

REVIEW ARTICLE

THE DANCE OF LIFE. E.T. Hall, 1983.
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E.T. Hall is a well-known and respected writer among those who labour in the fields and vineyards of the anthropology of human movement. His work in proxemics (The Silent Language and The Hidden Dimension) represents an invaluable contribution. This recent book seems to represent a new kind of format and it is one about which this writer has serious misgivings. Feelings of unease began with these statements on page 2:

William Whitehead edited the original manuscript and was, in addition, the source of much needed advice and counsel when it was in the crucial formative stages...My agent, Carl Brandt, has always played two roles, both of which are important to any author. For me, he has represented the public and in that capacity he provides an unbiased mind which responds creatively to what I have written (underlines supplied).

Not only was this book "edited" in the original, it is apparently mandated by a "representative of the public" who has "an unbiased mind". These are strange phrases which might be attributed to the rhetoric of prefaces, yet further reading seemed to indicate that there was something else going on: admittedly, American editing practices are frequently heavy-handed and presumptuous, but in this case, one really wants to know more about who Mr. Whitehead is so that one can assess the weight of his "advice and counsel" and its relevance. Then, too, it would be interesting to meet Mr. Brandt, who is surely unique among human beings in his possession of an "unbiased mind". The point? Readers may be confused, as I was, about who is accountable for the book and to whom it is addressed.

It did not assist me to be told that

The nonverbal, behavioral part of communication is the provenance of the common man and the core culture that guides his life. This complex of feedback, local wisdom and feelings is generally ignored or disparaged by our leaders (page 4).

By whose leaders? "Leaders" in what? And what are we to make of the following?:

Culture is not just a concept invented by anthropologists, any more than stratigraphy is a concept invented by geologists or evolution by Darwin. Culture is no more a concept than earth, air, or water. All of these things -- including evolution -- exist completely independent of what people believe. There are, of course, conceptual aspects of culture -- i.e. our belief systems concerning the universe (pages 4-5).

Who says, or said, that evolution was invented by Darwin or that the concept of culture was invented by anthropologists? Are these statements made for the benefit of -- or were they suggested by -- Whitehead, or were they added to instruct Brandt's unbiased mind?

If "culture is no more a concept than earth, air, or water" (what happened to fire?), then what are the "conceptual aspects of culture" that are defined as "our belief systems concerning the universe", and are these a part of "culture" or not? Contradictions and confusions of this kind, as far as I know, would rate a 'C' or a 'D' on an undergraduate essay, but we have not been led to expect this kind of thing from Hall.

If culture is homologous to earth, air, or water, as we are led to believe, then it belongs to that set of intransitive objects of knowledge (well known to philosophers of science and many social anthropologists) that includes gravity and much else in the universe that was not invented or 'created' by human beings. Is it possible, I asked myself, that a senior social scientist is apparently unaware of a central paradox of science, i.e. that there are intransitive objects of knowledge available for study and transitive objects of knowledge, the latter generated by human beings, of which "culture" is surely a part? If, however, "culture" is an intransitive object of knowledge, as Hall says it is, then how and in what ways does it "exist completely independent of what people believe"?

Gravity? Yes, that is intransitive. Culture? No. Of the hundreds of examples that could be adduced, many of them from Hall's own work, one would want to point to religious orders (Williams, 1976), or dance companies or any structured system of human action signs (Williams, 1982), or to corporations or universities and ask if these manifestations of human culture and language exist independently of what people believe? One would have thought that these institutions exist precisely because people believe that they should exist and that they are important to human life and social intercourse.

The kind of talk and argumentation alluded to above may impress Hall's agent and his editor, whose main purpose in life, I imagine, is to sell books, but it cannot impress those of us who are well-acquainted with current discourse in the philosophy of science and social anthropology. None of this readership, I believe, would be impressed, either, with the "fence" that is described as existing between Hall and "many western social scientists" who

like pre-Copernican philosophers, hold that Western philosophical scientific models and, by association, Newtonian models are applicable to all cultures. They see time as a constant in the analysis of culture, and they also see Western science and Western thought as more advanced than other systems of thought. This position is epitomized by Yale University's Leonard Doob, who has written extensively on time in the cross-cultural context (page 5).

Quite honestly, one can only feel embarrassment for a senior colleague who trivializes important discussion and debate in this way, epitomizing the position of "western social scientists" by the thought of one obviously ethnocentric individual at Yale University who insists (as Gellner and some others do) on trying to maintain western political supremacy and at the same time maintain Newtonian models of space/time this late in the 20th century. The only relevant question, it seems to me, is "what's new"? There are still a few in the social sciences who believe that the cephalic index can tell us who is more intelligent among the sexes and/or races too, and one can only say "so what"?

All of this is meant to provide background for a discussion of a major flaw which seems to reappear over and over in all of Hall's published work: a feature of the format of his books that seems to rest on an oversimplified structure of argument that consists mainly of a presentation of "scientific" argument and evidence that is invariably followed by many pages of really good ethnographic data, interpretation and insights. In Hidden Dimension, for example, this constituted an exegesis of "critical distance" based on ethologists' findings in animals, followed by a discussion of human forms of life. In The Dance of Life, this format falls down because there aren't any notions of time in the animal world that are comparable to the biologically triggered mechanism of critical distance. Given the complexity and recondite nature of scholarly discussions of time (most of which Hall completely ignores), the author had to settle for something, so we are treated to a rather aimless discussion of the nature of "culture" and ethnocentric western social scientists. To be fair, Hall admits that

the biologists and ethologists who have done such an extraordinary job recording the spatial and territorial behavior of other life forms haven't come up with comparable material on time. [Nor, we might add, will they be able to.] If there ever was a body of work governed by words which epitomizes Western thinking, it is time. In fact, if one reviews the field not for insights into the nature of time, but as a giant case study of Western thought, then things begin to make sense (page 8).

Unfortunately, the 'sense' to which Hall refers is going to get through to his anthropological readers only with great difficulty, if at all, because of the fact that we will not understand why "Western thinking" is singled out as "a body of work governed by words" on time. One

would have thought that any ethnicity's notions of time could be characterized as a "body of work governed by words" because all human domains are characterized by the use of language. Who is Hall angry with and why? Why the veiled, oblique references to some undifferentiated "Western thinking"? One would much prefer honest, direct criticisms of those whom Hall finds offensive -- at least that might provoke some lively debate! As it is, Hall makes himself vulnerable to that kind of criticism; e.g. he has obviously never read Hampshire (1970) who pointed out that in the human domain, spatial points of reference are points of application for linguistic predicates, thus explaining (among many other things) why biologists and ethologists have not come up with "materials" from the domain of language-less creatures on time.

One keeps searching for the implicit messages. For example, I do not doubt that Hall has a legitimate basis for latter-day dissatisfactions with his early training in American cultural anthropology. I have great sympathy for those dissatisfactions and perhaps that is what the exercise of writing this book was all about, but it has apparently taken him most of a lifetime to arrive at that which, to some of us, are necessary beginnings and fundamental anthropological insights. For instance, Pocock's work on the idea of a personal anthropology has been with us since 1973, and his essay on the anthropological reckoning of time for longer than that. Although I will admit that these (and other comparable works are not easily available, is this a legitimate excuse for ignoring them? But this refers back to my original sense of uneasiness about his book: editors and literary agents might find Pocock, Hampshire, Durkheim and countless others who did not find their way into Hall's discussion of time somewhat heavy going. Yet, we (and they) live in a world that has included Kuhn, Polanyi, Harré, Čapek, Grene and others in philosophy, and Ardener, Pocock, Needham, Sahlins, Beidelman and others in anthropology. Moreover, there is at least a corner of the discipline that is presently concerned over a different consensual notion of 'objectivity' (See Varela, 1984, for further discussion), and there are many of us who are trying to grapple with the notion of time/space and motion and ethnographic description.

Throughout his recent book, Hall expresses dissatisfaction with low-powered, unsophisticated social scientific models of explanation. There is no doubt that these exist, but why aren't there references to writers who avoid the use of these? It is difficult to tell whether the author's omissions are deliberate, or if they are a function of his lack of knowledge, or if the omissions reflect a growing cynicism. He characterizes himself as wholly unique and individual and seems to view his own work as if it existed in a vacuum or as if no one had ever thought of such subjects before:

I discovered a system of behavior going on under our very noses about which virtually nothing was known. It was known, however, that people respond proxemically in all cultures. Whenever the proxemic patterns and mores were violated, people reacted in

readily observable and predictable ways...I was not prepared for the richness and the detail of those visual records (films) when they were subjected to the frame-by-frame analysis of a time-motion analyzer. Unfolding before my very eyes was a perpetual ballet. Each culture, of course, was choreographed in its own way, with its own beat, tempo, and rhythm. Beyond this there were individual performances, pairs dancing out their own dramas, and beneath all this was the truth of interpersonal encounters -- particularly those of the interethnic variety -- the specifics of behavior that may engender misunderstanding, prejudice, and even hate..." (page 142).

This kind of talk sounds all too familiar to those of us who have been forced to live with Lomax, "choreometrics" and the many naive accounts of his discussions with Bartenieff and Pauley during his first 'love affair' with the notion of dancing, but that is probably irrelevant. What is relevant is this: who, we may ask, "choreographs" cultures? What justification does Hall have for accusing others of "pre-Copernican thought" when he plunges us (in the above passage) straight into Zeno's paradoxes of motion -- and provides no thread out of the labyrinth, indeed, he seems unaware of the fact that there is one. "Frame-by-frame analysis" indeed!

Hall's goal with this book, he tells us, "is to use time as a means of gaining insight into culture" (page 6). Does that mean that we cannot gain insights into "time" by using "culture"? He says that he does not believe that the latter is possible -- or if it is, then only in a "narrow" sense. This, we are further told, has "deep implications" (page 6), but what those implications are, we never find out. Instead, he introduces a "basic point" because "most of what follows it subsumes it" (or is subsumed under it -- I was never clear); namely, there is an underlying, hidden level of culture that is highly patterned -- a set of unspoken, implicit rules of behavior and thought that controls everything we do (page 6; underline supplied). We are never told of what this "hidden level of culture" consists, we are only told that it is there, reminiscent of the bogey-man under the stairs.

In this reviewer's theoretical frame of reference, such 'hidden' levels are clear and explicit (See Williams, 1976, 1977, 1979, 1982). For the purposes of this essay, it is enough to ask, (a) given that all human actions take place within the dimensions of up/down, right/left, inside/outside and front/back in a context of different time frames, and (b) given that the degrees of freedom for the human expressive body have been determined (See Williams, et al, 1981) and (c) given that some of the meta-rules of idioms of body languages have been established, what do we make of the notion of "control"? How would Hall respond to a challenge of his statement of determinism? How would he view propositions based on the existence of meta-rules in an intransitive dimension, but in spite of their existence, they do not control?

But, all this is 'academic', so to speak, because Hall's book leaves one with the impression that whole areas of anthropological research and evidence do not even exist. Perhaps to Hall, they do not, but that does not render our criticisms of his serendipitous approach to aspects of space and time and human actions invalid or irrelevant. Graduate students would (I trust) be sent 'back to the drawing board' for this kind of thing. I fail to see the rationale for senior scholars getting away with it. Given the postulation of something like "hidden levels of culture", investigators are meant to be prepared to answer the questions 'of what do these "hidden levels" consist?' and 'how are they to be dealt with ethnographically?' If there are no answers, or if there are only verbal gymnastics, then no matter how intriguing, seductive or provocative the written performance may be, it is empty. Hall's "hidden cultural grammar", he says, "defines the way in which people view the world, determines their values, and establishes the basic tempo and rhythms of life. Most of us are either totally unaware or else only peripherally aware of this" (page 6).

Hall conflates rules with meta-rules, grammars with structure, intransitive objects of knowledge with transitive objects of knowledge and his statements, on the whole, conflict with known features of human will, intention, agency and freedoms, but it is in his computer analogy (presumably meant to be a paramorphic model of human life and actions) that he reveals the full naiveté of his formulations:

[hidden cultural grammar] is somewhat analogous to the hardware of a computer. Conscious, explicit, manifest culture, the part that people can talk about and describe, is analogous to the software -- the computer programs (page 6).

The author's analogy does not classify as a successful anthropological description of the human estate because the sentences he uses to convey the analogy between "manifest culture" and "software" on the one hand, and "hidden cultural grammar" and "hardware" on the other, are not so constructed as to convey the elements of either. Nor do they ascribe properties to them that either actually possesses.

We are to believe that all conscious, explicit, manifest culture (which would have to include events, objects, locations, directions, language-use and much else) is the "software" and that "hidden cultural grammar" (the nature and properties of which are never explained) is the "hardware" in a vague, ill-conceived system of determinants that programs people and "output" alike. Perhaps we are to subsume everything he says under this mind-boggling existential hypothesis, which I am sure Hall would rationalize as "only a metaphorical usage" or something of the kind.

Are we to imagine that humanity lives on a planet that is analogous to an immense piece of computer hardware, or that what we see and participate in every day is a piece of ethnic software, or what? Later, we are told that

most intercultural relations are conducted as though there are only slight differences in the software and none in the hardware, as though the only differences are those which are representative of explicit, manifest culture, while all of the underlying PLC (Primary Level Culture) are identical...The results of treating members of other cultures as though we are all programmed in the same way can range from the humorous through the painful to the tragic and even destructive...Primary level culture has core components which pattern our thinking and which give us sets of underlying assumptions for arriving at the "truth" (page 6).

The term 'truth' often crops up in popular assessments and explanations of the sciences, 'social' or otherwise. Discussions of truth abound in general philosophy. Many scientists are concerned with truthful description, interpretation and explanations of their subjects of investigation and with what seem to be related goals: accuracy, concision, objectivity and such. The search for 'truth' might be said to be a central epistemological concept in the sciences, but there are criteria for 'true' statements in these disciplines that are to be found in considering the ways in which simple declarative statements are made and how analogies, models, evidence, functions and information are used in social scientific disciplines. Harré asks,

How can we know that some group of words is a report of the way things are? The answer to this problem is the key to the whole group of questions about truth...When we grasp the idea of truth, what we have grasped, I believe, is the idea that arrangements and qualities of things expressing propositions to one who can 'read' them, that is, to one who has learned to observe; that is to one who can do something other than just see. A statement is true when it is made by means of a sentence which can be understood to express the same proposition as the arrangement of things, or state of the things to which attention has been directed [and] can be understood as showing to a sufficiently experienced observer. The function of demonstrative conventions is to ensure that our attention is drawn to the right place at the appropriate time, that is, to the place in which we are supposed to see that such and such is the case; that is to observe the state of affairs (Harré, '1970:191-92).

Hall's computer analogy simply isn't true. If he were a novelist, that would not matter. Because he is an anthropologist, and because he wields such influence on upcoming generations in the struggling young field of the anthropology of human movement, it does. It matters because the literature of the dance field, especially, is distressingly encumbered with superficiality and trivializations. It is a shame when a writer who has capabilities far beyond this engages in what

appears to be an exercise in self-indulgence, which is in the end, how I feel obliged to assess this book. That such efforts "sell", I have no doubt, but in the long run, that is scarcely ample justification for a work which is purported to address anthropological problems of time and cultural explanation.

We now possess several books entitled The Dance of Life: it is to those deemed to have some relevance to the study of anthropology of the dance to which I will refer. Perhaps it is to Havelock Ellis that we owe the often-repeated euphemism that life is a dance (1923) and the strikingly unprofound statement that may have led him to that conclusion, i.e. 'the dance is the basis of all the arts that find their origin in the human body'. What human activity does not find its origin or have some intimate connection with the human body? Why is the dance singled out as the basis of it all -- surely a doubtful privilege, given the reams of non-sense that the notion seems to have generated regarding dancing, dances and the dance.

It is to Ram Dass (pseudonym for Alpert, of the Leary-Alpert team, once at Harvard, famous for their contributions to American drug culture) that we also owe many references to the dance of life in his book entitled The Only Dance There Is (1974). He may have been influenced in his choice of title by the nationality that he eventually identified with -- India, in whose venerable and resplendent array of dance traditions and religion we can find the image of Shiva's cosmic dance. My reading of this book, however, causes me to doubt that much of the reality of these traditions found its way into the subjective stream of consciousness of this self-styled American guru's efforts.

Now, we have Hall's 'life-dance', which is about 'time', and which in some aspects is similar to Ram Dass's offering in that he attempts a generalized cultural criticism of the West in a chapter entitled "The East and the West" (page 85ff). It is a chapter that boiled down is a chapter of platitudes: 1. It is rewarding to study culture; 2. We should discontinue our fascination with technology and pay more attention to the human spirit; 3. One's personal experience is a part of the anthropological experience; 4. It may be a good idea to try to understand Zen Buddhism; 5. The "element lacking" in cross-cultural studies is "the existence of adequate models to gain more insight into the processes going on inside people while they are thinking and communicating" and 6. "We need to know more about how people think in different cultures, as well as how they organize and explain ideas" (both quotations on page 86), and so on and on and on.

My suggestion would be that Hall needs to know more about how people in his own field of research think and how they organize and explain ideas about time/space, motion and such. My further suggestion to anyone who writes on the subject of anthropology and the dance or

anthropology and human actions is that they begin by disabusing themselves of the notion (perhaps taken from their editors and agents) that they are endowed with unique insights into such centuries-old imponderables as 'time', and that they resist the temptation to ignore history and on-going scholarship in favour of trendy colloquialisms and current fashion.

Drid Williams

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