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Shuntaro Ito
Reitaku University

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What Is Civilization? — A New Approach*

SHUNTARO ITO

The International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations is a gathering of scholars which is devoted to the study of civilizations, whatever they may be.¹

What are civilizations? The concept itself is often vague, utilized differently by various writers and thinkers. I would like to make clear my concept of civilization and contrast this concept to that of “culture.”

How do civilization and culture differ?

As you know, Kroeber and Kluckhohn gave us such a variety of definitions of culture in their book *Culture — A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions* that we cannot help but have difficulty in choosing the best. One very likely candidate is perhaps the most famous definition. Edward Tyler defines it as follows:

Culture, or civilization ... is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.

Here, he does not distinguish between culture and civilization. Rather, his definition includes both.

I would begin, therefore, by attempting to distinguish between the two terms, culture and civilization.

As I stated in the last Presidential Address, I think we humans have come to our present state by experiencing five major revolutions, social turning points. These have been the Anthropoc Revolution, the Agricultural Revolution, the Urban Revolution, the Axial Revolution, and the Scientific Revolution.

We can use the word culture for all that man has made (produced or manufactured) since the Anthropoc Revolution, since the beginning of the modern human race.

*This paper is based on the Presidential Address delivered at the 26th Annual Meeting of the International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, in 1997.

Culture derives from the Latin word *cultura*, the verb form of

which is *colere* — to cultivate, to take care of, to practice. Culture is not what naturally exists but what is made artificially by humans. Therefore, it has a kind of pattern. For example, Olduvai culture and Acheul culture have a definite pattern of complex tools, of stone implements. In this sense, the Anthropoc Revolution, which started to produce stone tools or implements, is nothing but the birth of culture.

The Agricultural Revolution worked upon nature by a more complex technique. This is, of course, culture in a higher sense, namely agri-culture. In this context, we may recall the Jarmo culture of Mesopotamia or the Gerzeh culture of Egypt, both during the Agricultural stage.

In contrast to this concept of culture, the word civilization derives from the Latin *civilisatio*. *Civis* means city and *civitas* is city-state. *Civilis* stands for civilian and *civilitas* for citizenship. Therefore, civilization means “to have the status of citizenship or to form a city state.”

Hence, according to my division of five stages, all those stages can be called civilization after the Urban Revolution which created city states, a legal system, social stratification and the invention of scripts. Thus, we may cite Mesopotamian Civilization, Egyptian Civilization, Indus Civilization, Shang Civilization.

Civilizations form larger networks than do culture(s); the former spreads far more widely. For example: unlike the narrow area of the Gerzeh culture in Lower Egypt, the Egyptian civilization was widely spread out, expanding through an extensive basin of the Nile River; in it, organization occurred on a large scale. Generally speaking, it is characteristic of civilization to have this kind of large scale and more complex organizations, institutions, and integration — the necessary consequences of the Urban Revolution.

Ancient Greek Civilization and Ancient Chinese Civilization after the Spring and Autumn Ages — civilizations after the Axial Revolution — are examples of more advanced civilizations. Modern civilization, after the Scientific Revolution of the 17th Century, is the most advanced civilization.

Culture versus civilization — we may say that civilization became culture after the Urban Revolution and so it continues

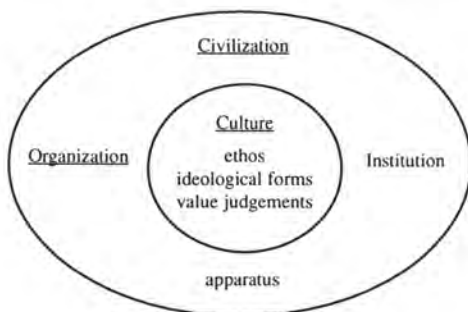
into the present-day Scientific Civilization. Therefore, civilization is a special and developed form of culture, a specific higher state of culture.

This conclusion concerning the relation of culture and civilization can, I suppose, be widely accepted. I think it also coincides with most cultural anthropologists' definition of civilization. However, a problem arises from this diachronic relation of culture and civilization: since cultures exist throughout all five stages but civilizations only begin with the Urban Revolution, it follows that culture and civilization are coexistent after the Urban Revolution stage. Thus, we need a new idea: the synchronic relationship between culture and civilization.

What I am calling a new approach in the title of this paper refers precisely to this kind of synchronic relation between civilization and culture. I would like to propose a novel idea, one which, I think, would help to explain the past well and is also fruitful for the future.

Let us image a sphere which represents the total way of life of human groups in a certain area. I call it the "life-sphere." At the inner core of this sphere, there are "ethos," "ideological forms" and "value-judgments" which are peculiar to the people of a certain group conducive to their way of life. I propose to call this inner core of the life-sphere "culture." The outer shell of the sphere represents "the institution," "the organization" or "the apparatus" necessary for the working operation of the life-sphere.

I propose to call the outer shell "civilization." We can designate this relationship as a homocentric sphere, as follows:



Here, civilization is, metaphorically speaking, a form of "hardware" which makes the apparatus necessary for human conduct. Culture, on the other hand, is a form of "software" which operates the civilizational apparatus, those organizations and institutions essential to a civilization.

The two concepts — culture and civilization — are thus closely connected. They are tied in that civilization (i.e., institutions, organization, apparatus) is formed reflecting culture (i.e., ethos, value-judgment, and ways of thinking peculiar to the life-sphere or cultural area). If a form of civilization is modified for any reason (for example, by the influence of another civilization), culture is also modified.

Nevertheless, we should note the fact that civilization has a tendency to become relatively independent of culture, once the former is established. I would like to call this phenomenon the independence of civilization from culture. Therefore, civilization, which was once systematized as hardware, often becomes independent of the culture which has produced it and can be transmitted into another civilizational life-sphere. This we may call "Civilizational Transfer."

Civilization and Culture are thus distinguishable although inter-related.

Normally, science and technology, political institutions, economic organizations, and legal systems can be understood as aspects of civilization, while the realm of philosophy, religion and art reside in culture. But there is a point to note. Science and technology are now anywhere transferable as an apparatus and institution. In this sense, they belong to civilization, but the "Scientific Revolution" of the 17th Century, which created the origins of modern science, was closely connected with European ideological forms at that time. The birth of modern science itself was a cultural phenomenon which was based on ethos, values, and ways of thinking in 17th Century Europe.

And, contrarily, religion, which usually belongs to the field of culture, must be thought of itself as a form of civilization, when it is organized in a certain order and institutionalized as a mission penetrating other cultural spheres. For example: Christian missions in fact were attempts at civilizational transfers. Therefore, we cannot simply say that science is civilization and religion is

culture. We must pay attention to the functioning of these processes in particular cases.

Thus far I have designated "Civilization" as the outer shell of a life-sphere and "Culture" as the inner core. I should also add the following:

Civilization has a centrifugal tendency to expand outward, while culture has a centripetal tendency to concentrate inward. Therefore, the contacts of life-spheres occur at the interface of the outer shell civilizations. I call this "civilizational contact."

In the late Edo period, and at the beginning of the Meiji Restoration, such civilizational contacts occurred between the Japanese and Euro-American civilizations. At that time a sizable civilizational apparatus was introduced into Japan from Europe and the U.S. Nevertheless, the inner core of Japanese culture was never lost, and these civilizational contacts were moderated by the Japanese ethos.

Today, the Japanese civilizational apparatus may be introduced into other societies as, for example, "Japanese management techniques." It is true that Japanese management was originally formed in accordance with the Japanese cultural ethos. However, it is possible that, as a part of the civilizational apparatus, it has become independent of the Japanese culture. What we should note in this case is that when these civilizational instruments are transmitted to other societies, they come out of Japanese culture and can and will be operated by the ethos of the society which introduces them.

Even if a society absorbs Japanese management techniques as economic instruments, therefore, the society's culture does not become Japanese culture — just as Japanese culture never became European culture, in spite of the fact that the European civilizational apparatus was introduced. Civilizational apparatus can be operated — in fact, it is operated — within the culture of the society which introduces it. We should think that civilizational exchange has in general this kind of structure.

At present, we have a major problem of civilizational contacts between the United States and Japan. When civilizational contacts do not go smoothly, frictions occur — in this case, economic frictions. Concerning this friction, U.S. government officials often say that it is due to Japanese culture, especially the Japanese

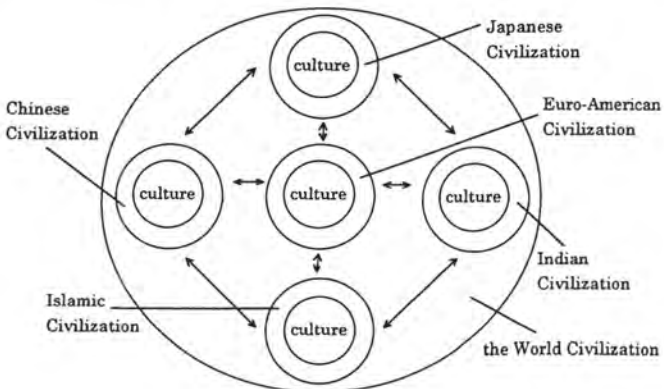
language. This utterance is really nonsensical. Frictions can never be completely overcome unless cultures become the same, so we must conclude that the problem is inescapable unless Japanese culture becomes American culture, or vice versa.

This would be an unhappy conclusion and it represents an error of thought. In fact, what confronts us here is a civilizational apparatus or institution which constitutes the outer shell of life-spheres and does not necessarily impinge upon the cultural contents existing in the inner core. It is a problem of amending economic and legal systems.

We can solve this problem by the adjustment of civilizational institutions. For example, tariff barriers may be lowered or a limitation placed on exports. Thus, we should not confound civilizational problems with cultural ones.

Every life sphere, commensurate with its civilizational apparatus, can become part of world civilization while at the same time keeping its cultural identity.

I call this "Civilizational Adjustment." With such civilizational adjustments, life spheres in the world will have more and more in common with civilizational elements.



Still, the world will never become uniform, not only culturally but also civilizational, because the exchanged civilizational apparatus will be operated by the proper culture of the life sphere or society and will create new forms of civilization.

I believe that with this novel approach to Civilization and Culture, we can have a new understanding of the ability of civilizations and cultures to coexist rather than come to inevitable clashes.

What may we conclude?

First, there is a necessity to distinguish between civilization and culture. To so distinguish, we may argue that the life sphere of a community consists of two parts — civilization and culture.

We can also maintain that civilization, the outer shell of the life sphere, consists of the following elements: institution, organization, system, and apparatus (e.g., political institutions, economic organization, legal systems, science and technology).

Similarly, we can maintain that culture, the inner core of the life sphere, consists of the following elements: ethos, value judgment, aesthetic feeling, the ideal form in philosophy, religion, and art.

Furthermore, there are interactions between civilization and culture within the life sphere.

Second, because civilization is centrifugal, expansive, and universal and culture is centripetal, cohesive, and unique, we look forward to the universality of civilization and the multiplicity of cultures. We emphasize the possibility of the coexistence of many different human life spheres — humanity, after all, must continue to share an increasingly common civilizational apparatus while retaining the unique cultural forms we have produced.

Thus, we have a new approach to civilization and culture, a paradigm which enables us to overcome the supposedly inevitable clash of civilizations.

Reitaku University