Cultural epoch theory

The Fact of Ceaseless Change
Whatever conception of reality is held by the
great majority of people over a considerable
period of time. This is true even though the
majority may not be aware of any concept of
reality, or more probably, take it so much for
granted that they are not aware it is simply a
human idea, held on faith.

Define Culture
WHAT IS TRUTH?
WHAT IS BEAUTY?
WHAT IS LOVE?
WHAT IS JUSTICE?
WHAT IS FAITH?

Values that shape cultural development
Based on concepts of REALITY and accepted truth, we build the thought structures that underlie institutions.
Chaos
Adjustment
Balance
Three steps every cultural epoch goes through
1st step toward new epoch
New critics chisel away at bedrock of established culture by pointing out inconsistencies & challenging the boundary limits of “reality.”
This collapse (of “old” patterns of belief, values, and behavior) sweeps away old institutions, theology, science, etc. + causes turmoil & confusion.
Note that in the 1st stage of creation stories, deity brings order to chaos
- New and shocking ideas, moralities and beliefs are introduced and discarded
- Terrorists attack established governments
- Civil strife and wars of conquest rage
- Everyone damages the environment
- Over everything looms the menace of nuclear obliteration

Chaos in our world today
Some try to turn back the clock to more peaceful days
Some seek refuge and security in fundamentalist beliefs
Some stay distracted by their smartphones, perhaps hoping all the problems will vanish

Coping with chaos
Innovative artists & thinkers (painters, scientists, writers, composers, philosophers) respond to chaos by suggesting/creating innovative new patterns for culture that seem more in keeping with the emerging spirit of the times.

Intellectuals (academics, government officials, business executives, media, etc.) seek to distill & resolve the tensions by designing new modes of thought and new models that will provide a framework for society.

Innovators posit a new design; intellectuals institute workable models of these new expressions.
The artist is a person of greater sensitivity than others, and with great skill in one medium.

The artist feels the tensions of the time.

An artist will not rest until he or she has explored this confusing experience and discovered some meaning.

Role of the artist in adjustment
College students and faculty, government officials, executives, etc.

They start reshaping the new ideas from the artists into new philosophies of justice, economics, religion, and the like, and build concrete institutions out of their philosophies.

Order emerges out of chaos

Role of the intellectuals
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What institutions have we created to respond to chaos today?
Order is reestablished when the new ideas of reality, the philosophies underlying the basic institutions, and the institutions themselves are all in harmony.

Everything seems to be orderly and tidy & people have a fundamental security that comes from certainty.

Even in periods of balance, there is always an undercurrent of new ideas brewing that will eventually upend this sense of surety.

BALANCE
If balance lasts too long, life begins to get dull
The big jobs seem to be done and boredom, decadence and deterioration may set in
Someone makes a new discovery (Einstein at the beginning of the 20th century)
Satire, sarcasm, irony reign

Why don’t we stay in balance?
Deciphering which phase of an epoch a culture is in can only legitimately be accomplished in retrospect.

Remember that all 3 (chaos, adjustment, balance) transpire concurrently and that their impact is a matter of degree and not an absolute; in other words, during periods of chaos, there will also be some semblance of adjustment and balance going on beneath the surface, and in turn, during periods that are marked by a predominant sense of security, there will be a chaotic element fermenting underground. Generally, there remains an ongoing process of adjustment that serves as a balancing mechanism between any two extremes.

Some cautions...
Give concrete examples of chaos, adjustment and balance in our modern culture
Where do you think we are today?

Apply to today