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Hitler Shook the Tree and England Collected the Apples: Comparing the Impact of Kurt Hahn and Rudolf von Laban on British Physical Education

Introduction

Among the flood of German émigrés to Britain during the 1930's were two extraordinary men who made a lasting mark on the nation's cultural and educational scene. Berlin born pedagogue Kurt Hahn (1886-1974) moved in 1933 to escape what he saw as the sinister forces of Nazism, and dance choreographer Rudolf von Laban (1879-1958), a German citizen of Hungarian parents arrived in 1938 after of-fending Goebbels on the eve of the 1936 Berlin Olympics.

Their contributions to physical education during the next several decades had a significant but relatively unexamined impact on the society in which they settled, and their biographies have been mostly hagiographical accounts by former pupils and colleagues. Given the centrality of educational practices to the social construction of the body, the role of schools in constructing and disciplining bodies takes on a particular importance. Using the examples of Laban, father of expressive dance in Germany and promoter of modern dance and educational gymnastics in English schools, and Hahn, Salem educator, founder of Gordonstoun school in Scotland and ardent proponent for the communal benefits of strenuous controlled physical activity and experiential outdoor education, I will compare and contrast the underpinnings and the ideological import of the particular embodied practices they promoted in the schools and colleges of their adopted country of Britain.

Hahn, the traditionalist, the liberal Jew who later turned Anglican, so Victorian in manner and language and in 1933 openly defiant in his criticism of Nazi brutality, has been compared by some to Thomas Arnold and his legacy of disciplined and organized sport. Taking the German *Gymnasium's* pedagogical aim of integrating intellectual and physical excellence he argued that one should aim to achieve peak physical strength and stamina and then channel this into team games and other forms of communal exertion, thus producing social virtue and individual leadership (BARNARD, 1930). Laban, with his mystical, occult and cultic belief systems around modern dance and expressive movement, and his history as willing collaborator with the Third Reich defies an easy comparison. Yet each emphasized the dynamics of intense physical experience, a love of natural settings for physical expression and the importance of community and group cohesion in promoting the kinds of movement practices they had nurtured in Germany (and Austria).

Both men were profoundly depressed, alienated and in financial and physical ill health when they arrived in exile in England and both were sensitive to the embarrassment of a refugee's position. Hahn, at forty seven years of age had lost his homeland, leadership of his school at Salem, and his battle to save German youth from fascist contamination. A man of means and substantial formal education, he was reduced to a nearly penniless refugee, rescued from prison only through the influence of British Prime Minister Ramsey MacDonald, a friend from his Oxford days. Initially rejecting the suggestion that he found a new school in Britain along Salem lines he said, "I do not have time to overcome the inertia of tradition" (MINER & BOLDT, 1981, p. 31).

Laban's path to England was equally troubled. He had remained in Germany during the Third Reich and come to terms with National Socialism before offending Goebbels in 1936 and fleeing Berlin (DAVIES, 2006). When he arrived at Dartington Hall, a unique arts and educational community in Devon in Southwestern England, he too claimed to have lost interest in his work. "I care very little whether I see a moving, dancing, body ever again", he said to his rescuer Kurt Jooss, choreographer and former dance student from Germany.¹ Yet within a relatively short time in Britain, each had successfully reestablished their credentials as educators of the body, albeit molded by their very different experiences of German landscape and culture, their early critiques of contemporary culture and their magnetic leadership abilities.

Influence goes two ways, says Daniel SNOWMAN in "The Hitler Emigres", suggesting that the *thesis* of the culture of middle Europe, encountering the *antithesis* of that of Britain, went on to create a new synthesis - new cultural insights enriched by the interaction between elements of both. Many of the Hitler émigrés, he points out became natural bridge builders who helped enrich their new homeland with fresh insights from Continental Europe "almost as if those who had been given refuge in Britain wished to repay their hosts by injecting into British insularity the exquisite elixir of cosmopolitanism." Thus Hitler shook the tree, and England collected the apples (SNOWMAN, 2002, pp. 336, xiv).

My analysis will problematize this optimistic reading through an examination of the philosophy and activities of Hahn and Laban and their approaches to the education of the British body. It is clear that the ideological moorings of their physical culture practices bear scrutiny from a number of perspectives, especially in their educational philosophies, the nature of the activities they promoted (sport and outdoor activities versus dance and expressive movement), as well as their different relationships to Nazi ideology and the regime's policies and politics (DAVIES, 2006; VERTINSKY, 2007). To be sure, sport and dance have been conventionally viewed in the west as residing within separate and even opposed cultural realms, yet they share a common status as techniques of the body as well as a vital capacity to express and reformulate identities and meanings through their practiced movements and scripted forms (DYCK & ARCHETTI, 2003, p. 1). Both forms provide a powerful means for celebrating social arrangements and cultural ideas, and the possi-

¹ Kurt Jooss interview with John Hodgson, October 1975. Laban Archives, Brotherton Library, Leeds University, UK.

bilities for imagining and advocating new ones (DESMOND, 1997, p. 33). If embodied practices are both symptomatic and constitutive of social relations as BOURDIEU (1984) has outlined so clearly, then tracing the history of their forms and diffusion from one group or country to another, along with the changes and re-inscriptions that occur in this transmission might illuminate shifting ideologies attached to bodily discourses, especially in relation to gender, class and national identity.²

This paper, therefore, will take a closer look at the philosophy and practices of Hahn and Laban as they developed their approaches to the education of the body in Britain in the years before and after the Second World War. Reflecting briefly on the formative years of both men, their relationships with fascism and the Third Reich and the development of their educational activities, I will compare and contrast the nature of their post-exile years in England and the impact of the physical culture practices they established in British schools and communities.

Kurt Hahn, Gordonstoun and Experiential Education

“The best lack all conviction while the worst are full of passionate intensity.”³

At 7.15am every morning, whatever the weather, students at Kurt Hahn’s Gordonstoun School in Scotland stripped to the waist and went for a run. As described by Charles MARWICK in the “Christian Science Monitor”, this gentle morning run was part of a strictly scheduled program whose sole aim was to “harden and yet at the same time to spare the growing boy” (MARWICK, 1962, p. 14). MARWICK’s description, of course, came some time after Hahn’s return to post war Germany in 1953 to resurrect the school at Salem, but it underscored the philosophy of experiential education that was at the core of Hahn’s physical culture enterprises (HAHN, 1950). Casual observers reported their impression that Gordonstoun boys spent most of their time bare-kneed in an arctic wind, plunging into cold water or roped to cliffs and mountain crags, sailing, fighting fires, rescuing folks from drowning and marching with starry eyes under some romantic flag into adventures of little relevance to the problems of living in the 20th century (BRERETON, 1968, p. 174; BRYANT, 1956).

In fact it was to his personal assessment of the problems of living in the twentieth century that Hahn was most committed. Although there was an obvious division in his life before and after being forced to leave Germany, he would claim that the same principles inspired him throughout his long career as an educator – a desire to alleviate what he saw as the moral collapse of society and stem that sense of alienation that he believed had provided Hitler and the fascists their opportunity (HAHN, 1936). He saw decline in every facet of life, especially among the youth. His answer was to reverse this by nurturing a sense of personal and social responsibility in his pupils, highlighting physical toughness and self mastery as an important

² According to DESMOND (1997, p. 158) movement learned both consciously and unconsciously within the home, school and community is a significant marker by which to identify different or affiliated social groups. Social relations are both enacted and produced on the body and not merely inscribed upon it.

³ Hahn’s favorite quote from the poet Yeats – see BRERETON, 1968, p. 130.

means to that end. Contrary to other public schools in Britain competitive games did not play an important role in this educational philosophy. Organized games were restricted to two classrooms a week just as they had been at his school in Salem (BARNARD, 1930). "We must dethrone games", he said, seeing them as experience therapy rather than devices to encourage competitive zeal (WILSON, 1981, p. 14). Competition was fine so long as it was not taken too seriously and students were encouraged to improve their athletic standards by working against yardsticks and stopwatches.

Hahn, who had worked in the German Foreign Office as private secretary to the last imperial Chancellor of Germany, Prince Max von Baden during WW1, had spent the next several years developing a public boarding school in a wing of the Prince's castle at Salem. Here with Karl Reinhard as Director of Studies he had further activated the Prince's educational ideas around the development of citizenship through the integration of intellectual, physical and moral education and become a passionate proponent of the life long benefits of strenuous, but controlled physical activity (WILSON, 1981). His efforts at Salem came to a halt when he publicly criticized Hitler's congratulatory telegram to two Nazi storm troopers who trampled to death a communist in Potempa (Beuthen) in 1933. Calling on staff and pupils to break with Hitler and the Nazis he was taken into custody and accused as a notorious freemason and arch Jew (ROHRS & TUNSTALL-BEHRENS, 1970, p. 169). Once rescued, his focus on the importance of self mastery and self confidence through physical discipline traveled with him to England (as did lingering suspicions that his methods still smacked of Nazi methods and the Hitler youth (MANN, 1970).

Despite initial refusal, his depression and constrained circumstances upon arrival in England, it did not take long for Hahn, "a Victorian ghost [...] the founder of schools, the liberal visionary, the vulnerable pioneer", to be persuaded to start again with scant tools (BRERETON, 1970, p. 42). Thus in 1934, Gordonstoun School started in a small way with twenty one students in Morayshire in Scotland, the place where Hahn had recuperated from a serious injury as a young Oxford student.⁴ Coming across the empty and neglected buildings of an old mansion, he felt drawn to the place and its impressive surroundings of sea and mountains. From these small beginnings Gordonstoun developed into an influential boarding school for boys, implementing many of Salem's methods as well as progressive ideas learned from a variety of British experimental and radical headmasters. Indeed, Hahn's innovations in education were in some ways similar to, and yet quite distinct from the progressive movement in English education. In some respects he did things in a way that was quite his own with a combination of romanticism and realism, requiring the school to be a volcano of educational ideas and activities. Applying the school's motto, "you've got more in you than you think" (*Plus est en vous*) to himself as well as his pupils, the pace eventually broke his health and forced his retirement as Gordonstoun's Headmaster in 1953 at the age of sixty seven (MINER & BOLDT, 1981).

Long before this, however, the exigencies of the Second World War necessitated Gordonstoun's evacuation to Wales where a combination of opportunities allowed

⁴ At 19, rowing bareheaded in a blazing sun, Hahn had suffered a severe sunstroke from which he never fully recovered and requiring that he spend a year in a darkened room.

Hahn to start a new kind of school, again focused on discipline and physical activity. In connection with Lawrence Holt, father of one of Gordonstoun's pupils and partner in a large merchant shipping enterprise he opened the first Outward Bound school in Aberdovey in 1941 to train navy recruits. It was a school where the sea was to be the classroom (TREVELYAN, 1944). The experience consisted of a month long training for young seamen "through" the sea rather than "for" the sea - a training "through" the body not "of" the body which he hoped would culminate in benefit to all walks of life. As Hahn saw it, life enhancing experience was best obtained in natural, sometimes harsh surroundings - the sea, the mountains, the lake country and the desert (NEIL & DIAS, 2001). His motto was "character first, intelligence second, knowledge third" (HAHN, 1947). The essential concept of Outward Bound, therefore, was to provide intense experiences to help students surmount challenges in a natural setting, build their sense of self worth, and through group work develop a heightened awareness of human independence and concern for those in danger and in need.⁵ Lifesaving was the job of the layman, he preached, adding with religious zeal that "he who drills and labors, accepts hardship, boredom and dangers all for the sake of helping his brother in peril and distress, discovers God's purpose in his inner life" (MINER & BOLDT, 1981, p. 58). From this beginning grew the Outward Bound Trust composed of prominent British supporters who helped promote a series of Outward Bound Schools that were established both nationally and in future years, internationally. They were later to be followed by the United World College movement focused upon the fostering of international understanding.

Hahn himself followed his religious feelings by disavowing his Jewish heritage and joining the Anglican Church in 1945. And although he had become a naturalized British citizen in 1938 he visited post-war Germany often and returned eventually to live there in one of Salem's junior schools. He died in 1974 at Hermannsberg at the age of eighty-eight, but not before helping initiate a string of international sixth form colleges throughout the world (MCFADDEN, 1974).

Rudolf von Laban, the Diffusion of Modern Dance and Educational Gymnastics

Despite the fact that he had worked hard to become a naturalized German during his years as Germany's dance master for the Third Reich, Laban vowed never to return to Germany after his exile to England in 1938 (HODGSON, 2001). His early wanderings had led from his birthplace in Bratislava in 1879 to Munich and then Paris where he became caught up in the artistic ferment of the avant-garde as an artist and dancer (FOSTER, 1977; PRESTON-DUNLOP, 1998). His career as modern dance teacher, choreographer and psychosomatic healer took shape at Ascona, centre for

⁵ The physical educator in charge of athletic activity was Captain Bernhard Zimmerman, a former Head of the Institute of Physical Education at Göttingen University. He was yet another German émigré fleeing Hitler persecution. He changed his name to Carpenter (MINER & BOLDT, 1981, p. 34).

counterculture in the Swiss mountains, a “back to nature” community renouncing the ills of modernization and technology where he encouraged his pupils to dance naked in the outdoors. Here he flirted with freemasonry and connected with Dadaism as well as leading a bohemian lifestyle with wife, mistresses and related children (GREEN, 1986; KOEGLER, 1974).

“Ausdruckstanz” or expressive dance as Laban developed it embodied a cluster of ideologies that had dominated Germany during the 19th century including the notion of art as the handmaiden of politics. During his Weimar years, Laban elaborated the notion that modern dance could be a vehicle for conveying important ideas through choreographed public festivals and movement choirs and it was this aspect of his work which later became a ready receptacle for fascist propaganda and expressions of party devotion in the Third Reich. Following WW1 he founded a number of dance schools in various European cities before relocating to Berlin and becoming Germany’s dance master in 1934 (SEGEL, 1998). Recognizing the political heft of Laban’s creative talent the Nazis gave him free rein to choreograph mass community movement spectacles throughout Germany. Laban proved himself adept at choreographing inspiring dance and music spectacles and it was only when one of these festivals incurred Goebbels’ displeasure on the eve of the Berlin Olympics that he was shunned, his freemasonry activities denounced and his work branded hostile to the state (PRESTON-DUNLOP, 1998; DAVIES, 2006).

As a reluctant émigré to England in 1938, Laban had neither the highly influential friends that Hahn did from his Oxford days, or his familiarity with the English language, culture, and institutions. Initially taken in by the wealthy Elmhirsts of Dartington Hall he was introduced to the estate and Dartington school with its child centered progressivism and experimental climate in education and the arts which totally rejected the values and practices of the Arnoldian legacy based on the classics, chapel, organized sport and prefects, along with its complex apparatus of control (YOUNG, 1996; BONHAM-CARTER, 1958). It was his introduction at Dartington to a former dance pupil from Germany, Lisa Ullmann, however, which provided the momentum to permeate the tight little specialized empire of professional female physical educators and inspire them to make a living teaching modern dance and its derivative, educational gymnastics in the schools and teacher training colleges (FLETCHER, 1984). For a number of years, led by a determined Ullmann, they eked out a meager existence teaching courses for schoolteachers and trying to promote Laban’s ideas on expressive movement in primary and secondary schools. They were relatively successful in this venture and modern dance and expressive movement flourished in British schools, especially in the northern counties and among primary school children (FOSTER, 1977; WILLSON, 1997). It was only when male-oriented competitive sport, changing disciplinary paradigms and scientific research on motor development and skill training gained ascendancy in physical education in the context of a massive expansion of secondary education in the 1960s that modern dance and movement education began to lose ground (KIRK, 2002; BAILEY & VAMPLEW, 1999). Those who scrutinized school physical education practices in the mid 1970s barely mentioned Laban and modern educational dance (WHITEHEAD & HENDRY, 1976). By this time, however, with further financial support from the Elmhirsts, Laban had retired to Addlestone in Surrey where he worked on his ideas for notating dance until his death in 1958 (PRESTON-DUNLOP, 1998).

Tasting the Apples from Hitler's Tree: Comparing the Impact of Hahn and Laban

Any comprehensive survey of the Hitler émigrés says SNOWMAN, would note their remarkable cultural dexterity in helping to build bridges between “the exquisite elixir of cosmopolitanism” and “British insularity”. Hahn, he says, was the most influential of the pedagogic exiles, and his rich contributions to British education and the education of the body were publicly rewarded with the CBE (Commander of the British Empire) in 1964 (BECKER, 1974). Laban he describes as “a true revolutionary, the leading dance theorist of the 20th century, and a tireless seeker after universal truths [...]. Like a religious teacher he sought a path of universal spiritual fulfillment, a perfect balance between mind, body and soul” (SNOWMAN, 2002, pp. 270, 324, 336).

Certainly both had an impact on approaches to British education, especially physical education in the years leading up to and following WW2 and both introduced ideas on the body and physicality honed in the cosmopolitanism of European centres of culture. It was, however, an impact of different proportions, born of different backgrounds, lifestyles and opportunities; of different dimensions and audiences, gendered, classed and differentially supported; and of subtle political and religious beliefs nurtured on German soil during the Weimar period and the Third Reich. Nor were their ideas foreign to educational authorities in England. During the 1930s, physical education schemes pioneered by continental dictatorships had profoundly influenced physical education policy. In November 1936, officials from the Board of Education observed physical education programs in German schools, the Hitler Youth and the *Kraft durch Freude* (Strength through Joy) movement and concluded that physical education Germany was novel, far reaching and instructive. The example of Germany was particularly influential (BERNETT, 1988). Physical education, wrote George NEWMAN somewhat enviously in his history of public health was contributing to the transformation of the German physique (NEWMAN, 1939; WELSHMAN, 1998).

Aristocratic, Victorian, traditional, Hahn was buffered by his wealthy German Jewish upbringing, opportunities for higher education at Oxford and elsewhere, and the patronage of Prince Max of Baden as he moved from politician to well supported headmaster of the school at Schloss Salem. In England, he readily found support from aristocratic friends and well heeled supporters and found himself most comfortable in the bosom of the Anglican Church. It was said that at his most solemn and deliberate he sometimes had the mien of a priest (MCCLACHLAN, 1970, p. 6). WORSLEY left a more colorful account of Hahn for posterity. In his popular book, “The Flannelled Fool” (subtitled “A Slice of Life in the Thirties”) where he denounced the sadistic awfulness of British public schools and publicly announced his own homosexuality, WORSLEY described his brief time at Gordonstoun until bitter arguments with the Head Master (Hahn) led to them throwing books at each other. As a young public school teacher, he had first met Hahn in London at meetings of the New Education Fellowship. Hahn, he noted, “was quite evidently in the wrong camp for his own theories were deeply opposed to the permissiveness the NEF stood for” (p. 182). Hahn had persuaded him to come to Gordonstoun and see

his school in action in the bracing Scottish climate. But as WORSLEY soon found out, Gordonstoun was little different from other English public schools, far from it. "I began to have doubts early on about Hahn's educational ideas", he said. "The sea breezes blowing cleanly off the Firth of Moray seemed to be blowing in a westerly direction from Germany. I found myself reacting disloyally against his despotic, overpowering personality" (p. 186). He was further bothered when Hahn, while showing him around the school stopped to exclaim, "Someone has been talking dirt in this room. I can smell it" (p. 192). Other quarrels followed and eventually WORSLEY proclaimed that "for all his high sounding phrases [...] I couldn't help feeling that his own theories of education were dangerously close to Nazism itself" (p. 192).⁶

Artistic, bohemian and restless, Laban boasted of his few attendances at school as a child as "guest appearances" (LABAN, 1935). His ideas on dance and expression were nurtured in centres of counterculture in the artistic ferment of the avant-garde where artists joined brother like communities torn between their fascination with the dynamic modern world and an urge toward experiencing the deeper spiritual qualities of man (TOEPFER, 1997). His quasi-religious cultic belief system derived from the secret Masonic order of *Ordo Templi Orientis* must have seeped into the way he approached and disseminated his ideas on expressive dance and can be clearly discerned in his numerous writings (KANT, 2002).

Both men were singular in relation to their dedication to their work. Hahn remained single all his life, with a wide circle of titled benefactors, living in the boarding schools where he worked as part of the mostly male community. The greatest praise he had for a woman was that she reminded him of his mother (BECKER, 1970, p. 141). Laban had several wives, numerous mistresses, and several children though his relationships with all of them were erratic. Certainly it was women who did most of his drudge work, as teachers and organizers of modern dance and educational gymnastics, and girls and women who made up the bulk of his pupils. Lisa Ullmann, who adopted the role of Laban's constant companion during his years in England, guarded him assiduously (from other women) and orchestrated his gendered approach to teaching modern dance and educational gymnastics. No doubt this association with women and dance caused his methods of training the body to be marginalized through their perceived feminization of the body and human movement. After an initial period of success, male physical educators waded in to blame the personal influence of Laban over a "mystic cult of female groupies" who were overcome by his personal charm and who purveyed ideas about dance and creativity that were anti-competitive, unfocused on skill development and generally "over the top" (KIRK, 2002; FLETCHER, 1984).

Hahn's prime educational objective was to build character through physical hardship and to equip the growing generation with willing and disciplined bodies. In some respects, his Platonic notion of education as a healthy pasture - a sort of field of dreams - was paradoxical in that his views on physical training were highly

⁶ WORSLEY's views were echoed by Lord Allen of Harwood who wrote to Bill Curry, progressive headmaster at Dartington, "I can understand that Hahn's views might seem liberal in Germany. What shocks me is that they are thought liberal in England." Archives at Dartington Hall, 26 February, 1934.

systematized, reflective of a militaristic/masculinist culture of contemporary sport and politics where the body (and social body) must be strengthened against the enemy – against feminization, foreigners and their political regimes. It is no surprise that he was often compared to Arnold and his views on sport, discipline, leadership and masculinity or that one can readily draw comparisons with some of the views of Baden-Powell and the boy scouts movement (WARREN, 1987). Public schools, he said many times, should build themselves into strongholds of fitness for the countries in which they are placed. On the other hand, his views on experiential education allowed youngsters the chance to discover themselves through rigorous adventure activities, develop a degree of intimacy and interdependency in group support, and learn to love the challenge of natural surroundings (HAHN, 1965).

You could also compare Hahn's milieu, Gordonstoun, one of the great houses of Scotland (and its predecessor, Salem school in Schloss Salem) with Laban's initial experience at the great country house of Dartington Hall and its gracious buildings, gardens and support for the arts – though it was in the local school yards of Liverpool and Manchester that Laban's mostly female followers left their mark on the dancing bodies of primary school children. Gordonstoun's first set of pupils included a number of well off students from the school in Salem including Prince Philip of Greece, future husband of the Queen of England, a circumstance that helped promote and sustain the school as a training ground for the elite (GREENBANK, 1965).

In many respects, however, the field of movement and physical culture is hard to hedge when one looks at the political ground trodden by both Hahn and Laban before their flight from Germany, and its relationship to the embodied practices they so fervently reproduced in their new home country. It is understandable that some of Hahn's ideas should have become associated with Nazi methods and the Hitler youth conceptions of discipline, and although he was eventually a bold challenger of Nazi doctrine he maintained common cause with Germany and with Hitler's leadership until 1934 – a situation that some around him saw as somewhat typical of his poor political judgment. "It is no reproach", says Golo MANN, "to say that he was mistaken in Hitler; other very excellent people were too [...]. For a time he failed to see the predominant power of evil in the whole thing. We must leave it at that" (MANN, 1970 p. 169.). One might point out that other British educators and politicians were equally mistaken.

Nor does there seem to be a safe guide through the mindscape of Laban, again raising the importance of examining the ideological moorings of embodied practices (MANNING, 1995; KEW, 2001). While all physical culture and sport is of course ineluctably ideological, it is acutely so under fascism (HOBERMAN, 1984). Laban's biographers have tended to paint a sympathetic story of a gifted but pained man who cooperated willingly with the Nazis, an artist disdaining interest in politics in order to continue his creative work (PRESTON-DUNLOP, 1998). Yet Laban did not publicly protest and worked willingly with Goebbels as he said "to place our means of expression and the language of our eager energy in the service of the great tasks which our nation is fulfilling and to which our leader is showing the way with unmistakable clarity" (LABAN, 1934, p. 5). Perhaps the only loyalty Laban understood was to his work, concludes DAVIES (2006). He could never be ap-

plauded as a man who opposed the Nazis, but neither can he be seen as a collaborator.

Perhaps we can give Hahn the last word. "It is wrong", he said, "to coerce people into opinions, but it is our duty to impel them into experience" (GODFREY, 1980, p. 1). Laban would likely have agreed. Bodies are powerful sites for social and political contestation and intense modes of physical experience can surely deepen the level of contestation. After all, those who create and disseminate modes of embodied practices are unavoidably taking part in contests over the construction of gender, nationality, conflicts among classes, struggles between political theories and regimes - meaning-making systems all (TOMKO, 1999, p. xv).

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