

A New Role for Culture

Not only did the Ecumenical Order, or Institute for Cultural Affairs, effect the complete renewal of the Chicago ghetto known as Fifth City; many other development projects were carried out worldwide, which were adapted to all the aspects of the local culture. What made all of this possible was a key event that took place in the early 1970s and molded the vision of ICA. In 1971 the Order: Ecumenical—introduced in chapter 2—conducted a worldwide global research project, surveying more than one thousand books concerning the social question. It was a worldwide study involving about one thousand individuals worldwide. Conversations were guided by the facilitative processes that are known by the designation “Technology of Participation.” The global research produced an insight that—as naïve as it may appear at first reading—was actually a major breakthrough: that culture could be added on an equal footing to politics and the economy, as a third, independent area of society. From this breakthrough were born the “social process triangles,” of which more will be said presently.¹ The independent role of culture in the social arena was the key contribution of the model. The new emphasis on culture and the shift away from the original religious focus led to the organization’s adoption of its new name—Institute for Cultural Affairs—in 1973.

The social question, ICA argued, can be articulated through the contribution of the economic, political, and cultural commonalities. These three major processes of society take their impulse from three basic drives found in all humans and in all societies. The first is the *drive for survival, resources, livelihood, and money* (the economic dimen-

sion of life); without it there can be no decision making and no consciousness. The second is the *drive for order*, the drive for the organization of society through law-making and law-enforcing bodies so that there is security and justice for all (the political dimension of society). Third is the *drive for meaning* (the cultural component of society), which bestows significance on both the economic and the political dimensions of society.² The interrelationship between the three commonalities was conceived thus:

To be a social human being is to be inexorably involved in issues of sustenance and survival (economic); of ordering and organizing society to overcome chaos (political); and of education, family, and community, and the celebration of life and death (cultural). These three, together with all the particular processes that make them up, create the whole system that we call society, or the social process. Because the social process is systemic, any malfunction in any one part will reverberate through the whole system. The same goes for the good things going on in any one part. In addition, if there is not some kind of basic balance between the three major processes, the whole social process suffers.³

Regarding the state of balance or imbalance of the system, these were some of the conclusions of the research:

The ideal (rarely found) is a balanced tension between the economic, the political, and the cultural. When this happens, society is in a healthy state. When these three processes of society are not held in balance, society gets sick. When we are deprived of the means of adequate livelihood, political chaos and rioting can re-

sult. When we are deprived of participation in the political process, our livelihood is likely to suffer while masters grow rich on the resources denied us. When our culture is taken away from us, we easily become political and economic victims, or find our lives devoid of meaning.⁴

ICA used triangles as a convenient symbol for showing the connections between the three sectors. The first-level triangle (Figure 5.1) quite simply introduces the reality of the three commonalities, but it also brings out something more than the obvious.

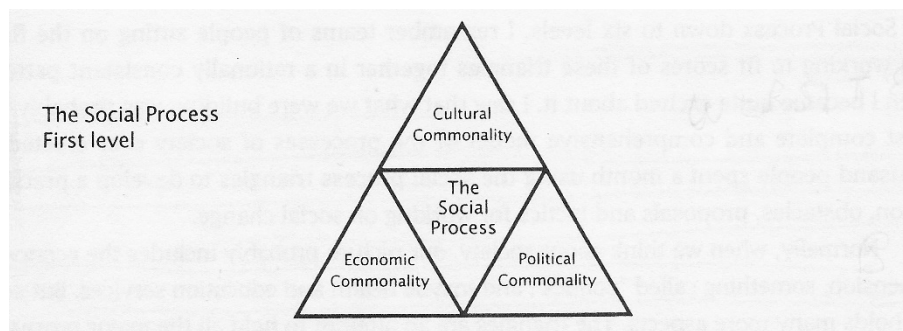


Figure 5.1: Social process triangles, first level (Stanfield, *The Courage to Lead*, 149).

In this triangle we can see the relationships of three parts

- Foundational (economic): without it the other two cannot go on.
- Ordering or organizational function (political): “the communal pole, which pertains to the relationship of power and decision-making in the midst of any social group”; it “counteracts people’s fundamental tendency to destroy each other, by creating a social contract.”
- Sustaining, meaning-giver (cultural): “this is the dynamic which dramatizes the uniquely human in the triangle; it is the spirit which makes participation in the so-

cial process worthwhile. This is the arena of the symbols, style, and stories which give significance to the whole.”⁵

The placement of the cultural arena at the top of the triangle reveals the determining place it occupies in relation to the other two areas. This perspective offers a counterweight to the present societal illness of an economic system run amok, which is causing havoc in the cultural and political sectors.

Each of the three processes creates, sustains, and limits the other two. Each of the three processes can be broken into its components at deeper levels, and there one would find again the tension between a foundational process (economic component) at the bottom left; a connecting process (political component) at the bottom right; and an informing process (cultural component) at the top.

The first-level triangles, if refined into triangles of higher orders and specificity, can be applied at every level from the community to the national and international levels. There are triangles from the first to the sixth level of detail; the second level is given in Figure 5.2. These illustrations allow us to place any of the smaller processes in society into a comprehensive context, showing how they are connected to the other areas of the social organism, enabling us to assess the health or imbalance of any given social unit. They can offer visualizations of what patterns are at play in a particular situation, thus throwing light on where the leverage points of the whole system are. If action is taken at these points, positive effects will ripple throughout the system. This approach explains the successes that ICA experienced in the United States and worldwide. From Figure 5.2 we can see how each segment of the triangle repeats the threefold ordering.

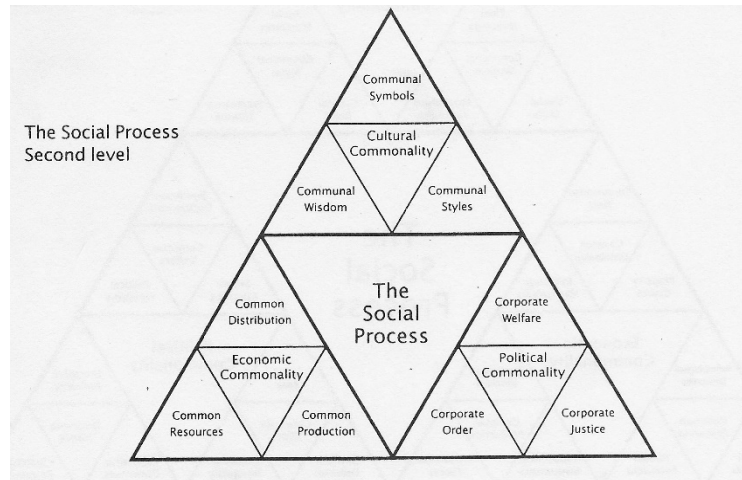


Figure 5.2: Social process triangles, second level (Stanfield, *The Courage to Lead*, 149).

At the second level in the economy, we have resources (economic component); production (political component); and distribution (the cultural component). The same tri-partition is true for the political commonality and the cultural commonality. The analysis of the triangles can be applied to our form of government. At the third level of the political commonality, in the political side of the triangle we find what corresponds to the US national government. When we further break down this side of the triangle, we find executive (economic component), legislative (political component), and judicial (cultural component).

The truly groundbreaking work of ICA condenses everything that has been brought out in this book. ICA's work is a remarkable illustration of the interrelatedness of the processes of change, which culminate in an articulate vision of the primacy of culture, and of the necessity of a conscious collaboration between the three sectors.

In the developments that followed the birth of the social process triangles, ICA also set new precedents. Together with many practicing consultants, it started the International Association of Facilitators and set up a number of international conferences, such as Our Common Future in an Environment of Change (Taipei, 1990); Exploring the Great Transition to Our One World (Prague, 1992); and the Rise of Civil Society in the 21st Century (Cairo, 1996).⁶ Thus, a 1996 conference on civil society heralded the role that civil society played in its coming to birth at the global level in the events around the 1999 WTO conference in Seattle.

At present, restoring the American Dream means a return to the primacy of culture and civil society over economy and corporations, which shackle the political process. Forty years after ICA talked about the state of balance that it sought to achieve between the three sectors, the United States has now become a textbook case of what extreme social imbalances look like. At the root of this colossal dysfunction lies our economic inequality, which is the highest among all industrial nations. In 2011, 42.7 percent of the national wealth was concentrated in the hands of the richest 1 percent; the bottom 80 percent shared a meager 7 percent of the remainder.

The consequences ray out from this simple root cause in all directions, finally affecting us even in our physical well-being. In order to protect this inequality of wealth, the United States devotes almost a quarter of its labor force to security, whether through the military, worldwide military contractors, the police, prisons, or specialized security forces. Not surprisingly, the United States harbors the highest per capita prison population in the world, with seven million people incarcerated in 2007, an estimated 23.5 percent of the world's reported prison population. The costs of this vast enterprise reach a

staggering \$60 billion per year. The American defense budget nearly equals that of all other nations in the world combined. That is easy to believe since the United States maintains some 710 military bases, spread over some eighty countries. Finally, as a predictable consequence, the United States ranks only forty-eighth in terms of individual longevity, yet it spends practically double what most all other countries spend on health care; the per capita number averaged \$2,966 in all OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) countries in 2007, compared to \$7,600 in the United States.⁷

We will now turn to a more recent vision of social development driven from culture. It comes from the work of Otto Scharmer. His contribution to the idea of social renewal has been highlighted in a new understanding of what is possible with social processes of facilitation and decision making and the change process of the so-called U. Scharmer has gone further in bringing the parts to a holistic integration. We turn here to his vision of the integration of a new economy within a new social project.