Culture, creativity, and conceptual dynamics: a structural hypothesis[*]

Per Aage Brandt, Case Western Reserve University

Abstract: We redefine the concept of *concept* and focus on its role in the intersubjective processes that characterize cultures and socio-cultural communities. Conceptual density determines communitary coherence, whereas highly variable conceptual velocity determines inter-conceptual dynamics within distinct conceptual fields of activity. Conflicts opposing force of conceptual authority by *knowledge* value and force of conceptual authority through social *power* lead to states of socio-cultural consensus or dissensus. A model of socio-cultural concept structure is proposed. The *creativity* of concept formation is considered a major factor in historical time; different states of relative balance between creativity and stereotypicity are mentioned, including a dangerous neutralizing alliance of artistic and epistemic creativity on the one hand and technologically enhanced power concepts. In a sense, *thinking* is ubiquitous, but only certain forms of thinking are *creative* – those that minimize the influence of social power and maximize the slow intersubjective processes of shared experience that make culture *be* culture.

1. A culture is a network of interactions

Human world civilization is heterogeneous and distributed over the territorial surface of our planet according to variations in the density of a *network of human interactions* that practically define what we call cultures. From this point of view, a culture is an area characterized by relatively high density of interactions, exchanges and communications, including direct or indirect numerical, textual, commercial, formal or informal exchanges and media-borne shaping and sharing of information and behavior. The ongoing mediatic and computational globalization of such networks affects, but does not eliminate, these variations and differences in interactive density that account for the relative stability of distinct cultural areas of the Earth which constitute what we could call cultural continents. If we look closer at these vast areas, we will see that they are again subdivided into sub-areas separated by tiny zones of low density of interactions; these sub-areas correspond *grosso modo* to our 'countries', territories invested with the interactive institutions pertaining to national states, and often marked by national boundaries. These entities are in fact covered by *semiotic networks* substantiated by phenomena such as: a monetary system (currency); a more or less idiosyncratic writing system (defining literacy and numeracy); a set of predominant spoken languages: administrative languages (law, politics) and various historical and vernacular idioms and dialects; a postal communication system; energy and water systems; and – not least – an informal set of customary places and habits, routines and rituals of conversation, celebration, interpersonal contact, communitary life in general. Social migration of different sorts always creates a certain trans-cultural heterogeneity even at this level, but the social reality of *material production*, with its requirements of organized work and maintained working conditions (health, education), necessarily situated in the framework of what we call 'countries', assures a minimum of conceptual and communicational density on this level.

A culture, on whatever level considered, can thus be conceived as a network of intersubjective interactions manifesting a certain intensity and density; its limits in space or time occur where or when the density of its interactions decreases so importantly that its contents must be *translated* into other cultures in order to circulate.[1]

---

[*] The ideas of this paper grew out of a KULVER seminar on *Culture and the Migration of Concepts*, organized by the Norwegian Ministry of Culture, Oslo, February 2012. A Danish draft has been published in the journal *Kritik* (Brandt 2012).

[1] An intersubjective transaction, consisting in a pair of acts – an addressing act and a responding act – is always conceptual, in the sense that it is regulated by a concept of relevance (otherwise any response could match any address). The *intensity* of a *series* of address-response transactions may be defined by the number of transactions effectuated per time unit (say, per day). It depends on the possible velocity of each transaction, which again depends

2. Socio-cultural acts are conceptually creative.

Any exchange,[2] verbal, numerical, behavioral, objectal, can be seen as involving an event of address (A1) from subject (S1) to subject (S2), and its inverse response (A2):

Figure 1: The anatomy of an exchange

$$S1 \rightarrow A1 \rightarrow S2 \; \& \; S2 \rightarrow A2 \rightarrow S2$$
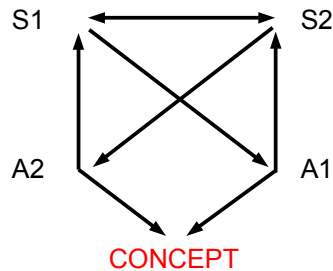
The equivalence between A1 and A2 – whether they be signs or things – must be obtained through a *concept* that allows comparison and establishment of either quantitative or qualitative equilibrium. The superordinate concept – implicit or explicit – is the general equivalent of the exchange, which makes it possible for the participants to determine the closure of the sequence.[3]

A cultural area which is also a society (production, distribution, reproduction, see below) will therefore contain and consist of a multitude of simultaneous exchanges, intersubjective interactions of many types, and every sort of exchange will imply its characteristic concepts. But since exchanges are realized in time, the processes of exchange can be compared as to their variable time frames, or typical velocity. Some processes are fast, others are relatively slow. The shortest time frames imply the most stable concepts: fast exchanges require simple and stable concepts, whereas slow exchanges can be satisfied by more complex and unstable concepts. This will mean that slower intersubjective interactions are potentially more conceptually *creative* than faster ones, which have to be more stereotypical.

All exchanges are of course conceptually creative, the faster ones simply by the fact that their very iterations create mutations and the slower exchanges by the fact that their unfolding allows explicitation of their inherent concepts. These concepts thereby become negotiable, sensitive to individual imaginations. Explicitated concepts unfold as *discourses* in socio-cultural contexts and are normally studied as such. However, socio-cultural discourses may not be the real cognitive cradle of the concepts they involve; instead, the latter may be grounded in the underlying processes of interaction here discussed. In other words, concepts may not even be grounded in language; admittedly, language is conceptually invested, but this may again be due to the underlying interactions.

---

on its referential contents and their concept: its type. There are therefore 'fast concepts' and 'slow concepts'; an extreme example: conversions of currency are significantly faster than translations of poetry. The communicational *density* is then a speculative measure of the integral of intensities of transactions over a certain spatial area. Bal (2002) builds her entire cultural analysis on concepts: "Concepts are the tools of intersubjectivity: they facilitate discussion on the basis of a common language". Virilio (1977) builds his analysis of power relations on the 'speed' of interactions. The considerations presented in this paper are especially inspired by the first installment in Serres' (1968) *Hermès* series, as well as the following four installments (Serres 1972, 1974, 1977, 1980); in particular, Serres' Leibnizian thinking has influenced this approach.

2 On this point, see Brandt (ms).

3 In terms of semiotic mental space theory, the semantic mechanism underlying the stabilization of equivalents can be described as a process of *blending* by which A1 and A2 merge into an imaginary blended A* schematized by the idea of a notion of shared topical content.

3. Conceptual dynamics

In a societal formation, i.e. a cultural area that is also a society, upholding instances and institutions of production, distribution, and reproduction, the different sorts of intersubjective interactions form an articulated whole, a quasi-system that can be schematically generalized by a concentric model like the following, distinguishing processes by decreasing velocity of interactions from (the center):

Figure 2: A concentric model of concept migration
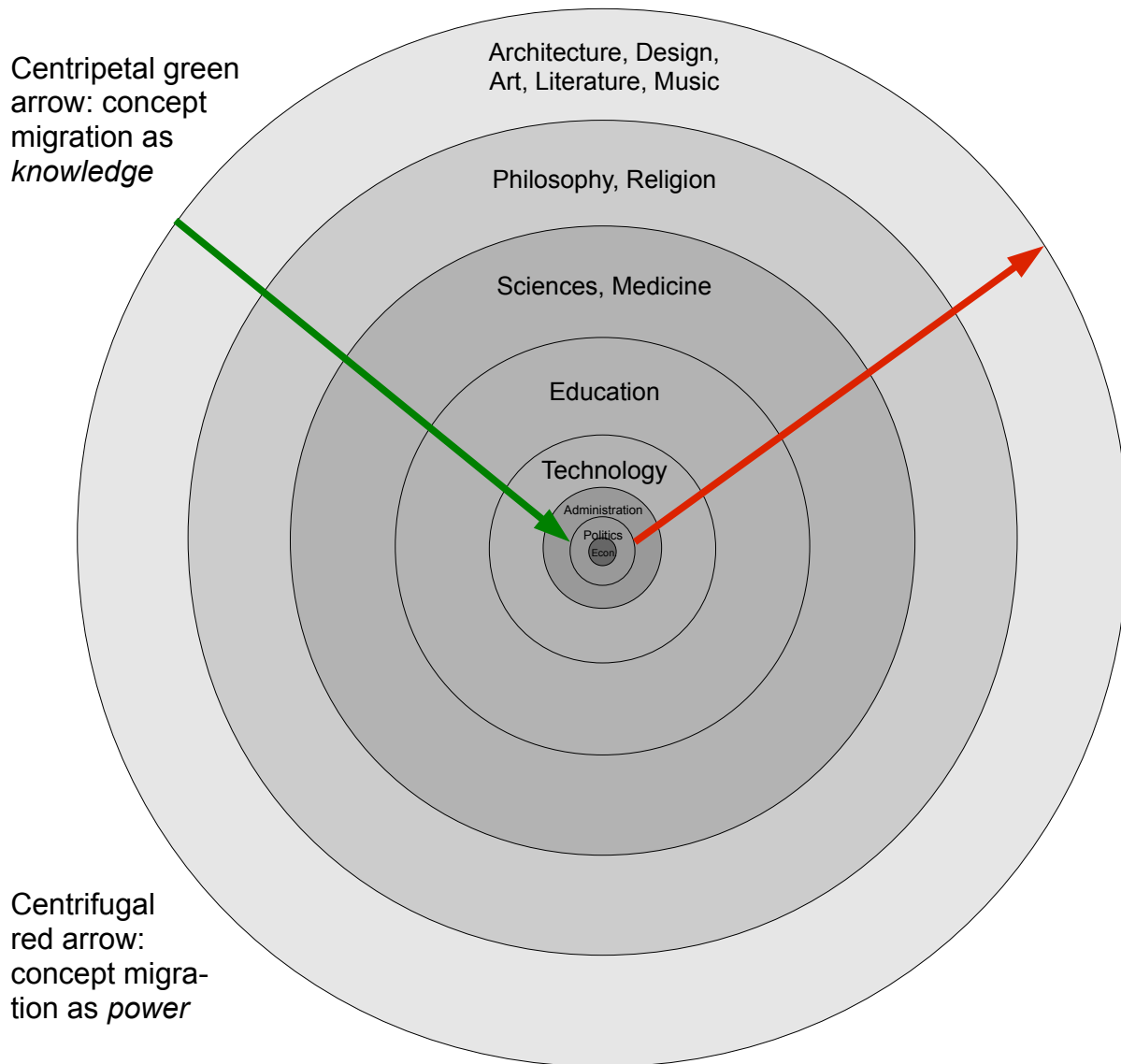
The configuration depicted above is Economy → Politics → Administration → Technology → Education → Science and Medicine → Philosophy and Religion → Art, Architecture, Design, Literature and Music, but there may be other ways to order the list of interactional streams, and there may be other elements or spheres in the concentric conceptual quasi-system, but a model of this 'dromological' kind should yield an overview of the sort of semiotic reality we are analyzing here.

Concepts created in the slower outer spheres will migrate inwards, due to their attractive authority as elements of knowledge, while concepts stamped in the faster inner spheres migrate outwards, by the authoritative force of their social power (to have power over someone is to be

faster than them, by "Virilio's law"). Decision processes gradually flow outwards, while information processes, new ideas, styles, and sensitivities gradually move towards the center. In general, all fields or spheres are of course determined by the crossing and the inherent conflicts between these inverse forces and flows: conceptual dynamics.

The periphery is an aesthetic domain of particularly slow conceptual processes that naturally touches on the corresponding domains of other socio-cultural areas; so, art and literature, music and architecture, etc., will be international and intercultural by nature, while still being conceptually influenced by their local situatedness. On the other hand, the political and economic processes and their concepts will move all surrounding spheres and also reach far beyond their local base by virtue of their high velocity, which connects them to corresponding spheres in other social-cultural areas – financial transactions, and the economy and politics they allow, will be directly connected to other economies and politics as efficiently as the available numerical communication channels permit.

4. Variations

Socio-political styles can be characterized in terms of conceptual dynamics. Authoritarianism, as a socio-cultural style, always shows a predominance of the centrifugal conceptual flows, and therefore often blocks creativity around itself; science, philosophy, art, literature regularly suffer from the demands of faster stereotypes that follow from such centrifugal imbalances in the migratory dynamics. Democratic conjunctures, by contrast, will show a more balanced relation between inward- and outward-bound forces, and will typically rely on approximative concepts of *common sense* resulting from pragmatic compromises between knowledge and power (concepts are half-true and half-useful, so to speak). In social situations of serious political and economic break-down, the slow and creative centripetal conceptual forces can even become predominant, and they will then be able to cause significant cultural changes (examples: the artistic and philosophical culture of the *Baroque* and the crisis of the societies that let this multi-faceted and highly creative phenomenon happen and flourish; the cascade of radical *Modernisms* in the post-romantic societies riddled with wars, civil wars, and chaotic politico-economical states of affairs).

Furthermore, it happens in times of politico-economical crisis that aesthetic concepts flow directly into the political conceptual sphere, from where they again migrate outwards in the form of a mixed conceptual discourse and social style; an aesthetico-political alliance takes form, articulating emphatic artistic expression and emphatic political expression, as in the Italian case of poetic and sculptural futurism and national militantism that became a *fascist* movement (a surprising amalgam of creative *avant*-*garde* and reactionary brutality). What happened, for example, in the Spanish and the German brutalist aesthetico-political creations of the last century may suit the same formula, with variations. Another remarkable phenomenon is the emergence of new high tech *theocracies* in this and the last centuries: a certain vacuum in some of the inner spheres allows religion, religious concepts of law, life and death, to flow inwards and take over from evacuated political concepts.

5. Identity or creativity

Individuals grow up in socio-cultural contexts but often experience migration and inter-cultural changes of such contexts. Inter-cultural migration stimulates artistic and intellectual interests, so many thinkers, writers, musicians, painters etc. have personal histories of cultural change, language change, and change of civil identity. By contrast, living in a homogeneous cultural setting, participating in multi-level exchanges of varying velocity and conceptual complexity strengthens the intersubjective bonds and allows the individual to familiarize with, and fine-tune, to the fine-grained nuances of the multiplicity of interactions that a person's life in a community involves.[4]

---

4   Languages constantly develop specific dialects with specific prosody, specific writing systems, specific idiomatic

Migration stimulates creativity, while also stimulating feelings of incommunication, existential or nostalgic, or both. An artist's work will be the signature replacing the traces he would have left as integrated part of a particular culture. According to the experience of many observers, feelings of strong bonds and affirmative ties to the social and cultural entity in which one actually lives seldom coincides with important artistic creativity, but more often with the production of kitsch, propaganda and clichéish expressions; a certain *degré* of incommunication and non-identification with the cultural context – and of course experiences of being explicitly rejected by that context – seem more likely to trigger reflection, art, invention in general. Integration and the acquisition of a local socio-cultural identity may be criteria of personal happiness and thrift, but they seem remarkably frustrated goals, or just absent realities, in the life of great creators. A possible conclusion is that identity is at the antipodes of creativity. Identity certainly leads to inclusive, fast communication of efficient, frozen concepts, whereas the opposite, a certain un-identity of individuals, may thus lead to the opposite, a certain propensity to live by slow and creative, exclusive, unwelcome, difficult ideas and conditions of exchange. The saying *ars longa, vita brevis* may refer to the problem of velocity that makes even a life span insufficient for achieving the optimal time frame of the conceptual work called art. But life is itself a form of communication: the 'message' will be delivered in the narrative part of the obituary, the memoirs, the esoteric memories of the friends of the departed. In this sense, a life still is an 'address', however impersonal, to which there is a 'response', at least emotionally. So, a concept arises retrospectively from the 'interaction', in this case a *moral* concept – what was wrong, right, heroic, cowardly, surprising, ridiculous, terrible…? The distance from this maximally slow concept to the maximally fast spheres, where it would do the most good, is long and marked by obstacles; fast activities are therefore almost by default immoral (cf. financial tricks and frauds, political corridor deals and the like). One understands philosophers like Diogenes of Sinope or Baruch Spinoza, who refused to approach the spheres of social power as Plato would have done and Aristotle did. Thinking, that is, by a recent definition (Deleuze & Guattari 1991), explicitly producing concepts, is going into unknown terrain, asking questions and finding problems where formerly there was nothing to know or to wonder about, because our own fast projections were hiding the not-knowing – *le non-savoir* (Bataille 1987). *Slowing down* the communication, including the subjective inner dialogue we call thought,[5] removes the hiding screens and exposes the blanks in our epistemic maps, allowing in those fertile spots questions to emerge and hypotheses to grow.

Cognitively speaking, human minds are laboratories of conceptual blending, 'bubble chambers', while 'making up our minds', in the sense of deciding what something should mean, which creation should be considered and remembered as valid, predominantly depends on our 'deadlines', that is, on the time span available for conceptual elaboration. Deadlines are in turn determined by intersubjective interaction: cognition and culture are inseparable.

References

Bal, Mieke (2002). *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide.* Toronto: University of
    Toronto Press.

---

expressions and co-speech gestures, probably thereby protecting and assuring the existence of its fine-grained communication, which would be damaged by generalization and standardization of 'codes'. 'Difference' is thus a real value in the sense of a guarantee of a maintained level of finer comprehension – emotionally, connotationally. The administrative requirement of standard pragmatic means of expression works in the opposite direction, so some countries have to negotiate the principles of national communication in terms of linguistic politics. The drive toward specification and 'difference' is at least as strong as the drive toward standardization.

5   The psychologist-economist Daniel Kahneman (2011) very efficiently shows the importance of using a 'slow system' for solid and creative reflection. He hypothesizes a mental two-speed structure, where this essay suggests a more comprehensive gradual structure for thinking and communication (thinking being intra-subjective communication).

Bataille, Georges (1978). Le système du non-savoir: une ontologie du jeu non-savoir. Paris: Les Éditions Minuit.

Brandt, Per Aage (2012). 'Kultur er vandrende begreber: om konceptuel migration, dromologi og dynamisk topologi'. *Kritik*, 45(205): 83-86.

Brandt, Per Aage (ms). 'La construction sémio-cognitive de la valeur économique'.

Deleuze, Gilles & Felix Guattari (1991). *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?* Paris: Les Éditions Minuit.

Kahneman, Daniel (2011). *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. London: Penguin.

Serres, Michel (1968). *La Communication: Hermès I*. Paris: Les Éditions Minuit.

Serres, Michel (1972). *L'interférence: Hermès II*. Paris: Les Éditions Minuit..

Serres, Michel (1974). *La Traduction: Hermès III*. Paris: Les Éditions Minuit.

Serres, Michel (1977). *La Distribution, Hermès IV*. Paris: Les Éditions Minuit.

Serres, Michel (1980). *Le Passage du nord-ouest: Hermès V*. Paris: Les Éditions Minuit.

Virilio, Paul (1977). *Speed and Politics: An Essay on Dromology*. New York: Semiotext(e).