

How Do We Change Culture? On Cultural Strategy for Animal Freedom

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Before we get started, what is culture?

It is difficult to summarise this concept without undermining its complexity. However, in broad terms, culture is the prevailing beliefs, values, creations, norms, customs, behaviours, practices and attitudes of a group of people at a point in time. In other words, culture is how we think, what we hold dear and how we act. **Culture is not just about a worldview, but a worldview that has been realised in practice** and is experienced simply as the way of life in a group/community/society.

Culture happens whenever beliefs, values and practices etc. are *transmitted* between people. Since the main characteristic of culture is that it only exists when transmitted, **culture can be seen most clearly in our behaviours and practices** (formed by norms, habits, skills and communication).

Culture also mediates our thoughts and feelings. For example, seemingly individual emotions like jealousy or envy reveal themselves as deeply social as these emotions arise more prominently in societies where monogamy and competition are valued.

Culture also lies behind systems. Having laws, enforcing rights in a certain way, and using certain structures to communicate, for example, are systemic elements that are also part of a culture. That is why they change from country to country and even more so from one region of the world to another. Some countries still use the law of “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth”, others use prisons and some are already starting to use principles of restorative justice to repair social harm. This means that systems are also cultural.

What is cultural change?

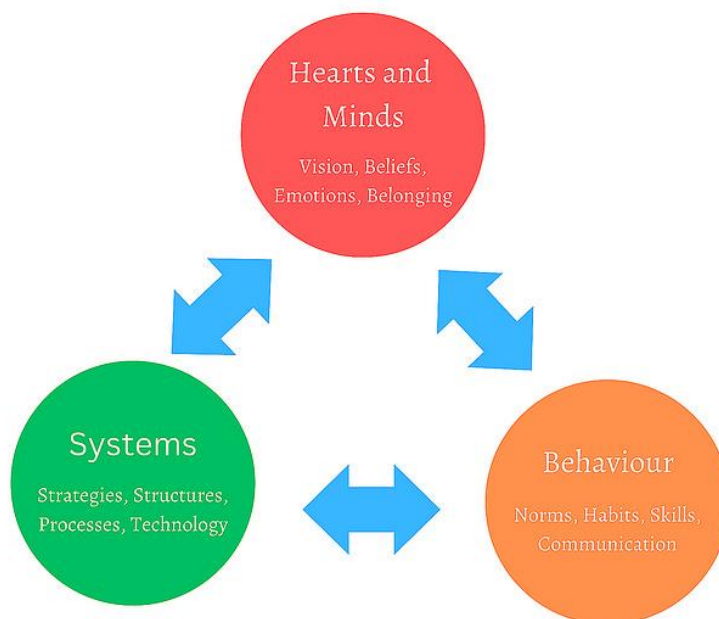
Cultural change is an intentional and continual process to change the dominant culture, which shapes beliefs, values, creations, norms, customs, behaviours, attitudes and practices. Although we often want a profound revolution in culture, it is important to take into account that **a massive cultural change needs to dialogue with the dominant culture**. Big cultural changes are not made overnight like a revolution, but are built through negotiations with aspects of the culture that we may not necessarily like.

For example, if we want people to change their perception about other animals, we may need to support the creation of more movies that address the personalities of animals raised for consumption and have these films circulated on streaming channels like Netflix or Prime Video. We can advocate for schools to have more content about animal exploitation in their curriculum, rather than questioning the education system altogether. We can also seek to change the content of a law without necessarily questioning the legal system as a whole. In these cases, **we ally ourselves with certain aspects of the dominant culture to transform other aspects of it**.

How do we change the cultural landscape?

Conceptually, we change culture through culture. That means that culture is both the agent of change and the object of change. For example, to change our hearts and minds, which are cultural, we need to create and be exposed to new messages and stories, which are also cultural. In order to make communication and intentions easier, we can name the aspects of culture in which we want to intervene.

Wheel of Change



The Wheel of Change framework, developed by Robert Gass, can help us name which aspect of culture we are talking about. It shows that change is systemic. This means that for change to happen, we need to intervene simultaneously in all the key elements that make up a human system:

1. *Hearts & Minds*
2. *Behaviours*
3. *Systems.*

These three domains continually reinforce one another. While this self-reinforcing cycle tends to keep individuals, organizations and societies resistant to change, a transformational approach can help us to initiate a self-reinforcing Wheel of Change.

In other words, if the change in one domain is not enough for a deep transformation, because the system tends to return to its previous equilibrium and resist change, then we need to act in all three domains at once, because then changes in one will reinforce changes in the others. **Only by intervening simultaneously in Hearts & Minds, Behaviours and Systems will we be able to change the cultural landscape** we exist in, shifting the way we feel, think and act, opening up space for a new worldview (with its new norms and behaviours) to take root.

The Wheel informs us that:

1) The Behaviour of people is driven by what they think and feel (Hearts & Minds) while also being impacted by the Systems in which they live.

2) Peoples' thoughts and feelings are strongly influenced by the Systems in which they live, while also being impacted by the Behaviour of those around them.

3) The collective Hearts & Minds and Behaviour of people, in turn, contribute to shaping and reshaping Systems.

In practice, this complex change is extremely important, because changing laws (Systems) while not also changing people's Behaviours and their Hearts & Minds will only have limited impact. For example, the recognition of animal sentience in law by the UK in 2021 should ensure a profound change in the consumption of animals by the population (after all, animals feel pain), but nothing has happened in practice, because we still need to change Behaviours and Hearts & Minds. Historically, changes in laws have not ensured profound transformative change and this shows that we need to intervene in the social field systemically.

Another aspect of cultural change is that, depending on the types of interventions, we can focus on either reaching the largest number of people or on building support from peripheral social networks, composed of ordinarily connected people, as pointed out sociologist Damon Centola in the book [Change](#).

For example, changing behaviours or norms, such as adopting veganism or taking the interests of other animals into account, need to be made from the depths of society to its surface. In other words, from Hearts and Minds to Behaviours and Systems. Because changing systems is only effective if it is the culmination of a change that is already happening among ordinary people. That is why a Theory of Change that plays the Outside Game is so important to help make animal freedom a reality.

By contrast, when we aim to propagate ideas and information, instead of new behaviours or norms, the more people that are affected, the better—in this case, highly connected people such as influencers and celebrities can be useful targets.

What are the key strands of cultural change?

There are many ways to drive cultural change. In the context of Animal Think Tank, the interventions in culture that we have invested in are:

- 1) The behaviours, practices and actions of the volunteers of the Social Movement (Social Movement Culture, Campaign Strategy, Community Organizing);
- 2) The consequences of mass protests, which have the potential of quickly shifting culture by changing Hearts & Minds;
- 3) The behaviours of the people in Animal Think Tank itself (People and Culture);
- 4) The research on narrative change, which will assist in future interventions in Hearts & Minds (Narrative Research);
- 5) The building of a field of cultural and narrative strategies that supports the animal movement ecology in the UK to make cultural and narrative change (Cultural Strategy, Narrative Strategy).
- 6) Systems change, through our collaboration with various agents of the animal freedom movement and supporters involved in this area (Political Strategy).

What is the relationship between Movement Culture and Cultural Strategy?

Social movement culture is important because it unites people, provides a sense of internal harmony and belonging, and initially attracts many new followers. Movement culture can be seen in the way people relate to each other, communicate, do things together and support certain collective rituals, such as playing music together, dressing in a certain way, eating certain things and protesting. In the Wheel of Change, the culture of a social movement can be clearly identified in the wheel of Behaviours, although to adopt these behaviours we also need to have been exposed to transformations in the wheel of Hearts & Minds.

Problems arise when these rituals insulate some groups, as happened with Occupy Wall Street (OWS), when an internal sense of harmony of the group started to look alienating to those on the outside. As Jonathan Smucker, in *Hegemony: How-To*, says: “To prevent insularity, core members have to take responsibility for ensuring that collective rituals and alternative narratives are oriented to connect with broader bases of society.” ().

Over time, movement culture needs to be less isolated and more mainstream. That is where cultural strategy comes in: **movement culture must serve a larger strategy for social change**, which eventually must communicate with the dominant culture so as not to become mere performative rituals with no clear political objective—or ‘prefigurative politics’, as Smucker came to call the rituals of OWS at one point.

In other words, the relationship between Movement Culture and Cultural Strategy is that a movement’s culture needs to be put into practice strategically, in the service of an ever progressive absorption of more people, and then of more social transformation. **Cultural Strategy should be responsible for ensuring that the culture of the movement is not merely performative and that it serves scalability.**

More broadly, beyond the social movement, **Cultural Strategy can also open avenues for interventions in other areas**, such as in education, the arts, or the structures that foster cultural transformation.

What does it mean to change the dominant culture in favour of a non-speciesist culture/kinship worldview?

In this process of change, the idea is not to standardise different cultures in favour of a non-speciesist culture or kinship worldview that does not respect multiculturalism. On the contrary: we want to show how **a kinship worldview transcends cultural differences**, just as one day the world came to recognise that the enslavement of human beings was not a cultural but a moral issue.

Historians point out that norms against causing harm, although they appear in different forms in each culture, cut across practically all human societies. This means that **the new norm we are defending is not a new culture that overrides other cultures, but a norm that crosses all cultures and therefore needs to be fully reclaimed in favour of other animals.**