existing customs, power structures, and paths of least resistance of the organization (Connor & Lake, 1988), planned cultural intervention is necessary (Burke, 2002). In such cases, it is essential to understand the existing organizational culture, to know its source and bounds (Lorsch, 1985). This helps to ensure that changes are made only to the aspects of that culture that are at odds with the change, not the benign aspects.

When change is contemplated, certain key questions need to be asked, including: Which aspects of the organizational culture are most compatible with the proposed change? Which aspects of that culture are least compatible with the change? How deeply entrenched are these aspects of the culture? How might the proposed change affect people's perceptions of the organizational climate? How great a change in climate is likely be perceived as a consequence of implementing this change? Which aspects of the new climate might be perceived as becoming more positive, or more negative? How strongly might these changes in perceptions affect individuals? Which individuals?

Even these understandings may not be useful in helping to change the culture, but they can help to shape or select strategies that have a greater probability of implementation and institutionalization (Schein, 1985a, 1985b). As Sathe (1985) noted, the selection of strategies should be based on questions such as: Can the desired results be obtained without changing the culture, or by utilizing the latent potential of the existing culture? If not, can they be obtained by moving toward more intrinsically appealing beliefs rather than characterizing the change as focusing on beliefs more alien to the existing culture? The weaker the organizational culture or the fewer and less central the assumptions of an organizational culture that need to be modified, the more likely it is that the planned improvement can be effectively achieved (Sathe, 1985), for changes in culture can create a sense of loss and even the potential loss of the meaning of one's work in the organization (Allen, 1985; Deal, 1985).

In 1990, Roland Barth presented a bold statement on school improvement: "What needs to be improved about schools is their culture, the quality of inter-personal relationships, and the nature and quality of learning experiences" (p. 45). In those instances where the major changes needed are to the school culture, itself, an in-depth understanding of the organizational culture, and sub-cultures, is even more essential. Organizational cultures can be changed, over time, but the more entrenched and more widely shared the culture, the more difficult it is to effect deep or lasting change. It is necessary to diagnose the culture carefully and focus on modifying only very specific key values or assumptions, not the entire culture (Harris, 2002).

The next step in the planning stage of the school improvement process is for the organization to select a planning approach (see Beach, 1993) appropriate to the specific school improvement under consideration and to the organizational conditions, including its climate and culture. Many schools assume that some form of the traditional rational planning process (Brievie, Johnson, & Young, 1958; Kaufman, 1972), e.g., the strategic planning approach, is the preferred model for guiding school improvement efforts Bryson, 1995; Cook, 1990). Although in certain circumstances this assumption is correct, there are many instances in which alternative planning approaches would be more appropriate. Beach and Lindahl (2004a) discussed how Lindblom's (1959) incremental planning model, Etzioni's (1967) mixed-scanning model, and developmental or goal-free planning models (Clark, 1981; McCaskey, 1974) complement rational planning approaches.

In large measure, the culture and climate of the school are factors that must be considered in this decision. As Clark (1981) noted, school cultures tend to be more a loose collection of ideas than a highly coherent structure (see, also, Lonsdale, 1986) and that it is unreasonable to assume high levels of consensus on goals. The technology of instruction is largely unclear, even among the teachers of a given school. Schools tend to operate more on a trial-and-error basis than through scientific design (Clark, p. 49). These qualities are all contradictory to the requisites of the rational planning model. Clark's assessment was seconded by Walter (1983), whose case study findings concluded that organizational behavior is not necessarily guided by formal goals and objectives, but by organizational culture (see, also, Lonsdale, 1986).

Walter (1983) tied these findings to McCaskey's (1974) earlier conclusions that goal-based planning narrows the focus and limits the flexibility of the organizational. Toll (1982) posited that rational, quantitatively based planning often neglects the human aspects of the organization and the changing environment. Larson (1982) concluded that rational models focus on the future, whereas, in reality, most people in the organization are focused on the present. In short, for many school improvement efforts goals are sufficiently diverse, the future is sufficiently uncertain, and the actions necessary to obtain the goals sufficiently unclear that goal-based, rational planning may well not be effective, efficient, or appropriate (Clark, 1981). Consequently, Walter (1983) suggested that a more intuitive, climate and culture-based planning approach might be more effective, particularly when the conditions facing the school are unstable or uncertain. Such a directional planning approach would allow the school leader to accommodate alternative preferences, means, and values within the school culture, thereby managing potential conflict.

McCaskey (1974) discussed how to plan without goals, beginning with the identification of arenas of activity and preferred behavior patterns within the organizational culture that relate to the contemplated organizational improvement. The leader would also strive to discern which recent activities or events were pleasing to the school's members, so that implementation activities could be designed of a similar nature. Once these shared arenas of activity and preferences have been identified, the leader can shape the imple-

mentation process in directions consonant with “who they are and what they like to do” (McCaskey, 1974, p. 283). This reduces resistance and does not limit individualism nearly as much as the rational, goal-based approach. It also allows for greater flexibility in adapting to the changing environment.

After a planning approach has been selected, the next step in this initial phases of the school improvement process is to assess the school’s capacity and willingness to change (Armenakis, Harris, and Mossholder, 1993; Beach, 1983; Beckhard & Harris, 1987; Cunningham et al., 2002; Fullan, 1991; Hall & Hord, 2001; Huberman & Miles, 1984; Louis & Miles, 1990; Pond, Armenakis, & Green, 1984; Prochaska et al., 1994; Prochaska, Redding, & Evers, 1997); this is often referred to as organizational readiness for change. Again, readiness for change is, in good measure, a function of the school’s climate and culture (Armenakis, Harris, & Mossholder, 1993; Beach, 1983; Beckhard & Harris, 1987; Cunningham et al., 2002; Evans, 2001; Maurer, 2001; Pond, Armenakis, & Green, 1984). Fullan (1991) found that those schools whose culture is compatible with change, in general, and with the specific changes involved in the current school improvement project, are most likely to be successful in their improvement effort.

The final step in the planning phase of the school improvement process is to decide to move ahead with implementation, undertake some organizational development prior to implementation, or to terminate the school improvement process, at least for the present time. As with the decisions made to this point in the process, the school’s culture and climate may well be major factors in this decision. If extensive changes in culture would be necessary before implementation could be attempted or if the school’s climate were not conducive to undertaking a major change effort, it is likely that the decision would be to abort the school improvement process. On the other hand, if the school’s culture were largely compatible with the planned changes and if the climate were healthy, these might tip the scale in favor of proceeding either with some organizational development or directly with the implementation of the planned changes.

Interactions in the Implementation Phase

During the implementation phase of most school improvement processes, three major elements take center stage: (a) change, (b) motivation, and (c) professional development. All three affect, and are affected by, the school’s climate and culture.

Clearly not all changes are of the same magnitude. It is easier to change a person’s perceptions or knowledge than his or her behavior; it is typically easier to change an individual’s behavior than that of an organization. In general, the most difficult change would be to change the values, assumptions, and beliefs of an organization – in other words, its culture. Consequently, the extent that the school improvement effort depends on changes to the organizational culture has a pronounced influence on the probability of its successful implementation. As discussed earlier, the more deeply held and shared those values, assumptions, and beliefs, the more difficult they are to modify.

The organization’s culture clearly shapes the implementation process. Implementation actions must be crafted to conform to, or at least be relatively acceptable to, the existing culture, as much as possible, without negating important aspects of the planned changes. Often the framing, or even sequencing, of aspects of the implementation process can be adjusted to be less threatening to the culture. In other instances, the proposed changes are sufficiently in conflict with the organizational culture as to necessitate cultural shaping or modification. In such cases, it is essential that the timeline for implementation be adjusted accordingly. Cultural change is not something to be attempted in the short term

As the implementation phase unfolds, the organization progresses through several phases (see Evans, 2001), each of which can threaten the stability of the organizational culture. During the unfreezing stage, the organization may suffer anxiety about the coming changes and guilt for feel this anxiety. The cultural safety of the organization may be challenged. The organization often experiences a sense of loss, often of cherished cultural perceptions and behaviors, and at other times, more seriously, of shared values, beliefs, or fundamental assumptions. For the implementation to be successful, the organization and its culture must move from this sense of loss to one of commitment to the new behaviors, attitudes, values, and beliefs.

It is at this stage that organizational climate, and specifically motivation, may assume a significant role. If the climate is healthy and positive in relation to the change(s), implementation is facilitated. If the climate is dysfunctional or negative regarding the change(s), motivation must be improved before it is likely that implementation and institutionalization will be successful.

Often, the lack of motivation can be tied to what Evans (2001) termed the need to “move from old competence to new competence” (p. 56); this is generally best done in schools through staff development. Staff development is readily influenced by the organization’s climate and culture. What a joy it can be to be a facilitator of staff development in a school with a healthy, open climate, welcoming to the development of new knowledge, skills, and dispositions. It is a fruitless, thankless role in a school with a negative, closed climate. School culture also plays a significant role in regard to staff development. How deeply is staff development valued? By whom (e.g., subgroups)? How well is it, or the changes expected from it, rewarded? Who are the early adopters of new practices? Who are the late adopters? How is each group treated by their peers and by the organization’s leadership?

Some school leaders have attempted to change their school’s culture and climate directly through staff development; this is unlikely to be successful other than for the most insignificant of changes. Over a long period of time, though, culture and climate may be shaped, as an indirect consequence of staff development. As teachers build the new skills to implement the planned improvements, they can gain the self-confidence and success motivation to change the climate. As enough teachers have success with new behaviors, this may change related underlying values, beliefs, and assumptions, i.e., the organizational culture.

The final step of the implementation phase is to move from conflict to consensus, generating widespread support for the change (Evans, 2001, p. 56). Again, this is shaping the culture of the organization. It is essential that most members of the organization not only accept and practice the new behaviors required by the school improvement, but also develop the corresponding values, assumptions, and beliefs. The more deeply rooted and widespread the values, assumptions, and beliefs, the more resistant they are. In cases of significant changes, this process can easily take years, if it is successful at all. This process begins in the implementation phase of the school improvement process, but culminates in the institutionalization phase.

Interactions in the Institutionalization Phase

Simply stated, it is in the institutionalization phase that the organization’s culture has transformed to incorporate the behaviors, values, assumptions, and beliefs inherent in the planned school improvement(s). These now become the organization’s culture!

When stated so concisely, this may appear to be a far more simple process than it is. As French and Bell (1998) explicated, changes in one aspect of an organization can well necessitate modification of other aspects of the organization before those changes can be institutionalized successfully. Such processes are often referred to as organizational development. Cultural changes may well require changes in the organizational structure, reward systems, technology, or tasks (see Datnow, Hubbard, & Mehan, 2002). Burke (1993), French, Bell, and Zawacki (1999), and Tichy (1983) offered good discussions of the systemic nature of organizational development, whereas Fullan, Miles, and Taylor (1978) provided insight into how these processes work in K-12 schools. The extent to which the culture of a school may be shaped to be compatible with the desired changes and the extent to which all sub-systems of the organization are brought into harmony with both the culture and the changes are essential factors in the institutionalization of those changes. The section that follows offers some insight into how the shaping of organizational culture and climate has been accomplished successfully.

Shaping School Culture and Climate to Facilitate Improvement

Many school leaders have consciously recognized the need to change the climate and/or culture of their school and have set out to do so. In the private sector, some organizations have taken what may be the most direct approach – removing certain members of the organization and selecting and socializing new members of the organization who already have values and belief systems consonant with the desired culture. In schools, however, tenure or continuing contract laws, student and teacher rights, community pressure, and a host of other factors mitigate against this as a feasible approach (see, also, Maehr & Buck, 1993 and Sathe, 1985 for further discussions on the limitations of this approach). This approach to cultural change clearly falls into the trap identified by Wilkins and Patterson (1985), who sagely noted that many approaches to cultural change are too simplistic and promise too much.

As Wilkins and Patterson (1985) noted, organizational culture changes are generally neither wholly revolutionary nor evolutionary. This recalls Chin and Benne’s (1969) three approaches to change: (a) power/coercive; (b) empirical/rational; and (c) normative/re-educative. When applied to changing climates

and cultures, all three can be utilized. The first two approaches can be utilized to change behaviors, which both Burke (2002) and Kilman, Saxton, and Serpa (1985) recommended as the starting point in cultural change. However, power/coercive changes are more likely to result in compliance, not true cultural change. Once behavior has been changed, it is necessary to address the deeper, more change-resistant levels of the culture, e.g., values and beliefs. To make changes at these levels, normative/re-educative approaches are needed.

Normative/re-educative approaches to cultural change require extended periods of time and sustained, virtually daily, efforts by those leading the school improvement effort. As many authorities on organizational culture note, one of the primary ways leaders can gradually accomplish normative/re-educative change is simply through the deliberate, consistent attention they focus on specific behaviors, values and fundamental assumptions (Allen, 1985; Deal, 1993; Deal & Peterson, 1993; Harris, 2002; Schein, 1993). Leithwood, Jantzi, and Steinbeck (1999) discussed the importance of clarifying shared beliefs and values and motivating by moral imperatives. Deal and Peterson (1999) and Schein (1985b; 1992) emphasized the importance of clarifying shared beliefs and values and of motivating by moral imperatives. Deal and Peterson (1993) and Schein (1992) added discussions on the essentiality of leaders modeling behaviors and values, consistently. This modeling is especially essential as leaders deal with organizational crises (Schein, 1992) or handle conflict (Deal & Peterson, 1993; Schein, 1992).

As part of this process, individuals within the organization must be repeatedly offered invitations to participate in the new culture, encouraged to experiment with new behaviors in an unthreatening atmosphere that accepts failure as part of the process, and empowered to help shape the culture and the organization (Allen, 1985; Deal & Peterson, 1993; Harris, 2002; Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbeck, 1999; Maher & Buck, 1993).

Leaders of school improvement processes can help to change the organizational culture through the carefully selective telling of stories, emphasizing heroes and heroines whose actions exemplify the beliefs, values, and assumptions fundamental to the desired changes (Deal, 1993; Deal & Peterson, 1993; Schein, 1992). Positive stories of heroes and heroines are generally regarded as more effective than negative stories about organizational members or stakeholders who have acted in ways contrary to the desired cultural mores and norms. Deal (1993) extended this storytelling responsibility of leaders to working with the “informal network of priests, gossips, and storytellers” (p. 17) of the school culture.

On a more formal basis, one of the most commonly cited approaches to effecting cultural change in organizations is through the modification or creation of organizational rites and rituals that emphasize and celebrate the major beliefs, values, and fundamental assumptions associated with the desired school improvement (Deal, 1993; Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Deal & Peterson, 1993; Schein, 1992). Among the organizational subsystems that might be affected by, and affect, the cultural changes are: (a) rewards (Allen, 1985; Schein, 1992); (b) information and communication systems (Allen, 1985; Schein, 1992); (c) training (Allen, 1985); (d) recruitment, selection, and orientation (Allen, 1985; Deal & Peterson, 1993; Schein, 1992); (e) organizational structure and design (Schein, 1992); and (f) formal statements of philosophy, values, creed, goals, or vision (Schein, 1992).

Summary and Closure

School culture and climate are integral components of the school improvement process. They affect decisions throughout all phases of that process. In turn, they are affected by the decisions made in all phases of the process. Although amorphous and complex enough to cause both contradictory and confusing discussions in the professional knowledge base, culture and climate are very real, very powerful forces in organizations. Although difficult to measure precisely, both constructs can be discerned within an organization if the evaluator has sufficient time and access to witness the daily behaviors of members of the organization and probe deeply as to the values, beliefs, and fundamental assumptions underlying those behaviors. Leaders of school improvement processes can utilize the information gained through the assessment of the school’s climate and culture to help guide each phase of the change process, from determining the school’s readiness for change to selecting the types of improvements most likely to be compatible with the organization’s climate and culture, from implementing the improvements to ensuring that they become institutionalized. Despite considerable discussion in the professional knowledge base as to how feasible it is to make significant changes in a school’s

climate or culture, in some cases it is the climate or culture, itself, which most needs to be changed if true school improvement is to occur. Through judicious use, over time, of power/coercive, rational/empirical, and, primarily, normative/re-educative change strategies, school leaders can shape and develop cultures and climates that are in harmony with, and supportive of, the desired organizational changes.

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¹<http://www.m-w.com/cgi-bin/dictionary?book=Dictionary&va=culture>

²http://www.principals.org/s_nassp/store_interior.asp?CID=408&DID=47554

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Semiosis and the Tragedy of Purity (Plato's Dilemma)

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I should begin by explaining the reason for the unusual title of a semiotic paper dealing with the notion of *purity* and specifically with what I'm calling its *tragedy*. Why is purity tragic? And what does purity have to do with semiotics? I'm using the term *tragedy* to foreground its inherent ambivalence, oscillating between two principal meanings. One refers to the *stagecraft*—the artistry or artifice—of notions of purity. The second foregrounds the sad, lamentable, or tragic consequences and effects of such beliefs, whether involving communities, institutions, or individuals.

My general interest here is with the mutable and contingent nature of what are conventionally referred to as representation and expression. More specifically I'm concerned with the terrors and tragic consequences of one particular modality of semiosis, which, for reasons that will become clear as we proceed, I will refer to in shorthand as *theism*. What follows will travel a winding but hopefully not-too-crooked rhetorical path toward a modicum of illumination about the nature and consequences of maintaining distinctions between what are conventionally distinguished as *fact* and *fiction*. Little of what I will be arguing is new, unique, or surprising, as should become evident.

In her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, the German-American philosopher and social critic Hannah Arendt famously observed in 1951 that the aggressiveness of totalitarianism lay less in its lust for power and more in an ideologically-driven *desire to make the world consistent*. To make the world orderly, homogeneous, and pure. More orderly than it currently appears. Even if the deconstruction and transformation of it might entail marginalizing, banishing, expelling, or murdering persons or peoples perceived as *impure*, whoever and wherever they may be, and on whatever grounds they may be staged as undesirably *other*.

Othernesses, however, are not only external but *internal*: constituting what in myself I distinguish or bracket as other. The uncanniness of this is strikingly manifest when reckoning with or accounting for self-erasures or self-sacrifices of one's life—the particular kind of tragedy that has become increasingly common today, overwhelmingly in societies dominated by *monotheistic* variants of theist religiosities. I'm thinking in particular of the *martyrdoms*—or acts

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of “witnessing” performed in the name of the *transcendence* of a divine entity, spirit, force, or being. Indeed of the very *idea* – that is, the artistry or artifice—of divinity. A cosmological *theatricality* concerning what William Butler Yeats, in his remarkable poem *Sailing to Byzantium*, aptly called “the *artifice* of eternity” into which we shall all be “gathered.”

The British philosopher and cultural critic Simon Critchley, in a recent book (2013) called *Infinitely Demanding*, investigating the ethics of political and religious commitment, and drawing on Hannah Arendt and other authors, argued that in modernity the political order of the state comes to be staged as social cartography, cultural mapping, and psychological ordering. He took as a salient example Martin Heidegger’s 1933 inaugural address as Rector of the University of Freiburg, in which he divided the university student body into three types of projected community service: work-service, war-service, and knowledge-service (*Arbeitsdienst*, *Wehrdienst*, *Wissendienst*). In fact, this civic-psyche multifunctionality was directly modeled on Plato’s three-fold division of the “soul” of the ideal citizen 2500 years ago in his utopian dialogue *Ta Politeia*, or “[Concerning] Civic Matters” (known in English as *The Republic*). Heidegger’s lecture was delivered 3 days after joining the Nazi party.

For Critchley, politics and democracy were two names for the same practice. Democracy not as a kind of thing; nor as something fixed or immutable, nor even as the practice of social *consensus*. Democracy is more fundamentally the practice of what he calls *dissensus*—what might more explicitly be termed *critique*. By which I mean specifically the crafting of an awareness of the contingency, mutability, and artifice of the social and political realities promoted and policed by the state as natural; the militarization of civic life: the practice, in other words, of totalitarianism.

If democracy is an ongoing performative process, then in relation to what other practices would it be understood? What is it staged as antithetical to? While one might answer: practices such as aristocracy, plutocracy, and oligarchy; more fundamentally, democracy is antithetical to *theocracy* or theocratic politics. Which means, in semiotic terms, a fixity of signification or the a-historical juxtapositioning and putatively permanent alignment together of signifiers and signifieds. That is, a *totalitarianism of belief*; the *policing* of signification and its affordances and

opportunities.

In totalitarian politics this commonly involves the staging of *shame*: shame associated with and publically manifesting one’s own imperfections and inadequacies. The shame that has played a central role in expressions of martyrdom, both ancient and modern, eastern and western. One classic manifestation of self-shaming in the early Western Christian tradition was Augustine’s account of his revulsion and abhorrence of his own body, the reaction to an earlier life of excess. Augustine, it may be recalled, articulated and promoted (some 1500 years before Freud) the notion of “original sin” as an innately negative and permanent quality of personhood as such.

But the feeling of shame is neither uniquely Augustinian, or Western, or even Christian, nor is it limited to the other Levantine monotheisms such as Islam, Judaism, or Zoroastrianism. Indeed, it is not uncommon in many religious communities around the world. It is exemplified in East Asia in the Aum Shinrikyo of Japan, where there is no single transcendent divinity, and in South Asia in Mahayana Buddhism—where, as in certain monotheisms, there is mooted a benevolent superhuman immaterial entity or spirit with whom disciples learn to passionately desire unity or oneness.

Nonetheless, shame is most powerfully embodied and realized in societies in thrall to the phantasmagoric artistry of monotheist institutions. As exemplified in the actions of the jihadist terrorists behind the suicidal destruction of 9/11, 2001 in New York, whose quite explicit aim, as stated by one of its organizers, the 32-year old Egyptian architect Mohammed Atta, himself on board one of the flights, was *to initiate a new series of religious wars*. Wars that have multiplied and whose devastations, displacements, and genocidal atrocities have strikingly accelerated over the past decade and a half, especially with the growth of what has been proclaimed as an Islamic State (IS, ISIS, or ISIL) and the projected revival of a “caliphate” [a word derived from the Arabic *kalifah*, meaning succession. A caliph as a successor to Mohammed, ruling over the community of the faithful, either (as in Sunni Islam) elected by direct democracy, or (as in Shia Islam), allegedly directly “appointed” by the god].

These were self-proclaimed *acts of destruction and simultaneous self-immolation*, done in the name; the artistry, of the transcendental purity of

divinity. An artistry staged as if it were *not* artifice, *not* theater. As the American theologian and psychologist James Jones observed recently, this commonly entails crafting an *image* of a vengeful, demeaning, patriarchal divinity; one eliciting individual and collective obedience, submission, and purification. For some monotheists, this also entails the earning of divine favor—which, precisely because it can never be securely attained, keeps desire permanently unquenched and in play.

Semiotically speaking, what is going on here? What exactly is such artifice or artistry? I'm going to call such an entity by the ancient Greek technical term used exclusively for *statues of gods*: an *agalma*. It is what psychoanalytic theorist and master semiotician Jacques Lacan once referred to as the "*objet petit a*": the *aporia* at the heart of semiosis, the still center around which revolves the world of signs. A sign that is *not* a sign. The "little a" stands for *agalma*.

Precisely like the Christian ceremonial object, the *eucharist*, the piece of bread that at a singular ceremonial moment comes to present; to be equal or identical to, what at all other times it would symbolize or merely "*re-present*:" the body of the divinity. An act which ironically simultaneously calls attention to the relationality and contingency of *representation*. These very issues were explicitly elaborated upon in the 17th century by the French linguist-theologians of Port-Royal, whose semiotic theory described a universe of contingent signs incorporating, as its enabling center-point, a sign that was *not* a sign and non-contingent: the *eucharist*. In scientific terms, this resembles the kind of massive black hole of *antimatter* said to be at the center of galaxies, and around which all galactic matter revolves.

I referred a moment ago to keeping desire in play, and the evocation of the formal or institutional solicitation of self-sacrifice. Making a sacrifice literally means making (something or someone) sacred. Self-sacrifice, furthermore, entails a *proactive nihilism* explicitly articulated *not* as "*suicide*"—which most monotheisms see as cowardly—but as the dramatic witnessing of the *inadequacies of the self*. In the face of what that imperfection is the negative index of—the perfection of an absolutely transcendent and unattainable Real; the artistry of divinity; the absolute and complete purity of the idea of the god. Lacan argued that art is the most explicit

staging of the impossibility of desire gaining access to its final object. Manifested as the artifice of determination within indeterminacy. Indeterminacy's *interior other*: its *theatricality*. This entails what in Greek Orthodox theology is termed *apophaticism*: knowledge of (the) god obtained by negation.

Those incorrectly called in the contemporary media "suicide bombers" are in fact performing the monotheist ritual of sacrificing the imperfections of *their own selves* so as to ostensify, reveal, or witness what that inadequacy is the *antithesis* of: the purity and absolute perfection of the god. A supremely semiological act of self-knowledge as self-(re)creation or re-birthing through the theatricality of self-erasure. Where impending *invisibility* (death) is made visibly legible as an affirmation of life.

Such an act is structurally akin to making a woman's body invisible by veiling or concealment; so as to *make visible* her "purity." An *allomorph* of female genital ex-cision or clitorrectomy as a negative index of sexual purity. Itself resonating with male genital alteration or *circum-cision*, the removal of a foreskin and, in Jewish monotheism, its transference by replacement on the head and left arm as a *phylactery*—a square leather box containing a piece of skin (or paper). The artistry of absence as a witness of future potency. Recall the deliberately empty section of Daniel Liebeskind's Holocaust Museum in Berlin, signifying the city's removed Jewish population.

The subtitle of my talk—*Plato's Dilemma*—referred to Plato's patent ambivalence in reaction to what he saw as the inconsistencies, incoherencies, and the very palpable messiness of his own social world: the *direct democracy* of the Athenian city-state. He proposed *banishing* (despite their obvious allure) the representational or mimetic arts—notably theater, sculpture, and painting—because in no small measure they had the power to seriously trouble or disturb the allegedly pure and ordered selves or "souls" of citizens.

Plato's solution to the danger, and what he termed the holy fear or divine terror (*theios phobos*) of art seems (from a modern perspective) strikingly disingenuous. It lay not in something entirely different, something that was beyond or external to artistry. He was supremely aware that all that we call reality is social fiction and illusion

(that is, artistry). His cure was in more *better* art. By which he meant an art that *coherently and consistently* echoed, reflected, and re-presented what was the greater order of the universe; the cosmos. This is more in line with what we would consider today a cure by *inoculation*—that is, by using a serum derived from what poisoned you to build up a resistance to that illness. Therapeutic semiology.

Plato's case for reforming and reconfiguring ancient Athens as a theocratic utopia, ruled by a philosopher-king purportedly in synch with divinity, affords not a few contemporary similarities. For example, the actions and proposals by the contemporary American Tea Party (for whom the "cure" for the contestable meanings of the 18th century US political document and literary artifact or constitution was to canonize and reframe it theologically: as literally an object of idolatry). Or consider the psychopathic genocidal thugs and gangsters of ISIS or the "Islamic State" (IS / ISIL), or their mirror-image ethnic-cleansing cousins in the Israeli colony in Palestine, whose ongoing territorial appropriations and displacements of indigenous populations were "authorized" by the convenient fiction; the artistry, of being a *gift* or endowment by a transcendent tribal god. A material world *secured* by immateriality; playing the game of territorial acquisition with what has aptly been called a theological "get-out-of-reality-free" card.

In *Ta Politeia*, arguably the earliest extensively argued and documented philosophical—and as I'm arguing here, theological and semiological—speculation on the nature of the artifice or artistry of *mimesis* or representation, Plato voiced his deep ambivalence about the *uncanniness* of art. That is, its paradoxical ability to simultaneously create *and* potentially problematize the hegemonic political and religious powers imagined to be materialized, embodied, or merely "re-presented" in and as people's forms and practices. Art itself deeply destabilizes and renders indeterminate and mutable seemingly secure oppositions between fact and fiction, history and poetry, reason and emotion, the sacred and the secular, materiality and immateriality. Contrasts that are revealed or made apparent as the circumstantial, contingent, and mutable products and effects of artistry.

What art creates, then, is *both* a "second world" (a heterotopia) alongside the world in which we live, *and* the very *topos* or world in which we

do live. It is *both illocutionary and perlocutionary*: creating *and* declaring or presenting that of which it speaks. The holy fear that Plato claimed art induced in the souls of citizens was the terrifying awareness of precisely this paradox: that works of artistry don't simply imitate or reflect but rather create and open up a world. In Derridean terms, *mythomorphic*.

Art consequently *really is dangerous*, because it makes available to common understanding that *what we take to be reality is a work of art*: "the fictions of factual representation," as the historian Hayden White once phrased it. Art is terrifying precisely because *it makes it possible for ordinary citizens to imagine the world otherwise*. Other than what their rulers would wish (or command) them to believe as real, natural, fixed, and true. Nothing could be more deeply threatening to those holding or desiring power than these two things: (1) that reality really is a fiction, and (2) that it can consequently really be changed.

There is what I'll call a *Praxitelean* impulse shared by politics and theology: the drive to *erase* the marks or traces of their manufacture; their artistry. The *fine art of artlessness*, in other words—an essential feature or quality of any political hegemony, and especially, to recall Hannah Arendt, any totalitarian or theocratic power. The motivation of which, of course, being to forestall the need to even think about discussing what is already claimed to be fixed and sacred and eternal. Any political system concerned with the organization and management of daily life would thereby seem best grounded and legitimized not merely (if at all) in discourse, discussion, and parliamentary negotiation, but in effectively *tethering* materiality to immateriality; the physical to the metaphysical; the palpable to the virtual; the world you see to a more enduring (albeit invisible) world of transcendence. That cosmological realm that is the antithesis of whatever is palpable. Plato's solution to his own dilemma, voiced two and a half millennia ago, is replicated in theocratic and totalitarian polities ever since.

And my "tragedy of purity"? The rhetorical logic of such an *antithetically-grounded* (theater of) *purity* was in fact explicitly articulated a decade ago by Joseph Ratzinger, the (currently emeritus) western Christian pope Benedict XVI. He strongly argued for the importance and indeed the *utter necessity* of art, precisely because *its very imperfections and impurities were*

legible indexically; as negative indexes—powerfully eliciting an unquenchable desire for the antithetically perfect, the pure, the fixed, the eternally immutable and immortal; the god. This entails, as noted above, what in Greek Orthodox theology is termed *apophaticism*.

Jacques Derrida once observed that it was “a divine teleology that secure[d] the political economy of the fine arts.” From a semiotic perspective, I would argue that Derrida’s assertion conjures up its ghostly obverse as equally cogent: that it has been aesthetics, or artistry broadly construed, that has always secured or grounded the political economy of religiosities, or “divine teleologies.” In the most general sense, artistry and religiosities are inextricable semiological and epistemological processes; variant positions taken on putative relations between objects, entities, and individual or collective subjects.

In conclusion, I trust it will have been clear that these brief remarks were intended as much interrogatively and hypothetically as they have been staged as assertions and theses. One can but stand in astonishment in the face of what I’ve called “the tragedy of purity,” and with what that theatricality has wrought in very real suffering, death, and destruction in so many societies around the world. Any hope for redemption in all this is what I’ve tried to weave into these remarks from the outset - stepping-stoned in the references made to the diverse writers I’ve cited. Which you are invited to take up as your homework. The texts and authors I’ve touched upon create an epistemological, philosophical, semiological and indeed an ethical trajectory which I might perhaps call a *theological semiography*. Which I’ll voice here again, finally and simply, as the courage to confront the truth of fiction as fiction; the real as artistry and artifice: the uncanny home we as social beings have been fabricating forever as reality’s very real fiction.

Art permits us to see fiction as fiction; to see with eyes wide open the fictiveness or contingency, the stagecraft and in short the tragedy of the artistry of the world. As the poet Wallace Stevens put it decades ago in a text he called “Opus Posthumous,” *The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is fiction and that you believe it willingly.* I’ve been suggesting that art and religion are semiotically *imbricated*—manifestations of *alternative signifying processes*, the essential

cohabitation of the *semiotic* and the *eucharistic*—the distinction between a sign and a sign that is not a sign. Between—in terms explicitly used in the 13th century AD by Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica*—*adequation* and *equation* What was foregrounded here was the conundrum of *representation* itself, of which *theism* was its most alluring and terrorizing manifestation.

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Social science fiction

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Social science fiction is a subgenre of science fiction, usually soft science fiction, concerned less with technology/space opera and more with speculation about human society. In other words, it "absorbs and discusses anthropology", and speculates about human behavior and interactions.^[1]

External video

 Sumer- A short social science fiction film.

Exploration of fictional societies is a significant aspect of science fiction, allowing it to perform predictive (*The Time Machine* (1895); *The Final Circle of Paradise*, 1965) and precautionary (*Brave New World*, 1932; *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 1949; *Childhood's End*, *Fahrenheit 451*, 1953) functions, to criticize the contemporary world (*Gulliver's Travels*, 1726; *Antarctica-online*) and to present solutions (*Walden Two*, *Freedom*TM), to portray alternative societies (*World of the Noon*) and to examine the implications of ethical principles, as for example in the works of Sergei Lukyanenko.^[2]

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In English

Social fiction is a broad term to describe any work of speculative fiction that features social commentary (as opposed to, say, hypothetical technology) in the foreground. Social science fiction is a subgenre thereof, where social commentary (cultural or political) takes place in a sci-fi universe. Utopian and dystopian fiction is a classic, polarized genre of social science fiction, although most works of science fiction can be interpreted as having social commentary of some kind or other as an important feature. It is not uncommon, therefore, for a sci-fi work to be labeled as social sci-fi as well as numerous other categories.

Thomas More's book *Utopia* (1516) represents an early example of the genre. Another early classic writer, Jonathan Swift, penned critical views on current society—his most famous work, *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), is an example of a novel that is partially social science fiction (with such classic sci-fi elements as pioneering in strange new worlds and experimenting with variations of the human anatomy) and partially high fantasy (e.g., fantastical races that satirize various sectors of society).

One of the writers who used science fiction to explore the sociology of near-future topics was H. G. Wells, with his classic *The Time Machine* (1895) revealing the human race diverging into separate branches of Eloi and Morlocks as a consequence of class inequality: a happy pastoral society of Eloi preyed upon by the Morlocks but yet needing them to keep their world functioning—a thinly veiled criticism of capitalist society, where the exploiter class, or the bourgeoisie, is symbolized by the useless, frivolous Eloi, and the exploited working class, or the proletariat, is represented by the subterranean-dwelling, malnourished Morlocks. Wells' *The Sleeper Awakes* (1899, 1910) predicted the spirit of the 20th century: technically advanced, undemocratic and bloody. Next to prognoses of the future of society if current social problems persisted, as well as depictions of alien societies that are exaggerated versions of ours (exemplified by *The War of the Worlds* of 1897), Wells also heavily criticized the then-popular concept of vivisection, experimental "psychiatry" and research that was done for the purpose of restructuring the human mind and memory (clearly emphasized in *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, 1896).

Other early examples of influential novels include *Vril, the Power of the Coming Race* (1871) by Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *Erewhon* (1872) by Samuel Butler, *Looking Backward: 2000-1887* (1888) by Edward Bellamy and *News from Nowhere* (1890) by William Morris

In the U.S. the new trend of science fiction away from gadgets and space opera and toward speculation about the human condition was championed in pulp magazines of the 1940s by authors such as Robert A. Heinlein and by Isaac Asimov, who coined the term "social science fiction" to describe his own work.^[3] The term is not often used today except in the context of referring specifically to the changes that took place in the 1940s, but the subgenre it defines is still a mainstay of science fiction.

Utopian fiction eventually gave birth to a negative and often more cynical genre, known as dystopian: Aldous Huxley's "negative utopia" *Brave New World* (1932) and, *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) by George Orwell. "The thought-destroying force" of McCarthyism influenced Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953). Examples of young adult dystopian fiction include *The Hunger Games* (2008) by Suzanne Collins, *The House of the Scorpion* (2002) by Nancy Farmer, *Divergent* (2011) by Veronica Roth, *The Maze Runner* (2009) by James Dashner, and *Delirium* (2011) by Lauren Oliver.

The Chrysalids (1955) by John Wyndham explored the society of several telepathic children in a world hostile to such differences. Robert Sheckley studied polar civilizations of criminal and stability in his 1960 novel *The Status Civilization*.

The modern era of social science fiction began with the 1960s, when authors such as Harlan Ellison, Brian Aldiss, William Gibson and Frank Herbert wrote novels and stories that reflected real-world political developments and ecological issues, but also experimented in creating hypothetical societies of the future or of parallel populated planets. Ellison's main theme was the protest against increasing militarism. Kurt Vonnegut wrote *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), which used the science-fiction storytelling device of time-travel to explore anti-war, moral, and sociological themes. Frederik Pohl's series *Gateway* (1977 — 2004) combined social science fiction with hard science-fiction. Modern exponents of social science fiction in the Campbellian/Heinlein tradition include L. Neil Smith who wrote both *The Probability Broach* (1981) and *Pallas*, which dealt with alternative "sideways in time" futures and what a libertarian society would look like. He is considered the heir to Robert A. Heinlein's individualism and libertarianism in science fiction.^[4]

Kim Stanley Robinson explored different models of the future in his *Three Californias Trilogy* (1984, 1988, 1990).

The Saga of Recluce (1991 — now), by L. E. Modesitt, Jr. represents a fusion of science fiction and fantasy that can be described as social science fiction. The 13 books of the series describe the changing relationships between two technologically advanced cultures and the cultures of a primitive world to which each is involuntarily transported. Themes of gender stereotyping, sexism, ethics, economics, environmentalism and politics are explored in the course of the series, which examines the world through the eyes of all its protagonists.

Doris Lessing won the 2007 Nobel Prize for literature. Although mostly known for her mainstream works, she wrote numerous notable works of social science fiction, including *Memoirs of a Survivor* (1974), *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (1971), the *Canopus in Argos* series (1974–1983), and *The Cleft* (2007).

Examples from the 1940s

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See also

- Anthropological science fiction
- Cyberpunk
- Design fiction
- Fable
- Libertarian science fiction
- Political ideas in science fiction

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