

Understanding the Logic of our Cultural Chaos

Ruth Benedict was a cultural anthropologist who studied the Japanese extensively in World War II. She reflected on her findings in *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*.

These days, many individuals have a sense of a culture in turmoil, of societal chaos. Everything seems to be in a state of flux and there is a great deal of uncertainty about the future. Indeed, many polls show a majority of Americans believe the country is [headed in the wrong direction](#) and that our best days are behind us. From Benedict's perspective, there is a reason for it. We are in a time of transition as we shift our cultural values.

A human society must make for itself some design for living. It approves certain ways of meeting situations, certain ways of sizing them up. People in that society regard these solutions as foundations of the universe. They integrate them, no matter what the difficulties. Men who have accepted a system of values by which to live cannot without courting inefficiency and chaos keep for long a fenced-off portion of their lives where they think and behave according to a contrary set of values. They try to bring about more conformity. They provide themselves with some common rationale and some common motivations. Some degree of consistency is necessary or the whole scheme falls to pieces.

Benedict continues:

Economic behavior, family arrangements, religious rites and political objectives therefore become geared into one another. Changes in one area may occur more rapidly than in others and subject these other areas to great stress, but the stress itself arises from the need for consistency. ...

Religious dogmas, economic practices and politics do not stay dammed up in neat separate little ponds but they overflow their supposed boundaries and their waters mingle inextricably one with the other.

We are in a time of “great stress” described by Benedict. Our country and society was built upon a very different set of founding ideas than those that are currently animating our society. In the past, there was broad acceptance of the Western worldview, rooted in the synthesis of Christianity and Hellenism. That outlook, with its ideas of a natural law and divine purpose, fundamentally shaped our society and its laws.

Today, though, the cultural leaders have largely rejected that worldview. They have embraced something quite different, grounded in a sort of secular, materialist egalitarianism. Over the past few decades, the culture shaping institutions of education, media, and entertainment have promulgated the new worldview. And they have met with success with increasingly larger percentages of younger Americans sharing the new thinking.

The reason for the sense of chaos and stress in our society is because the structure of our traditions and laws are in conflict with the new worldview. They must be modified and changed to conform to the new worldview. As Ruth Benedict argues, “economic behavior, family arrangements, religious rites and political objectives” are “geared into one another”. No part of our society is safe from the fundamental changes taking place, hence why there is such great uncertainty.

It’s likely that the sense of change and chaos is only going to increase in coming years as the logic of the new order finally works its way through “economic behavior, family arrangements, religious rites and political objectives”. And there is always the possibility that the new worldview will not succeed. The current chaos may create openings for other

ideas and perspectives in unexpected ways. Whatever the case, successful or not, the stress will continue until all parts of our society are united around a dominant cultural worldview.