

We are Cognitive

Talk To The Hand Episode 1: Matthew Taylor On Cultural Theory

Andrew: Hello and welcome to the first episode of Talk To The Hand. I'm Andrew Park, the creator of the RSA Animates series and pioneer of whiteboard animation. I'm a visual thinker, which basically means I understand the world through pictures. And for me this is particularly helpful when pictures are laid out in space, so you can literally see the connections between things and ultimately, how they relate.

I also love working with stories and metaphors. These are powerful tools to have in your visual thinking toolbox and help everybody to see the bigger picture. In this series I'll be exploring the ideas I've been fortunate enough to work with over the last decade. I'll be having conversations with the people who have developed those ideas and using my visual thinking skills to re-examine them with a fresh perspective.

I'm delighted to say that my first guest is Matthew Taylor. Matthew has been the Chief Executive of the RSA since 2006 and before this he was chief advisor on political strategy for Tony Blair. He has also served as the Director of the Institute for Public Policy Research, and we began by discussing cultural theory and my first meeting with Matthew back in 2009.

So, I've been looking back over past RSA Animates recently, just trying to get a sense of what we created, the history of them, how they came about, my relationship with the RSA, my relationship with the content that you guys have produced over the years. It's more than a decade now since we've been working together. I just wanted to take a moment to reflect on the amazing work that we've done, the amazing content that we've produced, the amazing speakers that you guys have presented to the world, and how we've visually translated those.

I wanted to go back and investigate, or relive, how I got involved with the RSA in the first place. I don't know if you remember how that came about. I remember some of it, but I don't know if you do?

Matthew: The bit about the story that I always tell is that when Sophie asked me to come down to her office, and look at something she'd done, which was the very first one - with that Scandinavian sociologist, talking about Gordon Brown.

Andrew: Yes, Stein Ringen.

Matthew: Stein Ringen. That I didn't know anything. She just said, "Oh, there's something you should see." I went down, and this is very rare, I'm not sure this has ever happened at any other time in my life really. I just said within 30 seconds, "Oh my God, this is going to change everything." The one thing I'm slightly pleased with myself about is, and I cannot claim any role in the genesis of this or the development of it, that I immediately spotted how powerful it was going to be.

Andrew: You first invited me into the society. You'd written a paper called The Basics of Cultural Theory.

Matthew: I do remember that. I am now, 10 years on, having failed repeatedly to get my book on those ideas published, now starting to publish them as a set of blogs on the RSA website.

Andrew: Well, I looked up 'Cultural Theory' on your blog and it came up - let's have a look. It was 300 times, I think? 306 times or something like that. So, I mean, cultural theory, it's one of your things, isn't it?

Matthew: One of the problems with cultural theory is the name Cultural Theory, but we do use it in our Living Change Approach as well. So, the idea that you think about interventions in relation to hierarchical interventions, solidaristic interventions, and individualistic interventions, that you look at a system like that, and you say, "How is it authority works in this system? How are values and belonging work in this system? How is it individual incentives and aspirations work in this system?" That is one that is embedded in our work now.

It's my tragic hobby because I've been writing about it and talking about it. It's not totally tragic in the sense that, for example, every year I do a talk for - my wife is head of content for a really good ethical leadership startup. She's gone from 2 people to 20 people in 4 years. I do a talk every year to their cohort of next-

generation leaders and even a couple of years later, people say, "I'm still using Matthew's framework." So, people have found it useful. It's entered into our Living Change Approach. What I haven't managed to do is the thing that I was trying to do with the book and that I'm now going to try and do with these blog posts, which is to popularize them.

Andrew: Well, this is an interesting part of the conversation really, Matthew, because I remember when I first came to see you. I think I'd been working at the Design Council. I got invited in to see you and I was really excited because I was going from... I know the Design Council, the work wasn't totally corporate, it had an element of design. The structure of some of their meetings was quite corporate because they were dealing with a lot of corporate entities. My bread and butter was dealing with corporates. Drawing large conversations for corporate clients. Meeting with you guys where it was more ideas, dealing with or representing ideas, I was really excited about that. I was really excited to meet with you.

I remember coming into the house and coming up to your office. I didn't know where I was going, it's a bit of a labyrinth anyway, isn't it, in the house? Then you talked to me about cultural theory, and do you remember what you said to me about the brief for illustrating these slides? I think you were giving a presentation, so you wanted me to illustrate some stuff.

Matthew: Well, I was chewing on this thing that I'd been chewing on for 10 years, which is how can I make these ideas accessible to people? The reason I like the ideas is because I think they have a number of qualities, but I think one of the relevant qualities to what we're talking about now, Andrew, is that I think that they're relatively easy to grasp, but actually, they generate quite a lot of nuance and subtlety. I think that's unusual because I think, generally speaking, big theory, it's either very complicated and complex and difficult for ordinary people to get their head around, or it's very reductionist and simplistic, and it fails to capture nuance.

The reason I love cultural theory is because I can describe it in five minutes. Actually, because it's about conflict and because it's about understanding how things exist at all sorts of different layers, it's got a lot of subtlety and nuance, I don't think it's reductive in the way in which you apply it. It's a difficult thing for me because this is the tragedy of my intellectual life, my failure to be able to articulate cultural theory in a way which ...

Andrew: ...well, I think it's interesting in my failure to visualize it too because it didn't go anywhere when I brought you back the sketches. I think because you said to me, "Can you draw this, but I don't want any representation."

Matthew: Did I?

Andrew: That was the brief. I was like, "Okay, that's quite hard. Aren't we dealing with people here?" This is about people and society and actors in society, but you were like, "No, no, no, don't draw people." I went and bought the book, Michael Thompson's book, is it Disorganising and Organising or the other way around?

Matthew: It is.

Andrew: In there were diagrams using squares and circles.

Matthew: There's one very famous one which I have in my book which is brilliant because they look like smutty drawings. There's one with curves that look like a smutty 12-year-old representing women's breasts, basically.

Matthew: It's very difficult to do it without people smirking when you draw the picture.

Andrew: If you showed those slides without any context, it would be quite good fun.

So I went away and I thought, "How am I going to do this without representing anyone?" Because you know my work now and subsequently after doing the RSA Animates, it's all about people. I make teacups, I make teapots, become personalities, anthropomorphism, and all of that sort of stuff. I brought these sketches back to you and I thought... they were like triangles and squares and random blobs. I think I was inspired - have you ever seen that cartoon Chuck Jones cartoon? It's called The Dot and the Line: A Romance in Lower Mathematics or something like that. Like a scribble and a line, the line has an affair with the scribble or something and the square is upset.

That also reminded me of the psychologists Fritz Heider and Marianne Simmel. They drew a box and they had a large triangle, a small circle, and a smaller triangle, and they animated them. It was done in the 1940s. They animated them going around this box. They asked people, "What's going on here in this animation?" Out of the 114 people that were tested, only 3 people said, "It's geometric shapes going around a box with a flap in it." The flap opened. Most of the other people ascribed some kind of soap opera, the big triangle's the brute, he's dominating the smaller triangle,

the circle's the kid, and they're all trying to escape. There was some kind of domestic drama associated.

Matthew: That's fascinating.

Andrew: Implied or put upon these shapes. And so, they kind of didn't get anywhere. I think that maybe...

Matthew: You see the interesting thing for me, Andrew, is that I don't know because I don't remember the conversation. I do, it's coming back to me a little bit, but I think I overstated it. Because I think the issue for me is that in cultural theory we talk about authority, values, aspiration, or hierarchy, solidarity, individualism, and fatalism. What I wanted to avoid was the notion that these are personality types.

Which isn't to say that they're not human motivations, I must have been overly determined to try to drive you away from saying, "Well, I'll draw individualists, I'll draw an hierarchist, and I'll draw a solidarist." That was a mistake because it is ultimately a theory about human motivation, so why would I not want human beings to feature in it?

I must have been in a particular frame of mind, I must have just had a conversation with somebody where they took it too literally and they kept saying to me, "What kind of person am I?" I must have been overreacting to a previous conversation.

Andrew: So, what is culture theory? Bearing in mind you don't really want to call it cultural theory anymore.

Matthew: So, I think at heart, it's a theory about human motivation that argues that it is useful, I want to avoid saying it is true because I think that any typology is best judged in terms of whether it's useful. George Box, the statistician, once said, "No theory is true, but some are useful." For me, cultural theory is a useful way of thinking about human motivation.

It argues that we can understand human motivation as having four distinct sources, three of which are active, and one of which is passive. The three that are active are that we do what we do because we're told to, so a lot of the time every day we just follow orders. Not explicit orders but we just do what the rules, regulations, and social norms expect us to do.

The second thing that motivates us is values and belonging. We have a view as to the person we are, the tribe we belong to, and what comes with that, and we behave in

the ways which we think are right in view of our participation within a tribe, within a group. Whether that's a team at work or our political affiliations or the football club we support, or our family or whatever. We're doing things because of our group membership. Then what we share with other people.

The third motivation is we are motivated by our own individual desires and aspirations. When it comes to the first, obeying authority, we all do that and most of us obey the same authority and behave in similar ways. There are some rebels but when it comes to values and belonging, clearly that is a group thing. We do the same things as people in our tribe.

The final motivation feels unique to us. We uniquely are this assemblage of the type of coffee we want, the type of career we want, the type of things that give us pleasure, our desires, and our appetites.

Then the fourth one is that and this is very often missing from other typologies is that a lot of the time we don't have any motivation at all. Not just because we're not interested in things, but it just feels too hard to do anything about them and we are tired, and we are pessimistic about the possibility of change. That is the core of the theory and I think that's not hard for people to understand. It, roughly speaking, chimes with some other theories about human motivation.

There's a theory in psychology called Self-Determination Theory, which really underpins positive psychology. That argues that human beings have three core intrinsic motivations. They are Mastery, which I say is aligned to my hierarchy drive. That's to be good at something. Now to be good at something means that you have to accept that there is a path to be good at it, which is a linear path to become better and better at something where you are understanding that you have to acquire expertise and technical knowledge, et cetera, so mastery. Autonomy, which obviously aligns with the individualism drive and Connectedness, which obviously aligns with the solidaristic or values and belonging drive.

You could also refer to Freud of course. This is deeper waters because Freud is complex. You could argue that in Freud the Id aligns with the individualistic individual appetite drive. The Superego aligns with the sense of conscience and social responsibility drive. The Ego is the hierarchy drive which, in a sense, is trying to deal with conflict. Very often, the hierarchy drive is dealing with the conflict between our individualistic motivations and our group loyalties. Very often in organizations and

policies and politics, people in charge are trying to balance the freedom drive over here and the justice drive over here, to put it in political terms.

The other thing to say though is that the reason I think this theory is useful is because I think you can understand it as a way of thinking about ourselves and our own needs, and the way in which we, in our lives, try to balance our desire for mastery and autonomy and connectedness, whilst dealing with the ever-present awareness of our own mortality, which is, I think, what underpins fatalism.

You can also understand at an organizational level. One of the most popular theories of organizational culture has a 2x2 Matrix where the categories are pretty similar to the ones that I've described, except that possibly because organizational consultants are looking at change, they tend to discard fatalism. They're not really interested in it, because they're interested in purposive change - partly because they look at the commercial. This is a theory based on commerce, they've got two different forms of individualism.

This theory has Clan as a culture, similar to solidarity connectedness. It has Hierarchy explicitly with a capital H as a culture, so obviously aligned to the hierarchy. Then it has Compete and Create, and it sees compete and create as two different types of culture. For me, they're two different sides of individualism. You can apply it to organizational questions about different views of how organizations work and what organization cultures are like.

Then finally I think you can apply it to politics. There are various typologists looking at politics, but one is that you've got a left-right axis, and you've got a conservative-liberal axis. Again, you can see that underpinning a lot of ideological disputes. The difference is that there are ideological individualists on the left and the right. The left emphasizing human rights and self-determination and the right emphasizing markets and competition and aspiration.

Then you have left and right versions of solidarity, right versions in the Trumpist kind of populist form, and left versions that are very much about social justice and inclusion, and also identity politics is all in that solidaristic space in the right and left versions. Then you have right and left versions of hierarchy which is the statism of the left and the social conservatism, social order perspective of elements of the right.

Again, fatalism is always left out but of course, fatalism is what most people think about politics. Because in the end, a nation is made up of organizations and organizations are made up of people. If you can have a theory which is useful at each level and memorable at each level, it's got a power which doesn't exist if you've only got psychologists talking about people, you've only got organizational theorists, sociologists, and anthropologists talking about organizations. You've only got political scientists talking about politics, and you'd have to know about the theories in each domain. What would it be like if you had a set of tools, that actually, broadly speaking, you could apply each domain and you could then look at--? Because in the end, as I say in the book, this is a theory that enables you to understand some of the big questions facing our country and our organizations by looking in the bathroom mirror. Because what's playing out here is actually something which chimes with the different ways we, as individuals, respond to each other and to the world.

The second reason I like the theory is because I like fatalism, which is missing out. In that theory of self-determination, that positive psychology theory, it talks about autonomy and mastery, and connectedness. It doesn't talk about the fact that a lot of the time we're not motivated, that's a blank space. I believe fatalism is an incredibly important part of how we view the world and it's sometimes an existential fatalism because we know we're going to die. Sometimes it's a circumstantial fatalism because we quite rightly think it's very unlikely that we'll be able to solve a problem and make progress together.

If only Tony Blair had been more fatalistic about Iraq, for example. I like it that fatalism is there because I think fatalism is a really important part of who we are, Freud recognized this as well, but it tends to be missing. It's also missing in that organizational culture typology because why would organizational consultants talk about fatalism? It's very unfashionable to talk about fatalism and very unfashionable to admit being fatalistic.

Then I like it because it captures conflict and contingency because it says, ultimately the theory, that, "The most effective way of trying to do something is to try to marshal all of these motivations." If you're wanting to make a change, you would want people to be motivated to want to achieve change, partly because they respect authority and they're happy to do what they're told, partly because it aligns with their sense of values and belonging, and partly because they think it's going to be good for them. The most successful organizations manage to combine each of these motivations.

Critically, that is a process of continuous creativity because they are intentions, these are intrinsically antagonistic ways of viewing the world. So, holding them together is a continuous act of creativity. Finally, also because even when you do hold them together just in your own life, in an organization, in a nation, then events come along. Events upset things and the way we respond to events will upset any equilibrium and so we'll respond to COVID by saying, "Well, the critical thing is control," or we'll respond saying, "The critical thing is solidarity." Or some people respond to COVID and say, "The critical thing is to preserve our freedom."

Even when you hold things together, something happens which gets the argument going again and which might lead you to create a solution which is overbalanced towards one way or another way.

It's an easy-to-understand theory, it's a theory which I think understands the importance of all our human drives. It's a theory that recognizes the intrinsically conflicted and contingent nature of any kind of solution, and that's why I love it. That's why I keep using it and that's why it's resilient to me, unlike other theories which break down because they're a bit trite or they're just too complicated.

For me, it's just handy and useful. That's why I've been addicted to it for 10 years and that's why I'm miserable about the fact I've never managed to find a way of articulating it. When I do my speech, the people who hear the speech go, "Yeah, brilliant," and some of them go and use it, a very small number I suspect. I've never found a way of being able to get it out there so that people I've never met never heard me speak about it, use it and value it.

Andrew: Do you think it's ... storytelling can help you? What you've just outlined there, obviously for someone like me who's a visual thinker I can see it all in terms of pictures and diagrams and space and all of that sort of stuff.

Matthew: Absolutely. Look, Andrew, the first chapter of my book starts with the human level saying, "Think about the average day." Think about your average day, you follow the advice of the weather forecaster, you obey the law, you queue up to go into the tube station, but the way you treat your family whether you give money to the homeless person at the tube station. How you work with your colleagues, that's another motivation.

Then also, you're doing what from the coffee you buy at the coffee shop to the way you try and pursue your ambitions at work, that's your individualism. Similarly, I

create a fictional argument between an executive team and an organization where someone's arguing for strategy, someone's arguing for value, someone's arguing for more autonomy, someone's checking out and going, "I've heard all this bollocks before."

I also then have a fictionalized Question Time audience arguing about immigration where again, one person saying, "It can work if we've got the right rules." One person saying, "No, but it's unfair," and one person saying, "Actually, migrants are just people trying to make the best of their lives, and it'll be good for our economy to be open." These sound like they're different political arguments but there's also an underlying difference of view about what matters taking place here. But also, a lot of days you go to bed at night being pissed off about everything and not actually having any desire to do anything about it.

Andrew: Just in terms of your blog, you mentioned Kevin Pietersen, Jack Straw, George Washington, Obama queuing up at a train station. It always pops up, this cultural theory thing.

Matthew: I have not deliberately set out to stick to this theory. It's not like I had a religious conversion and then I spent my entire life obsessed. I put it in a box and try and forget about it a lot. I spent six months not using it, but it just keeps coming back and I keep recognizing it and keep thinking, "Oh, there it is, happening, it's there again." So, yeah.

Andrew: So, it was really great catching up with Matthew and revisiting those early days. And also, to get a second chance at applying visual thinking to cultural theory, something I really didn't know much about before meeting to Matthew. It was also fascinating to listen to Matthew describe those different motivations in society, and to explore the role of fatalism.

Matthew used cultural theory as the basis of his final lecture as the CEO of the RSA and we had the great pleasure of actually illustrating that and animating this into a RSA Minimate, I've also recorded a Making Of video about how we made that RSA Minimate, which takes a closer look at what goes on behind the scenes of making a whiteboard animation.

We will also be back soon with another episode of Talk To The Hand, thank you all very much for watching and reading.