

Lindisfarne Letter 8



THE CULTURAL CONTRADICTIONS OF POWER

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In *Evil and World Order*, I tried to show how cultural movements can turn into their opposites, that a movement to do good can end up by doing evil. With this ancient idea of the *enantiodromia* in mind, I was not overly surprised to notice that Lindisfarne, originally set up to be an almost monastic center for meditation and study, was running the risk of becoming a sort of counter-cultural Trilateral Commission of poets, thinkers, and visionaries loosely associated with Governor Brown of California. As I watched more and more of my colleagues taking appointments in Governor Brown's government, I began to worry that perhaps Lindisfarne was in danger of turning into its opposite, and that what appeared to be co-operation could turn out to be co-optation. I discussed my fears with the poet Wendell Berry, and in the best traditions of contemplative teachings we decided to exorcise the ghost of power by focusing the 1978 Lindisfarne Fellows' Conference on the theme of "The Cultural Contradictions of Power." As Alan Watts used to say: the best way to get rid of a ghost is to walk straight through it, for if you turn and run, it will feed off your fear, grow larger, and pursue you with added strength. And so, I sent off the letters of invitation to the conference with the following opening statement of theme:

Every civilization is based upon a vision. Whether the vision is that of Jesus, Mohammed, or Karl Marx, the civilization begins with a world view larger than one of greed and force, and then something happens, and the vision is lost. All of the people who are associated with Lindisfarne are committed to a vision of a new society, but as the ideas which were marginal in 1974 begin to be drawn into the public political dialogue, there is a danger that our visions, too, can become simply new vehicles for ambition and the desire for power. And so, at the suggestion of Wendell Berry, this year's gathering of the Lindisfarne Fellows is going to explore the larger societal implications of our collective work.

Is there a common cultural vision running throughout the diversity of the work of the Lindisfarne Fellows, or are we beginning to see new political battle lines developing, with the space colonies of Stewart Brand and Rusty Schweickart on one side and the bio-shelters of John and Nancy Todd on the other? If we have been accustomed to working with relative freedom at the margin of society, what efforts should we take to protect the cultural integrity of our ideas when centers of power and people at the center become interested in them? Or should we welcome this political attention, take sides along with Governor Brown against nuclear energy, and allow all our ideas to be used in a push for national power? Would this simply be a rerun of the "Best and the Brightest" of JFK? Since that group of luminaries gave us Viet Nam, what makes us think that the implementation of our ideas would not lead to some unforeseen disaster? We have all been prepared to be ignored, but we have not been prepared for attention. Perhaps, in coming together in exploration of this political theme we can find a collective wisdom to keep the power of vision from becoming merely another vision of power.

I am happy to say that Alan Watts was right: walking through the ghost did make it disappear. The problems of bureaucratic implementation, political co-optation, and political responsibility were all explored and discussed, but by the end of the conference it was clear that Lindisfarne could get back to its basic educational and cultural work, and that future conferences could focus on sacred architecture and the Pythagorean integration of art, science, and religion.

But to share part of the process of this exploration with our Corresponding Members, we decided to publish some of the material from the Fellows' Conference and the conversation I had with Governor Brown in the months before the Fellows gathered in June of 1978.

Reflections On The Chilean Civil War

FRANCISCO VARELA

I CAN'T really talk about the Civil War in Chile without being very personal. And therefore, I am quite uneasy talking here today, because I haven't spoken publicly on this matter since those events, five years ago. I guess in this group of people and given the circumstances, it is somewhat possible to do it now. But I have never done it. I would be much more comfortable talking about differential equations, or the limbic system, or something. So you will have to bear with me, because it is not the kind of thing where I can prepare something very logically structured.

So I guess I am just going to use the broad paintbrush and draw a few images for you. However, I don't think it would do us any good to have just a bunch of anecdotes or experiences without any context. So I would like to propose a context for these ideas or experiences: what these experiences have meant to me, on the basis of what we have heard at this conference yesterday and today. You see, my basic bias, my fundamental narrow-mindedness, is that I don't believe we can talk about a world view, or any representation of what the world is, without at the same time observing and critically examining how did these ideas come about. No content should be divorced from where this content has been produced. This goes under the name of epistemology. And so I would like to do a little epistemology.

I take epistemology quite seriously. I think it **does** matter. It is not a game or a fine pastime. Very specifically I want to go back to yesterday. And I want to make a distinction which I was very disappointed we did not make yesterday. Maybe there was no time. I want to retake the question of energy as an

example of what I mean by getting us into a frame of mind about our ideas, which would include an epistemological side to it. The energy issue can serve as my example, because it was discussed yesterday and it thus becomes more tangible. And in that sense I want to make a very clear distinction between the kind of picture that Howard Odum was presenting to us and the kind of picture that Amory Lovins was presenting to us. They are fundamentally distinct: what Lovins was saying is something I can relate to and side with in many ways; Professor Odum's point of view I consider, in many respects, nonsensical. I am sorry he is not here, because I would have loved to have him hear what I have to say; in fact, one of the reasons I can say this at all is because we are in a gathering of friends, and he was present.

Now: why do I make this distinction? Well, because Odum's position about energy contains in a nutshell what I believe are the most dangerous hangovers of a kind of world view based on a purely mechanistic observer-free science and philosophy. Take, for example, his notion of the **quality** of energy in analogy with food chains: as you move "up" in a certain direction, you increase the "quality" of energy. And it's this nice exponential that he draws: that the President, with the negligible energy of pushing a button, can blow up a whole continent. In more specific terms the way he draws it is by having a system with a source and a waste, then somewhere here in the middle, in the flow, there is a nice little symbol which he calls **order**. You can call it information. This, for me, flattens out completely what I would consider what information can possibly be. Because order and information are not absolute concepts. They depend on the system that

is being described, and on the describer that sees it.

If I am going to take literally what Odum is saying, then energy somehow decreases and gets to the point where it is packed with information. We ask: What kind of information is this? Is that the bureaucracy? Or is that the power of the media? Or is it that the power of the workers? Whether I see the bureaucracy as having the information or the media as having the information, or the workers as having the information, these are very different points of view. I am not saying that one is particularly better than the other. Depending on where you are, order and information are going to mean different things to you.

In a compact form I could say that order is nothing more than my ability to distinguish a pattern. And randomness, by contrast, is my inability to distinguish a pattern. There is nothing "in" nature that is order, and nothing that is chaotic. There is for us the possibility of making some distinctions and drawing some inferences. And that says more about what we are doing than about what poor Mother Nature is supposed to be doing. If I show you a piece of paper and you say that it is a dirty picture, it says nothing about the paper, it says a lot about you. Similarly, if I say that there is order in society, it says nothing about where that order comes from, or how it is specified. Who is specifying that order? To put in continuity energy and information flattens out the most essential aspect of both. These notions are a reflection of a point of view, a reflection of a human stance, a cultural tradition which we all have, and in which we all move. Each of those views of order and information is going to come from such a tradition and is going to produce nothing else but another interpretation of that tradition. And it is not going to constitute a description of a state of affairs in any sense of outside, in any sense of out there.

I am claiming, in direct opposition to Odum, that information and energy have little to do with each other. Energy says as much about information as, say, block print will say about language. There is obviously the need to have some sort of structure, of a concrete physical conveyor, of a certain action that we classify

as informative. It says nothing about what the informative act is all about. And to put those two levels together is to fall into the trap of the old objectivistic ideology. I believe that when it comes to issues like energy and information, particularly information, we need to bring to the foreground, and not to flatten out in neat block diagrams, these questions: Where is information generated? How is it generated? By whom is it generated? In this I am, you know, a student of Gregory Bateson, who is, as far as I know, one of the few people who have really argued about this, as a lonely voice in the desert, for many years. Well, it's about time for him to be not so lonely. When somebody says things such as Odum did in this kind of a gathering, it's time for us not to just sit and relax and say, "Isn't that all very groovy?" Maybe he was using the analogy between energy and information in a metaphorical sense. It can be taken that way. But it contains a lot of technological assumptions that I don't think we can just let go unchallenged. Now, I am taking obviously a somewhat opinionated position. It is not that I am that convinced about it, but given the kind of group that this is, I thought that I might as well be somewhat less nice than I tend to be.

Energy itself is a concept that is rarely questioned at all. We forget, for example, that energy as a concept has all the connotations of organic action at its origin in the Seventeenth Century. That's what energy means also, etymologically. It is usually forgotten that the discovery, (or the so-called discovery) of the notion that one form of energy can be converted into another is a very interesting case of how a world view can, all of a sudden, be congealed into a solid perspective, and that people become completely oblivious of the origins. Tom Kuhn has written a marvellous paper on the idea of the interconversion of energy as a case of simultaneous discovery, how within a period of three years, many people stumbled upon the same notion that I can take light or electricity and somehow find an interconversion factor with heat or with other forms of energy. Now, it is a historical fact that many people in Europe stumbled at the same time upon the notion that you could define this

factor of interchangeability. That's what people then were looking for. But that becomes an operational meaning; so many calories can be converted into so many watts or whatever, there is a very definite relationship between the two. How I interpret that is an entirely different matter. And it was in the fancy or frame of mind at the end of the Nineteenth Century to project the possibility of interchanging different forms of these forces that we call energy, to project that possibility of transformation, into a unified notion that energy is a **fundamental** "substance" out of which the universe is made. That is a very nice metaphysics, but it is neither more nor less than that. It is not a statement about the ultimate picture of the universe. As a matter of fact, if you read, for example, Feynman's Lectures on Physics, published in 1965, he has no qualms in saying, in effect: "Look, I don't know what energy is. I haven't the faintest idea. All we know is that this frame of mind (of looking at different forms of measurement, these different forms of phenomena, and seeing that they can be converted into one another by some quantitative factors) is a useful one. So I go along with it. But don't ask me what energy is. I don't have the slightest idea." When good technologists forget Feynman's point and go along with the notion that the universe is fundamentally made out of energy, their quantitative point of view says that we have an energy crisis. I say we don't have an energy crisis. We have a crisis in our ideas about energy. Obviously, again, I am being one-sided about this. The case can be argued on the other side. But I won't.



Well, why does all this have anything to do with Chile?

Well, it has to do with Chile, because the Civil War gave me the experience that epistemologies are not something abstract to be given over only to historians of science; epistemology creates the kind of world that we live in and the kind of human values that we have.

Not to be aware of the fact that we construct this world perspective with an epistemology is even more dangerous than a bitter argument between two philosophies. And I was trying to make a case for this in the example of energy.

You see, here the whole thing becomes personal. Chile was, for me, a process of understanding, in the midst of a traumatic social transformation. Only then were these issues made apparent to me, or at least that was my lesson from the process. And to my surprise when I left my country, I realized that whatever happened in Chile had acquired somewhat of a mythical connotation, had become somewhat of a paradigm. A lot of people were so interested in it that it was hard for me to understand why, until I saw that it is a capsule statement for many similar situations, locally, nationally, and internationally. A friend of mine recently gave me a book of poems about Chile. It's entitled **FOR NERUDA, FOR CHILE**, and the most interesting thing about the book wasn't what was printed, but what she wrote on the cover of the book: "There is not such a thing as a personal story". This seems to be quite true. Everybody's story becomes our story, and some of them seem to resonate more than others. So I guess this is why I thought it might not be idle to convey to you some of the experiences in Chile.

Chile is a strange country. I cannot separate it from its landscape. You go to Chile to find yourself in the middle of a mountain and at the edge of the sea. You cannot get away from that haunting sensation of being sort of dangling almost out of nowhere, with only about two hundred miles to move across. The fact that it is such a long country, going almost all the way from the Equator to the Antarctic, gives one the feeling of being in a long corridor. That gives the Chileans a character somewhat different from that of other South American peoples in the Inca-based countries (Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador) and very different from heavily European-influenced Argentinians. Argentina is more like the United States than any other South American country. Chileans, by contrast, are very withdrawn—a somewhat melancholic people used to the rain and cold. One of the most impressive things about the

country is the Chileans' love for poetry. For some reason, everybody in Chile writes — or at least loves — poetry, and poets are the best national heroes. I have never been to a country where ten or twelve major poets are sold together with the porno magazines and Donald Duck. Well, that is partly what the country is.

In 1970 came the well known election of Allende, the first Marxist politician ever elected in a free election. The thing to realize here is that the 1970 election cannot be taken in isolation, cannot be taken out of context, but must be seen in a forty year or forty-five year long and slow-moving growth of a broadly based worker movement. When 1970 came, Chile probably had, percent wise, the largest organized labor force in the whole world. Literally half of the workers were part of active political movements and had been involved for years in the labor movement and in labor participation, so that the level of political sophistication is something unusual in South America. Allende wasn't an accident, he wasn't a weird thing, but the conclusion of a long process and a long tradition.

Now, I suppose it is very hard to convey the sense of what that election generated for all of us, the sense that everything was possible. The 4th of September, the night of the election, I remember everybody poured out onto the street and started jumping like kids. For about two hours you could see 500,000 people jumping up and down like kids. We had a sense of a tremendous opening, a tremendous hope. I won't make a political analysis of the three years of Allende, because I couldn't do it. I'm not really a political scientist. Others probably would know much more about it than I would. But what I do want to paint for you are some of the events during those three years, the general way things began to go, and what forces were brought to bear upon it, internal and external. From this sense of opening and exploration, what began to happen was the development of polarity: in other words, polarity in terms of either supporting, being on the side of or against the movement, not the government, particularly. That's another misconception that I always find. The government wasn't so important as the parties behind the govern-

ment. The coalition of parties was an indication of the kind of political mentality prevailing at that time. Allende wasn't a caudillo. He wasn't a leader *per se*. He was the head of a vast force, a political party. And that was what really carried punch. So polarity revolved around siding for or against the popular front, which by 1973 was about 43 percent of the vote. It quite literally split the country in two.

I cannot be emphatic enough in saying that this is literally splitting it in two. You could go to the newsstands in the morning and one newspaper would say "It's raining," the other would say "It's not raining." "A is a son of a bitch;" "A is the king of the universe." It was literally like that. And you know, three years before, these two were reasonable newspapers, who agreed that a table is a table and blue is blue. But by 1973 this was not possible anymore. They couldn't literally agree on anything, the time of the day or the color of the sky. It was absolutely and right down the middle a complete split. And that sense of polarity created a sense of "we're right" of "they are right". The polarity created a continual exaggeration of the sense of boundary and territoriality: "This is ours; get out of here".

For me this was the time at which things began to get very, very confusing. I started out being very supportive of the whole thing. I worked pretty hard, like many other people, doing what I felt was possible. I was doing nothing fancy. I wasn't ever a high official in the government; I was just doing my sort of grass-roots work. But by the second year the polarity began to develop, and I began to have my serious suspicions, to doubt whether this was making sense or not. I couldn't believe that the other guys, on the other side of the fence, were so bad, stupid, wrong, immoral, ugly, and so on and so forth, as I was supposed to believe. There was something that wasn't jibing anymore. And I was very, very confused by the whole thing and caught in a dilemma of loyalty to what I felt was essentially my people, my friends who were into this together. I mean, I wasn't apt to jump out of the boat, but I was beginning to lose my whole conviction, my whole commitment to the idea of defending this thing.

That was the state of affairs in which I was by the end of 1973. I didn't have any sense of understanding at all. I was in the uttermost confusion about the whole thing. And the only thing that was keeping me going was simply a sense of solidarity. I remember walking down the streets the first days of September, having a burden on my shoulders, I guess like everybody else. I had a sense of impending doom and no understanding anymore of what this was all about. Where did it all begin? I don't know how to say it vividly enough; it was absolutely and completely chaotic. In the literal sense of the word chaotic. There was no possibility of distinguishing any order or any rule anymore.



So it is Tuesday, September 11th, 1973. It is not raining, but the radio says it is raining. I am waking up in the morning at around 6:30, taking my little daughter to her nursery school and the radio keeps saying "it is raining," but it is not raining. I thought: These guys are crazy. And as I am walking out of the house to take my car, the young neighbor runs across the street and says; "Don't you know?" "No, I don't know." And only then did I learn that half of the radio stations are taken over by the army. And they are broadcasting their decision to overthrow the government. Then I remember — stupid of me — that the code, "It's raining" means that a coup has begun. I had been told that about a month before and had forgotten. So I take my daughter back to the house and take the rest of the family to a next door neighbor, who was a very quiet person. And I go to join, as it was agreed, the people that I was working with at the university to see, you know, whatever is to be done. Supposedly it is civil war, so everybody is assigned certain tasks. So it is ten o'clock in the morning, and three quarters of the radio stations are already taken by the army. And we're all sitting; we are supposed to be waiting for the instructions to do whatever. But no instructions come. We all sit there with the same sense of impending doom, not believing that this is happening. The war is still an abstract thought, still something

that is not really happening. We have never had a war in Chile before. I have never seen a war. Nobody has ever seen the army on the streets before. Nobody has ever seen the police be anything except very nice people. So there is no frame of reference. This is abstract.

So it's ten thirty in the morning, and most of the radio stations, except one, are already taken by the army. And I begin to see tanks rolling down the streets, and I begin to see wagons loaded with soldiers driving down the street, and I begin to see the airplanes, war planes, flying over the city. And I begin to recognize that funny sound of submachine guns, distant from where I am. It is eleven o'clock in the morning, and we know that every faction of the army has turned against the government, or those that haven't have been isolated. We know that the President has decided not to surrender, but to stay in the presidential palace, and they give him an ultimatum before bombing. So we know that there is no way back. Bullets are already screaming over your head, so you know that the war is not abstract. It has a very concrete sound to it, that funny whistle of the bullet, that you can't locate except after it is gone. And still we don't have instructions. So the local leader decides that we are to disperse to different places and hide out until we receive instructions. So I go with four other friends to a place in which we are going to hide out and wait until the moment to do something comes. We must walk, oh, twenty blocks to where we ought to go. And as I walk out, the reality of the war becomes already vivid. I see a tank bulldozing over a wall in a factory that is occupied by some twenty-odd people with some light guns. The tank blasts through it and turns around the thing after it is blasted, so I see some twenty or twenty-five people, the first twenty-five or so people, in which polarity is not anymore an abstract idea but twenty-five people whom I can hear. I am scared. I have never been in a fight before. I hardly know how to use a gun. Down the street, a couple of blocks away from where I am, a man runs down the street to the intersection, and as he reaches the corner, I see coming from the other end a soldier who riddles him with bullets. So we keep walking

and we finally get to the place where we are supposed to go.

Now, at this point, one o'clock, the presidential palace has been bombed. We can still see the Hawker-Hunter plane hovering around not only the palace but other important places in the city. And we know that the rug has been pulled from under us, that there is no sense in which we know what is happening anymore. There are no instructions. There is no government. The military, whom we had seen before as somewhat respectable people, now we can see that they are not. I remember very well that the soldier, whom I saw machinegunning the other fellow who was running down the street, was probably a 19-year old boy from somewhere in the South. A typical face of the people of the South. Probably, if you had met him two months before in a bar, you would have had a swell conversation — a sweet boy. He couldn't be more than nineteen, yet I could see in his face what I had never seen, a strange combination of fear and power. So those people I don't recognize anymore; I don't know their faces anymore. We are all stranded in this place, and we know that there is simply no hope. If they decide to come after us with automatic M-2 rifles, the best you can hope for is not to be treated too roughly. So, it is three o'clock in the afternoon, and the whole city has been vacated. There is nobody on the streets, because curfew has been imposed. The only thing you can hear is the constant rattle of the machine guns, a sound that you hear for the next two weeks, which by now is a familiar sound to me. And you start waiting. And there is no radio, no communications. So I waited Tuesday afternoon, Wednesday morning, Wednesday evening, Thursday morning, Thursday afternoon. Curfew is lifted. So we can go out. But those days we wait with that strange sense that you don't know when your last moment will be. Anytime they might come in, and that's going to be it. So you have that funny relationship with people, knowing that you might be doing the last thing you will ever do, you might be saying the last thing you will ever say. So what do you say? Little silly things. You draw little figures on the foggy windows.

For me, at that time, the ground had been pulled from under me. Nothing else was left to hold on to. At the same time a very funny and contrary process happened; as things got more and more chaotic, the evidence of what a war is, there was a strange form of clarity coming more and more, a strange form of understanding, which I can't really express. I suppose it is somewhat like a semi-dream state. At the same time it was very real, because in this room with these people I could literally see how this whole thing wasn't me here and they there. But I could literally see how the army, and that nineteen year old boy, shooting somebody down, wasn't distinct really from me. I could somehow contemplate that murder with a sense of brotherhood at the same time. Polarity wasn't anymore this and that side, but something that we had collectively constructed. Literally a collective action that we had all done. As this became more and more clear to me, it dawned on me that whatever my stances had been, my opinions had been, or whatever somebody else's opinions had been (and the workers' opinions and what not), were fragments that constituted this whole, this complete mandala of sorts. That all of a sudden it revealed a craziness. Total craziness. I mean, this is somewhat as when literally someone is really crazy. You see the mind completely out, the brain turned upside down or inside out. Well, this was like that, except this was a whole country, or a whole city of three million people. That's what my actual experience was; three million people being turned upside down the same way. And you see the craziness, the way in which there was a collective pattern in which I was responsible, everybody was, and in which my views couldn't anymore signify anything except that piece of a larger puzzle for which I really didn't have any answer.

So, it might sound strange, but Wednesday night I gave in to it, and I sat down and wrote some twenty or so pages that I entitled "The Logic of Paradise", because it seemed to me for the first time that this had a logic to it. The whole thing had an intrinsic logic that was essentially good, in that it gave me a handle on what paradise is, for the first time. I know

that might sound strange, but that is what it felt like — that being rooted in the complete chaos and mass killing, out of that was emerging a completely inverse understanding. And I was too scared or something to resist it. So somehow it just got transformed into those pages.

Now, that experience is what was given to me, is what I have had to deal with ever since. Because it revealed to me the connection between the world view, political action and personal transformation. It revealed to me, in a way that I knew but really didn't know, that I somehow vaguely understood but hadn't experienced, that unless I was able to cut through my sense of identity and attachment and identification with what I believe are my ideas, my things, my territory, my limits, I had no hope of understanding what the hell was going on. And it literally turned my life inside out. What that experience told me was: "Unless you build on the foundation of working with that sense of spirituality, (what later on I began to understand was what religions are talking about) unless you build on that base there is simply no hope of understanding". I have found, for myself, expression of that understanding in Buddhist practice. I cannot separate that practice, that sense of working with the contemplation of how my mind and my actions generate and operate. I cannot separate that from political action and from what my understanding of the world is. I suppose this is why I become so passionate about issues on epistemology. Because epistemology does matter. As far as I am concerned, that civil war was caused by a wrong epistemology. It cost my friends their lives, their torture, and the same for 80,000 or so people unknown to me.

So it is not an abstract proposition for me when I say that we must incorporate in the enactment, in the projecting out of our world

views, at the same time the sense in which that projection is only one perspective, that it is a relative frame, that it must contain a way to undo itself. And unless we find a way of creating expressions of that nature, we are going to be constantly going around the same circle. Whether that can be done or not I do not know. But if it can be done at all, it can be certainly done with a group of people like this. My deep conviction is that we must try to see to what extent our political views and our projections on the world can express this form of relativity, the fact that every position we take will also contain the opposite one. That ultimately I cannot follow a form of political action that is based on truth anymore. I cannot say that my political stance is true as opposed to yours, which is false. But every political stance contains the elements on which the truth of the other is based, and that all we are doing is a little dance. Sure, I have to take this side, and that is cool, but how do I really embody in that action that I acknowledge the importance of the other side and the essential brotherhood between those two positions? How can I go to Pinochet and say, "Hello, my brother?" I don't know. I don't think that I am that enlightened at all. I wouldn't be able to do that, but in some sense I realize that is a great limitation. That should be in some sense possible.

I am going to end here by summarizing this theme that is one of my major concerns: I don't believe anymore in the notion of a cultural revolution in the sense that one form of politics and knowledge and religion is superceded by a new one. If I am interested in doing anything at this point, it is in creating a form of culture, knowledge, religion, or politics that does not view itself as replacing another, in any sense, but one that can contain in itself a way of undoing itself. If we are not here to do that, I quite frankly would rather go skiing.

