

## Preface

I believe we need to pass out of the present economic age and into a future cultural age. In order to do this, it is necessary to unlock and capitalize on all the diverse and dynamic secrets of culture.

This book describes the long and fascinating journey I have had over my life attempting to achieve this objective and make the case for a cultural age. It begins with a project I did in public school on Marco Polo, and concludes with my quest to live a cultural life today. But the most important part of the journey is all the jobs, projects, problems, breaks, and turning points I have had along the way. For, as John Stuart Mill observed many years ago, the most essential part of any journey is not arriving at the destination, but rather the route that is taken to get there.

Unlocking and capitalizing on the secrets of culture and entering a cultural age were the farthest things from my mind when I was young. Despite the excellent education I had in the arts in my youth, I studied economics at university and then taught economics for a number of years in the early '60s. I marvelled at the power of the economic age to generate vast increases in material and monetary wealth. I also felt this economic age (as I came to call it) was capable of solving most if not all the world's problems. Not only had it improved living standards and the quality of life for billions of people in the years since Adam Smith wrote *The Wealth of Nations* in 1776, but it had also yielded phenomenal achievements in industry, agriculture, education, science, technology, the arts, and many other areas of life.

I was so taken with the power and potential of the economic age to make improvements in the world situation — which has always been a real passion of mine — that I thought I would stay in this field and teach economics for the rest of my life. In order to do so, it was necessary to get a Ph.D., since I only had a Master's degree at that time. So I enrolled in a doctoral program in economics at the University of Michigan with this purpose in mind.

## *Preface*

The first inkling I had that there was something wrong with this decision came when several faculty members at the university told me that I would not be permitted to write a Ph.D. thesis on the economics of the arts — another real passion of mine — because there was no such thing as “the economics of the arts.”

As my studies at the university progressed, other problems began to emerge that troubled me a great deal. One was the mathematical nature of economics. Another was the tendency of economists (and others) to see everything in the world in economic terms. But the most serious problem of all was the fact that the natural environment was treated as a “given” and ignored, largely because it was deemed to exist outside the realm of economics. This bothered me immensely. The natural environment is vital to the survival and well-being of everything and everybody. How could it be ignored?

With reservations like these weighing heavily on my mind, I decided it would not be wise to remain at the University of Michigan. But what was I to do? Most of my training had been in economics, and I was ill-equipped to do much else. Since I was still interested in many aspects of economics, I decided to pursue my interest in the economics of the arts, as well as my dream of helping to make the world a better place for all, in some other place and in some other way.

After a long and illuminating trip to Europe and Morocco to sort things out, I eventually landed a job at the Ontario Arts Council. This was the first real step in the “cultural leg” of my journey. Although I didn’t know it at that time, I was destined to spend the next fifty years of my life attempting to broaden and deepen my knowledge and understanding of culture and cultures and making the case for a cultural age.

My job at the Ontario Arts Council was followed by a job as director of the Program in Arts Administration at York University, which was arguably the first academic program in the world for training arts administrators and cultural policy-makers. After this, I spent the better part of a decade working on numerous projects as a self-employed person. This included undertaking several missions for UNESCO to different parts of the world, as well as writing publications on culture, the world system, Canadian cultural policy, and Canada’s international cultural relations.

But the most important job I ever had was at the Scarborough campus of the University of Toronto. I went there in the early ’80s to participate in the creation of two new cooperative programs, one in arts administration and one in international development. It wasn’t long before I discovered

## Preface

that the campus library had an incredible collection of books, articles, and other documents dealing with culture, which, by this time, had become my principal preoccupation in life.

What I discovered in the library amazed me and changed my life. I learned that cultural scholars have had an enormous amount to say about culture that is relevant to improving the world situation. This is true not only for the many different ways culture manifests itself in the world — from the arts and humanities to the organizational forms and structures of different species — but also for making improvements at every level, from the individual, institutional, and municipal level to the regional, national, and international level.

By this time, I had become much more concerned about the economic age and its consequences. As with every age, there was a tendency to focus on the strengths of the economic age but ignore its shortcomings. One shortcoming was the devastating effect this age was having on the natural environment. Another was the tendency to justify everything in terms of its “economic impact.” A third was putting too much emphasis on the material and quantitative side of life, and a fourth was placing a much higher priority on the production and consumption of wealth than on distributing wealth more equitably.

As I delved more deeply into these matters, I began to realize that there was a basic flaw in the economic age that could not be corrected in my view. It stemmed from the fact that (as mentioned earlier) the natural environment was treated as a given and consequently as an “externality.” This problem eventually caused me to conclude that the economic age could not be transformed from the inside, since it was impossible *after the fact* to insert the natural environment into a system of thought and practice that had evolved progressively and relentlessly over more than two centuries.

Even several decades ago, it was apparent that dire consequences were in store for humanity if it persisted in giving priority to economic concerns over everything else. The rapid rate of world population growth, growing shortages of natural resources, escalating pollution, and undue pressure on the finite carrying capacity of the earth all added up to a prescription for a catastrophe of monumental proportions if these matters were not addressed. More than once, I recalled Einstein’s observation that “the significant problems we face cannot be solved by the same level of thinking that created them.”

As my investigations into culture intensified, I began to realize that

## Preface

everything was there to make a compelling case for a cultural age as the next great age in human history.

For one thing, culture is rooted in nature, not materialism. This is because the term culture derives from the Latin verb *colo*, meaning “to plant, till, and cultivate.” For another thing, many cultural activities — such as the arts, humanities, education, life-long learning, social interaction, spiritual renewal, and the quest for the sublime — are capable of bringing a great deal of happiness and fulfillment in life, as well as reducing our huge ecological footprint, because they are largely labour-intensive rather than material-intensive. Moreover, culture is capable of coming to grips with the enormous amount of complexity and diversity in the world, primarily because it is perceived, defined, and manifests itself in the world in many different ways and not just one way.

But the most compelling argument of all for the importance of culture — when we take it in the all-encompassing sense as “the complex whole” or a people’s “total way of life” — is that culture is, by definition, holistic. This is undoubtedly one of culture’s best-kept secrets and most valuable assets. It makes it possible to see the big picture, come to grips with key components and strategic relationships within that all-inclusive perspective, and achieve more balance, stability, and sustainability in the world.

It is important to emphasize that the strengths of the economic age would not disappear or be rejected in a cultural age. On the contrary — a cultural age would incorporate these strengths, along with many other strengths, into a broader, deeper, and more fundamental way of looking at and dealing with life, living, reality, history, the human condition, and the world system. Clearly we will need strong economies in the future, but we will need them properly positioned in a comprehensive cultural context, as well as informed by environmental, historical, and cultural values and not just industrial, commercial, technological, and financial values.

But the most important point of all is this. When all the different thoughts, ideas, and insights of generations of cultural scholars are brought together and considered collectively, they produce a powerful portrait of what a cultural age would be like — what our future could be like — if we choose to move in that direction.

From the moment when I realized the full potential of culture several decades ago, virtually all of my research and writing has been concerned with fleshing out what is required to create a cultural age and to enable it to flourish.

These matters have been addressed in several books, including *Cul-*

*Preface*

*ture: Beacon of the Future, Revolution or Renaissance: Making the Transition from an Economic Age to a Cultural Age, The Age of Culture, and now The Secrets of Culture.* This is also the principal objective of the World Culture Project, which was created in 1989 to commemorate the World Decade for Cultural Development. The Project is designed to show in theoretical and practical terms how it is possible for culture and cultures to play a mainstream rather than marginal role in the world.

That culture should be at the centre of human life is as it should be. Not only is this consistent with reality; it is also the key to the future. While preoccupation with the economic age has produced countless benefits and opportunities, it is not capable of carrying humanity forward into the next great epoch in human history. For this, a cultural age is required. Such an age possesses the potential to capitalize fully on all of culture's profuse and profound secrets, as well as to create the conditions for a more equitable, sustainable, and harmonious world.

D. Paul Schafer  
2015