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What is the Difference between Culture and Civilization? Two Hundred Fifty Years of Confusion

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Abstract: The distinction between culture and civilization is not well embedded in the English language but has remained relatively meaningful in both other European and non-European languages. Edward B. Tylor designed an idea of civilization that covers both culture and civilization. Similar attempts had been made in late 18th Century Germany. Though it is sometimes stated that Tylor's relativist concept of culture harks back to Herder, the latter's *cultural* relativism differs from Tylor's *civilizational* relativism. Tylor's holistic definition of civilization-culture has created an amount of confusion that can still be felt today.

European totalitarianism is often called "civilization" because many people would work in the service of an expansionist tendency of colonizing groups. On the other hand, European racism, such as that which occurred in 20th Century Germany, profited from the creation of a totally mystical culture that included a pseudo-biological notion in the concept of culture (Master Race). This component had not been present in the Enlightenment or in Herder's Counter-Enlightenment discourses.

Civilization-based racism thrived not only in the colonies but also in the United States, where Beard's purist and radically culture-less idea of civilization could create a suitable background. In Nazi Germany, anti-Jewish racism was based on a naturalized idea of culture; in European colonies and in the United States, anti-black racism was based on the idea that Black people are unable to attain civilization *by nature*.

Introduction

The distinction between culture and civilization is not well embedded in the English language, but has remained relatively meaningful in other European and in non-European languages which adopted these concepts from French and German scholars. In the English-speaking world, a century-old confusing play of name switching and revisions has made the distinction between culture and civilization difficult. The fogginess of the distinction has been reinforced when powerful streams of English-speaking anthropologists suggested that both concepts are identical.

"Culture" (from Latin *cultura*) is the older term and corresponds to the Latin form also in its content; the term *civilization* (from Latin *civis*) was coined later, in 18th Century France and later also in England. However, German scholars preferred *culture*, with its complex of meanings. One can draw a more or less distinctive line between civilization and culture by stating that the former refers more to material, technical, economic, and

social facts while the latter refers to spiritual, intellectual and artistic phenomena. The German usage of *Zivilisation* has always alluded to a utilitarian, outer aspect of human existence subordinated to *Kultur*, which was perceived as the “real” essence of humans, society, and their achievements.

Unfortunately, things are not always that simple because there are cases where the two notions are not clearly distinguished. For example, both culture and civilization can be applied for analyses of religions. Another example is one of the most famous critiques of civilization, Freud’s *Unbehagen in der Kultur*, which uses the word culture, although Freud clearly means civilization. Consequently, the book has been translated into English and into French as *Civilization and its Discontents*.

E. B. Tylor

In the English speaking world, the idea of civilization has developed autonomously, without reference to the term culture. This is because of the particularity of British anthropological approaches (strongly influenced by “Victorian evolutionists” and Edward B. Tylor), which would find no useful applications for the German-French distinction. Tylor’s notion of civilization covers both culture and civilization. It adds to the confusion that Tylor, although defining civilization as more than culture, nonetheless used both terms interchangeably.

Tylor abandoned the distinction between culture and civilization because the angle from which he was looking at culture made this distinction unnecessary. His intention was to examine social expressions that are measurable, such as customs. By declaring culture to be “merely” civilization (though calling it culture), Tylor freed culture from its elitist connotations through the work of his contemporary Matthew Arnold, who saw culture as a high art inaccessible to “common people.”¹ This elitist stance had never been part of the German concept of culture.

Tylor also wanted civilization to embrace those elements that the Germans would call culture but would approach them in a way that make them measurable. In *Primitive Culture* (1872), Tylor designs a comprehensive concept of culture-civilization as a “complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.”²

Tylor’s holistic definition of civilization-culture has created an amount of confusion that can still be felt today. Even extremely systematic works such as those of Kroeber and Kluckhohn, who established six categories³ and 161 separate definitions of culture, could not do more than reinforce the chaotic perspective initiated by Tylor’s fusion of culture and civilization.

Tylor “naturalized” culture by redefining it as a large pool of customs and skills in need of systematization. That is, he redefined human history as a purely natural

phenomenon, postulating that “history of mankind is part and parcel of the history of nature, [and] that our thought, wills, and actions accord with laws as definite as those which govern the motion of waves....”⁴

Once the distinction between cultural and civilizational phenomena was removed, Tylor could submit the description of civilization to scientific standards: “Thus, in examining weapons, they are to be classed under spear, club, sling, bow and arrow, and so forth; textile arts are to be ranged as matting, netting, and several grades of making and weaving threads; myths are divided under such headings as myths of sunrise and sunset, eclipse-myths, earthquake-myths, local myths....”⁵

Whatever Tylor’s influences, his step is in keeping with a tendency inherent in civilization itself, because civilization as a concept has always had an “expansive” character. Norbert Elias found that civilization describes a process that refers to something which is constantly in motion and is constantly moving forward. Civilization is *generalizing*, and it plays down differences, which is one of the reasons why this concept has been so successful since the Enlightenment.⁶

Civilization works towards an increasing extension, referring to and denoting more and more things. Furthermore, civilization is a convenient conceptual tool because its abstract originality remains distinct and recognizable even when it is made to include a large number of individual phenomena. Although Tylor’s civilization embraces all of the world’s mechanical, scientific, and artistic achievements, his terminology remains conceptually meaningful. This is not the case for culture, which fulfils the opposite function because it *delimits* and exists only through this delimitation.

The definition of culture has an increasing *intension* as it depends on the concrete sense or the connotation of phenomena. Allan Bloom holds that “there must be as many different kinds of mind as there are cultures.”⁷ Being the expression of a people’s characteristics, the term culture is conceptually powerful only as long as it *excludes* most phenomena from itself. Any extremely liberal idea of culture is useless. This is why the definition of culture became increasingly narrow through history. The French began to use the word culture as a synonym for everything that can be acquired through education (manners, arts, and sciences, for example) and designed *civilisation* in more and more general and supra-national terms, while the Germans cut it down to more personal and individual expressions linked to art and philosophy.

The German notion of culture has been developed within a cultural context of political fragmentation, where it would increasingly be used as an instrument to provide unity of culture where no political unity existed. Culture is particularistic and “slow” as it establishes differences between more or less stagnant phenomena that are not involved in overly speedy developments. Its identity function would even be radicalized outside the German borders. Petr Struve, a 19th- century Russian economist with Slavophile

tendencies, selected the German word “Kultur” as one of the basic terms in his analytical vocabulary. There it was supposed to signify “the conscious creation of an environment assuring the individual’s and the society’s unrestrained search for identity.”⁸

Tylor’s original purpose had been to overcome the paradigm of culture as a “primitive” phenomenon, as opposed to civilization as a more advanced stage of humanity. By fusing culture and civilization, he sought to make culture more democratic. This combated the elitist paradigm, but at the same time, he wiped out a dialectical tradition as interesting as the one that evolved around the opposition of the Platonic and the Aristotelian, or around Taoism and Confucianism.

After Tylor

In the English-speaking world, Tylor’s notion of civilization would be accepted as solid enough for the study of “real” societies and his supposedly value-neutral, democratic and relativist concept of culture became the standard in the social sciences. Although Tylor had been inconsistent in his terminology, Bagby would state in the 1950s that “after Tylor, ‘culture’ came to be the preferred word in America.”⁹ Of course, one needs to keep in mind that, from a non-Anglophone point of view, what Tylor meant was rather civilization, even though cultural components were included.

Very often, Tylor’s concept would be radicalized in an American context by eliminating all remnants of individual expressions that were still reminiscent of the older ideas of culture. This was, of course, against Tylor’s initial intention, because he had sought to improve the concept by making it broader. The historian and enthusiastic technologist Charles Beard, in his *Towards Civilization*, castigates European aesthetes for stubbornly refusing to recognize a fact that he deems self-evident: “What is called Western Civilization, as distinguished from other cultures, is in reality a technological civilization, resting at bottom on science and machinery.”¹⁰

For Beard, civilization should be reduced to the fact that engineers provide the necessary means to acquire consumer goods for the entire population.¹¹ Forty years after Arnold’s outbursts against philistine reductions of civilization, Beard offers the materialist definition of civilization that Arnold had feared most. Never again would civilization be defined in Beard’s radically materialist way.

The opposition of culture and civilization would flare up in the context of Lévi-Strauss’ anthropology (1949), where it gained another dimension. Lévi-Strauss identifies civilization with modern societies distinguished by tensions and social conflicts, which he contrasts with cultures in the sense of “primitive” societies, which, from a modern point of view, are “settled” as they lack both history and progress. This distinction became important for most French anthropologists.

Apocalyptic accounts of modern civilization were soon to come, most famously delivered in the 1960s by Jacques Ellul, who criticized modern civilization as being determined by a reductive concept of technique and industrialization: “Death, procreation, birth – all must submit to technical efficiency and systematization.”¹² Civilization as technique is due to “a coupling of rationalistic thinking, [of] one particular mythic model of the scientific method, and a specific cultural value of efficiency.”

Retrospectively, the American contrast between culture and civilization, as it had been constructed by Beard, might look like a debate opposing the culture of Old Europe to the civilization of the New World. In the late 1920s and 1930s, many traditional humanists would see American civilization, with its mass-culture, hedonism, and technology, as the collapse of “Western” traditional values.¹³

The “Continental depth” sought by many Americans in the past, including “obscure longings and search for the elusive grounds of all things,”¹⁴ was part of the discourse opposing culture to civilization. In the end, however, also in America, purely materialist definitions would not catch on, because the complete withdrawal of culture in favor of technological civilization appears to be artificial. The 1960 Sourcebook Introduction to Contemporary Civilization in the West¹⁵ does not only mention historical and economical facts, but also the history of philosophy and the arts – and this has become the standard.

For some time, one felt the necessity to disguise, in the historical sciences, culture “under other names, such as ‘currents of ideas’, ‘customs’, mores, values, national character, local color, Geist and even sometimes Volk.”¹⁶ This means that in the post-Tylorian world that Bagby describes, culture remains distinguished from civilization. The problem is that it is not distinguished clearly enough and everyday language maintains a blurred awareness of overlaps and interferences of culture and civilization.

Tylor’s broad view can be detected today in the most abstract definitions of culture, for example, in the recent offering by the Chinese anthropologist Godwin C. Chu, who in his work on Chinese political culture defines culture “conceptually as consisting of the self’s relationship with (1) significant others in his/her life; (2) the material world within which those significant others play an indispensable role; and (3) the values, beliefs and attitudes that govern both.”¹⁷

In general, the most purist definitions of civilization would survive in anthropology because there, civilization continues to have a central position. American anthropology remains the discipline most determined by a positivist methodology that spawns mechanical models of civilization sometimes tuned with Darwinian ideas of evolution.

Suffering a brief lull during the temporary dominance of Franz Boas’ empiricist

anthropology, evolutionism would be resurrected around 1940. Since then, attempts to formulate rival anthropological, historical, or philosophical camps that continued particularistic, value- and ideas-oriented traditions in the humanities have often been fought off by mainstream science.

The main cause of the false dichotomy that opposes “evolution” to “relativism” or to “historical particularism” (the latter most often ascribed to Franz Boas and his disciples) is the failure to distinguish between culture and civilization. In reality there is no reason to suppose that absolute empiricism (avoiding value statements by definition), and a theory of evolution that establishes civilization in terms of “bad, better, best,” are the only options.

Particularists are right in saying that culture cannot be reduced to chemical or mathematical formulae or forced into the straitjacket of general theories; however, they fail to see that culture is an element that communicates with civilization. It is absurd to reduce culture to a random accumulation of customs, skills, and information transmitted in social groupings independent of any and all extraneous variables. But it is equally absurd to measure culture with the progressive yardsticks of civilization.

Tylor was right in saying that civilization has been a “gradual development from an earlier, simpler, and ruder state of life;” but even within such an evolutionary scheme, intentional structures of culture can subsist. There is simply no reason to replace all those intensional structures with extentional structures of civilization. Culture is too close to art: it is without purpose, playful, and inward-turned, and it constantly develops its own standards.

It might be possible to trace Western music from Gregorian chants to Bach, Haydn, Mozart, and Bartok in an upward movement of evolution disclosing increasing sophistication. However, any statement that holds that Haydn’s music is “better” than Bach’s misses the point. Is Haydn more creative, more sensitive or more profound than Bach? At some point comparisons become meaningless. It is also true that Ernst Gombrich has traced art’s evolution “upward” starting with schematic primitivism typical of non-western cultures. Still it is possible to admire “less evolved” art in its own right.

Civilization, on the other hand, often does manifest evolutionary advancements from inferior structures to more modern ones. Relativism provides the right perspective on both primitive and elitist culture. On the one hand, there is no need to praise primitivism. On the other hand, skepticism towards evolution in culture is also reasonable. This skepticism is evinced through culturist, relativist, and particularist stances. The resulting ironical attitude, ambiguity - as well as the metaphoric displacement of signification - often results from a simultaneous apprehension of culture and civilization. Postmodernism does certainly owe a lot to this constellation.

The same goes for another relativism that establishes culture as a quality emptied of any essence: such as “the drug culture, the rock culture [or] the street-gang culture.”¹⁸ This cultural relativism has been found in Stuart Hall’s cultural materialism concentrating on working class or youth culture. It has been taken up by cultural studies ever since. However, even if one dislikes this, there is no reason to suppose that the only alternative is a cultural elitism à la Matthew Arnold. Again, the false dichotomy flows out of the neglect of the distinction between culture and civilization. Norbert Elias, for example, believed that culture can very well belong to class and that, at the same time, all citizens of a country do share the same civilization.

Samuel Huntington attempted to talk away, on three pages of his *The Clash of Civilizations*, the distinction between culture and civilization by insisting that “the efforts to distinguish culture and civilization ... have not caught on, and, outside Germany, there is overwhelming agreement ... that it is delusory to wish in the German way to separate culture from its foundation civilization.”¹⁹

Without mentioning Tylor, Huntington adheres to the latter’s idea of civilization as “a culture writ large” (ibid) and generalizes this concept even further in order to define it as a worldview of a particular people. Throughout the book Huntington uses civilization as if he were writing about culture (e.g. “Italian civilization”). Huntington produces brief quotes from Wallerstein, Dawson, Mauss, Durkheim and even Braudel and Spengler (the latter two entirely out of context) in order to reestablish a Tylorian anti-elitist idea of civilization. Still, put into the context of his own discussion, Huntington’s casual dismissal of the conceptual value of a “German” idea of culture appears as extremely strange when considering that the culture-civilization distinction remains of utmost importance in contemporary, not only German, debates on globalization and modernization.

In 1961, Paul Ricœur launched a debate on the cross fertilization between rooted culture and universal civilization,²⁰ pointing to ideas of regionalism that would become eminent in the future. Since then, the culture-civilization debate has become important in the context of postmodern situations of fragmentation. Ibrahim Abu-Rabi, in his study of Middle Eastern political culture, for example, points to the “frequently expressed view that there is an Islamic civilization and not just culture or cultures” in the modern Muslim world. According to him, “the political and economic elite in the Arab or Muslim worlds, regardless of their culture, are true participants in the civilization of capitalism. True, there is an Arab or Muslim culture, but it is currently dominated by the larger capitalist civilization.”²¹ Abu-Rabi claims that because the Muslim world has failed to develop its capitalist system in the modern period and has become dependent on the world capitalist system, “the Muslim world has culture but lacks civilization.”²² Just like Elias, Abu-Rabi perceives civilization as a progressive development of humanity to which he opposes culture as a national form of self-consciousness. Also,

Terry Eagleton takes the culture-civilization distinction for granted, especially when it comes to a characterization of the global situation: “The line runs between civilization (in the sense of universality, autonomy, individuality, rational speculation, etc.) and culture if we understand by this all those unreflected loyalties and spontaneous convictions.”²³

Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment

When Tylor decided to define culture in terms of civilization, more or less positivistic definitions of civilization were not new. Similar attempts had been made in late 18th Century Germany by Johan Christoph Adelung and Gustav Klemm (1843-52) in his massive *Allgemeine Kulturgeschichte der Menschheit*. He suggests an idea of culture as a complex of beliefs and customs had been Tylor’s inspirational source.²⁴ Here culture gains for the first time the status of a normative concept. As a matter of fact, all these positivistic approaches continue central ideas from the Enlightenment.

Denis Diderot had insisted in his *Le neveu de Rameau* (written in 1760, although not published during his lifetime) that “civilization” and not culture is the counterpart of nature, and that civilization had made possible the progress that characterizes European culture. This comes indeed very close to Beard’s much later ideas. Enlightenment defines civilization as perfection, progress, style, and refinement. However, it is against these optimistic and conquering connotations that many French and German authors felt the need to oppose culture as a concept able to grasp more “inward” turned values like soul and spirit.

Norbert Elias mentions Kant’s discursive remark in the *Idea on a Universal History from the Point of view of Cosmopolitanism* (1784) where Kant describes the difference between culture and civilization as that between deceptive and external “courtesy” and true “virtue.”²⁵ Looking closer, we see that Kant identifies exactly this virtuous, anti-civilizational value as culture:

We are civilized – perhaps too much for our own good – in all sorts of social grace and decorum. But to consider ourselves as having reached morality – for that, much is lacking. The ideal of morality belongs to culture; its use for some simulacrum of morality in the love of honor and outward decorum constitutes mere civilization.²⁶

Kant is the first philosopher to use “culture” in the modern sense.²⁷ Of course, Kant’s approach echoes Rousseau’s distinction between civilizational values such as politeness, decorum, fashion, and ceremony and *nature*. In his *Discours sur les arts et les sciences* (1750), Rousseau (who never uses the word civilization) regrets that “there governs in our customs a vile and deceptive uniformity and all minds seem to be thrown into the same mold. Politics requires constantly that we follow the rules of polite society; constantly we follow customs but never our own spirit.”²⁸

Rousseau's rejection of civilization was eccentric during his time (although it was preceded by Giambattista Vico), but it represented a reaction against the current French idea of civilization as a progressive, measurable, cumulative human achievement able to accomplish the project of Enlightenment. Strangely, Rousseau does not name his alternative, anti-civilizational model "culture" (as does Kant), but "nature."

In intellectual history, the echoes of this culture/nature impulse will reverberate for a long time. One generation after Rousseau, Fichte and Schiller (the latter in his *Aesthetic Education*) "change culture from denoting something [that is] antithetical to nature to what could restore us."²⁹ Allan Bloom has noted that the "interesting response to the nature-society tension," which is much more fertile than the return to, or nostalgia for, nature, can be summed up by the word "culture." Bloom finds that *this* idea of culture "is almost never used pejoratively, as are "society," "state," "nation," or even "civilization." ... Culture restores the lost wholeness of first man on a higher level, where his faculties can be fully developed without contradiction between the desires of nature and the moral imperatives of his social life."³⁰

Further echoes of a civilization-nature opposition (in which confusions about nature and culture are implicit) can be perceived in Freud's criticisms of civilization. Also this criticism can be seen as a sequel of the Counter-Enlightenment movement. Freud, who obstinately refused to distinguish between culture and civilization, believed that "every individual is virtually an enemy of civilization." Every individual must feel "as a heavy burden the sacrifices which civilization expects of them in order to make a communal life possible."³¹ For Freud, civilization is built up on coercion and renunciation of instinct as it is imposed on a resisting majority by a minority:

If [civilization] has succeeded in making the majority of mankind happy, in comforting them, in reconciling them to life and in making them into vehicles of civilization, no one would dream to alter the existing conditions. But what do we see instead? We see that an appalling large number of people are dissatisfied with civilization and unhappy in it, and feel it as a yoke that must be shaken off; and that these people either do everything in their power to change that civilization, or else go so far in their hostility to it that they will have nothing to do with civilization or with a restriction of instinct.³²

Despite his refusal to effectuate a final distinction between culture and civilization, Freud admits the existence of a "back to nature" impulse able to oppose the alienating power of civilization. And this impulse functions through art and culture: "As we discovered long since, art offers substitutive satisfactions for the oldest and still most deeply felt cultural renunciations, and for that reason it serves as nothing else than to reconcile a man to the sacrifices he has made on behalf of civilization."³³ Despite Freud's inconsistent switching between the terms civilization and culture, in this particular case it is clear that *culture* (in the form of art) is supposed to represent an ersatz for nature. Religious consolation has the same function though religion is also – rather confusingly – part of the package of a civilizing process.

In Rousseau's and Kant's time, the search for and refinement of the concept of culture was accelerated by the contemporary need to find a substitute for waning religious vigor. After the French Revolution, civilization would indeed be sacralized by Condorcet, Michelet, and Victor Hugo.³⁴ Here France would submit to the influence of the German notion of *Kultur* as something intimate, local and personal (the French word "culture" is since then marked off by this meaning).

In Germany, Johann Gottfried Herder, who is sometimes referred to as a representative of Counter-Enlightenment, opposed all generalizing forces of civilization. In his *Yet another Philosophy of History for the Purpose of Educating Mankind* (1774), Herder makes the distinction between culture and civilization very explicit by equating civilization with the most alienating forms of industrialization. Some of his most radically relativistic eulogies of supposedly "dark" and uncivilized phases of mankind represent the pinnacles of the German anti-civilizational agenda:

What has become of those virtues and dispositions to honor and freedom, love and courage, courtesy and word of honor? We have become shallow and barren and are building on sand! However this may be, give us our piety and superstition, your darkness and your ignorance, your turmoil and crudeness and, in exchange, take out "light" and skepticism, our frigidity and elegance, our philosophical enervation and our human misery.³⁵

Most famously, Herder postulated that "every nation has its center of happiness within itself"³⁶ and that it is not "up to us to be their judge, to evaluate or condemn their customs by our own standards."³⁷ This anticipates the culturist, relativist, and particularist stances of Boas and his school. And Emerson, in his essay on culture and civilization, rephrases the same thought as such: "Each nation grows after its own genius, and has a civilization of its own."³⁸

Although it is sometimes stated that Tylor's relativist concept of culture harks back to Herder,³⁹ in reality both authors are opposed to each other. Herder's *cultural* relativism is incompatible with Tylor's *civilizational* and analytical relativism that remains strongly embedded in a value-neutral anthropology. Herder believed, just as did Tylor, that a particular way of life (through which are implemented certain meanings and values) is manifest not only in art (most broadly construed) and scholarly productions, but also in the ordinary behavior of people as well as in their institutional achievements. Therefore, Herder's view of culture must be seen as foundational for a scientifically minded cultural anthropology distinct from classical, "aesthetic" philosophies of which Arnold is the most lucid representative.⁴⁰

The difference between Herder and Tylor is anchored in both authors' relationship with culture and civilization. Tylor had declared that all cultures are the same because they are not more than civilizations whereas Herder held that every culture is different and that we should not judge any culture by using a common civilizational standard. The

only points that both thinkers have in common is, apart from being opposed to Arnoldian “elitist” or “culturalist” definitions of culture, their affirmation that culture cannot be found *only* in Western civilizations.

Around 1880, a consistent opposition of civilization and culture was firmly established in German philosophy. However, it was also at that time that the opposition begins to lose its distinctive rigor. Nietzsche took over from his philosophical predecessors the idea of culture but he saw it more as a general “framework within which to account for what is specifically human in man.”⁴¹

German Romanticism developed an idealist notion of *Kultur* as something “foggy,” ungraspable, or “dreamy” (reinforced on the French side through the writings of Mme de Staël), while in France, the term *civilisation* would adopt more and more general and supra-national connotations. Culture becomes a mystic entity evoking soul, freedom, and art. Following earlier strains initiated by Vico and Rousseau, civilization was classified by Nietzsche and also by Max Weber as moral decay.

The German Notion of Culture

During the First World War, while the French interpreted civilization in an increasingly supra-national sense, Germans begin to see “culture” more and more as an expression of their national spirit. The use of culture for this purpose was not random but was inscribed in the historical profile attached to the term culture. While the French began to use the word culture as a synonym for everything that can be acquired through education, the Germans cut down “culture” to more personal and individual expressions linked to art and philosophy. In the long run, the involvement of “culture” in nationalism would become unavoidable.

In 1920, Thomas Mann defines culture as “national” and civilization as “the liquidation of nationalism”⁴² making the distinction between culture and civilization coincide with the differences between German and French/English national characteristics. Here is what follows from some pages of his text, which he provocatively entitles “Considerations of an Unpolitical Man:”

Germany	France and Britain
Culture	Civilization
Art is poetry and music	Art is literature and prose
Protestantism	Universalism
Burgher	Bourgeois
National	Feeling humanitarianism
Pessimism	Progressivism
Life	Society
Irony	Radicalism
Reverence	Enlightenment

Germany	France and Britain
Inwardness	Reason
People	Class and mass
Aristocracy	Democracy
Ethics	Politics

A Romantic stance that sees everything “official” as challenged by the power of the intellect leads Mann, to the opposition of the intellect and politics, which overlaps, once again, with the difference between culture and civilization: “The difference between intellect and politics includes that of culture and civilization, of soul and society, of freedom and voting rights, of art, and literature; and German tradition is culture, soul, freedom, art and not civilization, society, voting rights and literature.”⁴³ The result is the opposition of democratic universalism of civilization vs. cultural particularism.

While the English and the French participated in a competition about “who has the best civilization,” which spurred both participants to reach higher levels of refinement, Germans saw no reason to join this race because their concept of culture as something purely subjective and unique made such competitions redundant by definition. Ever since Germany was invaded by Louis XIV and by Napoleon, it fully recognized the value of French civilization but perceived it as alien and incompatible with German *Kultur*.

For Mann, culture included everything German, especially music, the interest in morals and “inner experience,” while civilization is represented by what is typically French, that is, political thought and a pronounced interest in social problems. German culture needed to be protected from civilization otherwise democratic enlightenment and bourgeois rhetoric would dissolve the German spirit of culture. This is why Richard Wagner once declared that “*civilization* disappears before music, like *mist* before the sun.”⁴⁴

It remains to say that in a global context, the French-German civilization-culture distinction can sometimes be foisted on a model that opposes America to Europe. As Bloom has noted, “a phenomenon such as Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a high work of art which is meant to be wholly German, of Germans and by Germans, and is an expression of collective consciousness, is inconceivable to Americans.”⁴⁵ For Americans, civilization is general and Dante, Shakespeare, and Goethe belong to everyone. The mentioned political fragmentation of Germany, on the other hand, had asked for definitions of national identities.

Oswald Spengler

Shortly before the Nazi debacle, the culture vs. civilization discussion was reopened by Oswald Spengler who often reflected upon the difference between “inward turned cultural energy” and “outward turned civilizational exposure.”⁴⁶ On the one hand,

Spengler's ideas were in the air as they fit well into an era of emerging grand narratives of civilization. It is also true that Spengler's critique of civilization is interesting if read as a critique of a fake, "civilizational" reality that we can penetrate only through constant questioning. This reading makes his book very contemporary.

On the other hand, Spengler uses a great deal of Tönniesian communitarian thought that had perhaps been valued for the last time a century earlier by the Slavophiles. Spengler's strongly identitarian discourse seems to be strangely out of touch with the modern environment within which he was writing. At first sight, Spengler seems to take over the civilization-culture distinction current since Rousseau, Kant, and Herder, propagating a culturalist approach that speaks up against modernization. His conclusion that civilization is "imperialism unadulterated" overlaps with Norbert Elias's insights and sounds neither politically incorrect nor eccentric.

A reading of ten pages in Spengler's *The Decline of the Occident*, in which the author develops the difference between culture and civilization, yields a pattern that plays out modernity against tradition in a fashion similar to Pan-Slavism, Pan-Asianism and other contemporary conservative political movements. Largely, Spengler suggests the following oppositions:

Culture	Civilization
Home	The world city
Reverence for tradition and age	Cold matter-of-fact attitude
The older religion of the heart	Scientific irreligion
Natural	Heart-earned rights
Fruitful earth and primitive values	Money as an inorganic and abstract magnitude
Folk	Mass
Primitive instincts and conditions	Wage disputes and football-grounds

Despite the fact that some of the scheme's points might have already appeared at Spengler's time as a consecution of platitudes, it cannot be denied that Spengler also added something new to the culture-civilization bipartition. He described world history as a necessary development *from* culture *to* civilization. Within this system, civilization is seen as decadent and as representing the last phase of culture. For Spengler, passing from culture to civilization means to pass from life to death.

According to him, "civilizations are the most external and artificial states of which a species of developed humanity is capable. They are the conclusion, they are 'the inevitable destiny of culture.'"⁴⁷ No theory of civilization is more directly opposed to Tylor's evolutionary optimism than Spengler's. Through an unexplainable mechanism, the inward energy of culture will be directed towards the outward oriented civilization from which it will evaporate into nothing: "Pure civilization, as a historical process, consists in a progressive *taking-down* of forms that have become inorganic or dead."⁴⁸

Spengler explains that the transition from culture to civilization had been accomplished for the classical world in the 4th century and for the Western world in the 19th century. This is why we are now living at the age of civilization and why “Cecil Rhodes is the first man of a new age.”⁴⁹ The enthusiasm for civilization that pops up in Spengler’s book is only difficult to coordinate with his negative evaluation of civilization as such, unless it will be interpreted as the fatalistic acceptance of decadence. This is how Spengler views the relationship between culture and civilization:

Culture	Civilization
Becoming	Become
Life	Death
Expansion	Rigidity
Natural	Artificial
Internal	External
Organic	Mechanic
Creative	Rational
Genuine	Fake
Traditional	Modern
Concrete	Abstract
Spontaneous	Calculated
Warm	Cold
Community	State
Spiritual	Material
Rooted	Superficial

However, as if fighting off fatalism, Spengler does not hesitate to involve himself into contradictions by attributing to cultures the capacity to resist civilizations. In the very end, cultures turn out to be the stronger element. By depriving civilizations of their dynamism and by condemning colonial empires to civilizational death, Spengler equips cultures with a self-sufficient force that is more powerful than anything the decadent world of civilization is able to offer. Civilizations die while cultures survive, although on a modest level as a sort of “countercultures.” Spengler explains that this is the reason why Europe still has “culture cities” like Florence, Nürnberg, Salamanca, Bruges and Prague, which “manage to survive as provincial towns and continue their fight against civilizational world cities.”⁵⁰

Spengler’s concrete choices when it comes to the fleshing out of his theory (cultural Doric versus civilizational Gothic; Greek soul versus Roman intellect) have been criticized as much as ridiculed. Still it must be pointed out that his nihilistic and deterministic vision of human development puts civilization into a completely new light. In the end, cultures are not condemned to degenerate into decadent civilizations, but are able to lead a resistant underground existence.

Totalitarian Notions of Civilization and Culture

European totalitarianism is frequently attributed to the often mentioned supra-national connotation of the term “civilization,” because so often “civilization” could work to promote an “expansionist tendency of colonizing groups.”⁵¹ In the colonies, it was believed that “if the Negro is not careful he will drink in all the poison of modern civilization and die from the effects of it” (Marcus Garvey).⁵² However, this is only true for colonialism. Internal European racism such as that which occurred in 20th Century Germany (a country with almost no colonies) profited, in the first place, from glamorizing its own culture by inserting a biological component into the concept of culture.

This component had not been present in the Enlightenment or in Herder’s Counter-Enlightenment discourses, although one can detect its implicit presence when considering the eminent parallelism that exists (since Rousseau and Kant) between the concept of culture and nature. Spengler’s insistence on the identification of the cultural with the natural, the organic, the genuine, and the concrete, to which he opposes an “artificial” civilization, spells out what had been contained in German thought ever since it had decided to see *Zivilisation* as the attribute of decadent aristocracy.

The culture of the “common people” was not only deemed to be more ethical but also more *natural*. Utopian naturist movements that are typical for German culture have their origin in the same philosophy. When civilization is declared to be “artificial” and “unreal,” everything that is *not* civilization can be classified as either cultural or natural. In an atmosphere of intellectual sloppiness, the two overlap. When this happens, culture gets “naturalized.”

It is along these lines that the Nazi *Kreisleiter* (District Leader) of Innsbruck, Hans Hanak, writes that culture “can’t be acquired by education. Culture is in the blood. The best proof of this today is the Jews, who cannot do more than appropriate our civilization but never our culture.”⁵³

Those who point to the cultural basis of racism and believe that civilization is the remedy will be disappointed. Civilization-based racism thrived not only in European colonies, but also in the United States where Beard’s purist and radically culture-less idea of civilization could create a suitable background. In the end, Tylor’s culture-civilization scheme could not avoid the three cardinal beliefs of the 19th Century: professionalism, racism, and the concept of progress.⁵⁴ Such civilization-based theories of race would sometimes even be supported by African Americans, as demonstrated by Jeffrey Louis Decker’s description of racist patterns in post-slavery America:

Without an Anglicized culture, it was understood that Africans also lacked the means for racial uplift and were destined for extinction. Even black nationalists who advocated separatism were usually staunch civilizationists. The key, as technocrat Booker T. Washington understood it, was to imitate white institutions within the black community.⁵⁵

The ideas of Washington's rival, W.E.B. Du Bois, on the other hand, are "culturalist" as they emphasize the importance of identity and the necessity of the "Conservation of Races." Du Bois spoke of an African American *Volksgeist* as the unique spiritual message of race that can be detected with the help of human sciences (history and sociology) and not the natural sciences. According to Du Bois, one "needs to invoke 'subtle forces' of history, law, habits of thought, the end of human striving, and religion to account for the distinctive spiritual lives of racial groups."⁵⁶

Conclusion

The distinction between civilization and culture has been subjected to various attacks for more than 250 years. It remains relevant in a world where cultures (both local and global), tradition, and modernity collide. In the past, most of the time, neither the understanding of culture nor that of civilization could lead to a better understanding of the other.

In Nazi Germany, anti-Jewish racism was based on a naturalized idea of culture; in European colonies and in the United States, anti-black racism was based on the idea that African Americans were unable to attain civilization *by nature*. Neither culture nor civilization has been able to help overcome value-biased dismissals of that which is foreign or which is simply different.

Idealized in isolation, both culture and civilization can even lead to totalitarianism because, at bottom, both culture and civilization are highly egocentric terms. China might have been proud of its 4000-year-old culture and "the West" might have been proud of its civilization that embraces manners, technology and scientific knowledge. However, in both cases what one called "culture" or "civilization" was only homemade.

The Chinese were well aware that Europeans had culture, but did not recognize them as such because that culture was not Chinese. The West was informed of the Chinese level of technology and science, but refused to consider these achievements as a form of civilization equal to its own. Clashes of local cultures as well as invasive civilizations should be re-thought by borrowing from the rich heritage that has reflected upon the differences and interactions of culture and civilization.

In the contemporary world, culture and civilization are in conflict, which means basically two things: First, Western and non-Western identity politics or even radical religious movements (Islamic or Christian fundamentalism) claim to be predominantly cultural in character and see as their enemies those who attempt to impose a universal or alien civilization upon them. The deduction makes sense in its most basic terms because, traditionally, culture or cultivation tended to be understood by Christian authors as "worship" (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

However, as the further historical development of culture and civilization has shown, there is no culture without civilization. This is what must be held against those who are culturalist in a fundamentalist sense.

Second, there are those who believe that mutual cultural understanding represents the most efficient reconciliatory power able to establish continuities and stability and to promote East-West understanding. These people are equally naïve because culture as a locally lived experience is always mediated through civilization (otherwise it would be a dead culture stuffed away in a museum or a theme park). In parallel, civilization in itself is a purely abstract universal and becomes concrete only through cultural enactment.

Endnotes

¹ Arnold, Matthew. [1889] 1994. *Culture and Anarchy*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

² Tylor, Edward Burnett. 1958. *The Origins of Culture* [formerly *Primitive Culture*]. New York: Harper & Row, 1.

³ The six types of definition established by Kroeber and Kluckhohn are: descriptive, historical, normative, psychological, structural, and genetic.

⁴ Tylor, 2.

⁵ Tylor, 7.

⁶ Elias, Norbert. 1978 [German: 1939]. *The Civilizing Process: The History of Manners*. New York: Urizen Books, 5.

⁷ Bloom, Allan. 1987. *The Closing of the American Mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 203.

⁸ Pipes, Richard. 1970. *Struve, Liberal on the Left 1870-1905*. Harvard University Press, 19. When in 1894 Struve spoke of the US as enjoying the highest level of culture in the world, he used the word in this sense; and so it appeared often in his subsequent writings.

⁹ Bagby, Philip. 1959. *Culture and History: Prolegomena to the Comparative Study of Civilizations*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 75.

¹⁰ Beard, Charles. 1930. *Toward Civilization*. New York & London: Longman & Green, v.

¹¹ Beard, Charles. 1927. *The Rise of American Civilization: The Industrial Era*. New York: Macmillan

¹² Ellul, Jacques. 1964. *The Technological Society*. New York: Vintage Books, 128.

¹³ Mathy, Jean-Philippe. 1993. *Extrême Occident: French Intellectuals and America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 11.

¹⁴ Bloom, 157.

¹⁵ *Introduction to Contemporary Civilization in the West: A Source Book*, third edition, 2 vols. 1960. New York: Columbia University Press.

¹⁶ Bagby, 9.

¹⁷ Godwin C. Chu: *The Changing Concept of Zong (Loyalty): Emerging New Chinese Political Culture* quoted from Hua 2001: 43.

¹⁸ Bloom, 184.

¹⁹ Huntington, Samuel. 1996. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. London: Simon & Schuster, 41.

²⁰ Ricœur, Paul. 1965 [1961]. "Universal Civilization and National Cultures" in *History and Truth*. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press.

²¹ Abu-Rabi, Ibrahim M. 2004. *Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History*. London: Pluto Press, 188.

²² Ibid. 189.

²³ Eagleton, Terry. 2008. "Die Gottesfrage" in *Die Zeit* 20, 8 Mai 2008, 46.

- ²⁴ See Klemm, Gustav. 1843-52. *Allgemeine Cultur-geschichte der Menschheit*. Leipzig: Teubner.
- ²⁵ Elias, 10.
- ²⁶ Kant, Immanuel. 1784. "Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in Weltbürgerlichen Absicht" in "Berlinerische Monatsschrift," Nov., 385-411. Engl. *Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View*, 391. Trans. Lewis White Beck. From Immanuel Kant, "On History," The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1963.
- ²⁷ See Bloom, 185.
- ²⁸ Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. 1964. *Discours sur les arts et les sciences* [Œuvres comp. III] Paris: Gallimard (Pléiade), 5.
- ²⁹ Hartman, Geoffrey. 1997. *The Fateful Question of Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press, 206.
- ³⁰ Bloom, 185.
- ³¹ Freud, Sigmund 1968 [1927]. *The Future of an Illusion*. Standard Edition. London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 6.
- ³² Freud, 1968, 5-6, 37.
- ³³ Freud, 14.
- ³⁴ Hartman, Geoffrey. 1997. *The Fateful Question of Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press, 213.
- ³⁵ Johann Gottfried von Herder. 1877-1913. *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit* [Herders Sämtliche Werke ed. by Bernhard Suphan]. Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 527-28. Engl. trans. by Eva Herzfeld, *Yet another Philosophy of History*. Thesis, Columbia University, 1969.
- ³⁶ Herder, 509.
- ³⁷ Herder, 511.
- ³⁸ Emerson, Ralph Waldo. 1971. *Society and Solitude* (The Collected Works of R. W. Emerson, ed. by A. Ferguson). Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.19).
- ³⁹ Binsbergen, Wim van. 2000. "Sensus Communis or Sensus Particularis? A Social-Science Comment" in Kimmerle, Heinz & Henk Oosterling (eds.), *Sensus Communis in Multi- and Intercultural Perspective. On the Possibility of Common Judgments in Arts and Politics*. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 114.
- ⁴⁰ The distinction between both options has been particularly important for the establishment of British cultural studies which remained undecided in its early years but finally opted for the broader approach.
- ⁴¹ Bloom, 203.
- ⁴² Mann, Thomas. 1983 [1920]. *Reflections of an Unpolitical Man*, trans. W. D. Morris. New York: Frederick Unger, 179.
- ⁴³ Mann, 17.
- ⁴⁴ Mann, 23.
- ⁴⁵ Bloom, 54.
- ⁴⁶ Spengler, Oswald. 1938 [German: 1917]. *The Decline of the West*. New York: Knopf, 36-37.
- ⁴⁷ Spengler, 31.
- ⁴⁸ Spengler, 32.
- ⁴⁹ Spengler, 36-37.
- ⁵⁰ Spengler, 33.
- ⁵¹ Elias, 5.
- ⁵² "Present Day of Civilization" in *Philosophy and Opinions* Vol. 1, p. 31 quoted from Moses, Wilson Jeremiah. 2004. *Creative Conflict in African American Thought: Frederick Douglass, Alexander Crummell, Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Marcus Garvey*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 269.
- ⁵³ from Hobsbawm, E.J. 1990. *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*. Cambridge University Press, 63.
- ⁵⁴ Bernal, Martin. 1987. *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization Vol. 1: The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785-1985*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 30.

⁵⁵ Decker, Jeffrey Louis. "The State of Rap: Time and Place in Hip Hop Nationalism" in *Social Text*, 34 (1993), 53-84, 56.

⁵⁶ Blight, David. 1997. Foreword to W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*. Boston, New York: Bedford, 9.