

Culture and Civilization

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This short paper is meant to explain the concepts of culture and civilization; because it is often assumed that they have the same meaning. Although the two terms bear similar definitions, their connotations differ from each other, which make their usage interchangeably inaccurate. Explaining the meaning of each word and its connotation, requires an explanation of how they relate to one another in a historical context. Such a clarification is important to understand the course of societal development over time, and to identify the issues that cause different peoples identifying with different cultures to misunderstand each other and at times clash with one another. So without understanding the meaning of each concept and how it relates to the other and differ from it, the evolvment of history and the fate of civilizations and cultures would not be understood correctly. The explanation is also helpful in identifying the issues that cause cultures and their followers to often misunderstand each other, and at times clash with one another causing conflict and war.

Webster's Encyclopedic Dictionary defines "civilization" as an advanced state of human society, in which a high level of culture, science, industry, and government have been reached."¹ An alternate definition by the same source refers to civilization as "modern comforts and conveniences, as made possible by science and technology." As for "culture," it is defined as "the sum total of ways of living built up by a group of human beings and transmitted from one generation to another."² Generally speaking, culture stands for the way of life that a group of people follows and defines the social cement that binds them together, forming a community or one society.³

The first definition of civilization as the achievement of "a high level of culture, science, industry, and government" considers culture, just like science and industry, one component of civilization, rather than its other face. This definition also suggests that culture does not include science, industry, or government; presumably, it includes only such intangible things that may be transmitted from one generation to another as beliefs, traditions, customs, literature, and values. Culture, defined by Constantine Zurayk, is "the sum of the creative achievements of the human spirit in society."⁴ In Thomas Sowell's formulation, culture "involves attitudes as well

as skills, languages, and customs.”⁵ Michael Naumann, Germany’s former Minister for Cultural and Media Affairs, said in 2000 that “culture is a symbol for spiritual innovation, for satirical laughter, for imagination, for an intellectual challenge – but also for comfort, for relaxation and for all those forms of entertainment that do not automatically dull people’s minds.”⁶

Since civilization includes culture, and culture is only one component of civilization, neither concept should, therefore, be used to refer to what the other means. Using both concepts interchangeably confuse issues related to both culture and civilization and makes it hard to understand how each concept relates to the other, and this makes it difficult to identify the role played by culture and civilization in the past.

Culture, as defined above, concerns itself with the quality rather than the quantity of what society has developed over time in the visual arts, literature, values, traditions, and similar fields of human endeavor. It refers to the total of ways of living built up by a group of human beings, interacting with one another in what we call society. This suggests that culture includes traditions, customs, attitudes, laws, belief systems, social institutions, worldviews, ways of thinking, and relationships developed by a group of people over time and transmitted from one generation to another. Culture, therefore, must be understood as a product of one group of people living and working together and interacting with one another for a very long time in one society. This makes culture particular, rather than universal.

Civilization, on the other hand, refers to both the quality and quantity of human achievements in the fields of culture, science, and industry; it is therefore a product of people interacting with each other as well as with nature and technology over longer periods of time in countless places, not in one society. Civilization tends to underline the comforts of life that are attainable through industry, science, technology, as well as culture. These are developments that in and of themselves reflect the accumulation of knowledge developed by all peoples throughout history. Civilization concerns itself with the material and non-material aspects of life, while culture concerns itself with the non-material aspects of life only.

Since the interaction of humanity with nature is meant to discover nature’s secrets and laws and exploit its resources, economic means and technological tools become decisive factors in making and shaping civilizations, and thus human history. Civilization, therefore, is produced by humanity and thus it belongs to all peoples; culture is produced by one society

and thus it belongs to one people or nation. Consequently, culture is particular and portable, while civilization is global and non-transferable; the first is communal and largely national; the second is universal. Because culture is only one component of civilization and one of its many aspects, a civilization can and does often produce more than one culture. Being an attribute of civilization, every culture owes its existence and basic traits to the particular civilization that produced it, and not to any other civilization. This means that when a civilization changes, the cultural component of that particular civilization changes as well.

Cultures, being products and attributes of civilizations, their developments had to follow that of their mother civilizations. Nevertheless, after a particular civilization is fully developed, its cultural components assume an active role in shaping the direction and influencing the pace of change in society. Cultures also help shape the way younger generations think and behave, influencing the attitudes they usually adopt towards other peoples, other cultures, science and industry, the environment, as well as time and work, education, and technology. However, the most important elements of culture, I believe, are the values it espouses and the attitudes it impels people to adopt, particularly toward work and time, the concepts of peace, freedom and tolerance, as well as the pursuit of happiness and material gain.

Being a product of people's interactions with one another and with nature in one society, the development of culture had to wait for societies to be formed. Only after agriculture was developed and human settlements appeared did culture begin to develop in a systematic way and influence societal change. Since the age of agriculture had lasted about ten thousand years before the industrial revolution began, all cultures produced during that period were products of one single civilization, the agricultural civilization, and therefore were similar to one another. "Until comparatively recently in human history, all humans had the same subsistence pattern. In a certain sense, they all shared a similar, though not identical culture."⁷

Each of the so-called civilizations of the ancient past is acknowledged as such because of its noted achievements in cultural attributes, economics, science, technology, and political and military organization. All civilizations, regardless of their time, duration, and comparative level of achievements, have produced refined cultures in the form of works of art, literature, architecture, values, and belief systems. Thus, no group of people was able to join the ranks of the acknowledged civilized nations at any time without enjoying a noteworthy cultural life.

Ancient 'civilizations', such as the Greek, the Egyptian and the Roman civilizations, were merely empires that covered large areas of land and ruled several peoples. Since all these empires had lived in the age of agriculture, they had similar cultures, not only to each other but also to other cultures that appeared in other places at the time. Describing life conditions and the way of life in Pacoma, a village in Bolivia, Jack Weatherford wrote: "in many ways Pacoma seems typical of village life across South America as well as throughout India, China and Sub-Saharan Africa."⁸ A visit to the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam will reveal that the artist's paintings depicting rural life in Holland, France and Belgium in the 1880's, particularly domestic life, could have been done a century later in Mexico, Thailand or Morocco.

The Egyptian Pharaonic era of more than 5000 years ago is considered one of the greatest civilizations of the past, if not the greatest of all. But Egypt of today, is much more sophisticated and advanced than Egypt of the past, yet it is not considered a civilization. And what is true of the Egyptian civilization is also true of the Greek, Chinese, Indian, Mexican, Roman, Persian, and Islamic civilizations. These were empires having similar cultures and life conditions; however, their architectural and artistic achievements and social and military organizations were somewhat different. While people may talk of an American or a Japanese culture, no one talks about an American or a Japanese civilization. These are cultures produced by the industrial civilization and therefore the people of both countries have similar ways of living and states of living.

The industrial revolution of the eighteenth century has enabled peoples of Western Europe and North America to achieve higher levels of culture, science, industry, and government, causing the western state of human living to be recognized as having reached the highest status of all civilizations. This civilization is the one commonly known as the "Western Civilization," but, to be accurate, it should be called the industrial civilization. In fact, this civilization no longer describes life conditions in the West only, but in all industrialized societies of the West and East. Advanced civilizations produce refined cultures, and refined cultures reflect the achievements of advanced civilizations. This means that the material and non-material achievements of each civilization go hand in hand, and their internal and external interactions are what make progress, stagnation, or regression possible or inevitable.

Cultures, therefore, are products of civilizations, and their levels of achievements and sophistication are functions of the achievements of the civilizations to which they belong. Advanced civilizations produce refined cultures, and refined cultures reflect the achievements of advanced civilizations. The material and non-material achievements of civilizations thus go hand in hand, and their internal dynamics and interactions are what make progress, stagnation, and or regression possible.

However, the only society that has had a common culture was the tribal society; all other societies that followed have a national cultural framework, within which more than one subculture exists. Subcultures are products of economic, religious, ethnic, and ideological forces that cause each group within each society to feel and behave and often believe differently. For example, the development and legitimization of the private property institution in the age of agriculture caused society to be divided into two major social classes, rich and poor; and that caused the culture of each class to be somewhat different from the culture of the other. In the industrial age, economic activity caused society to be divided into three major social classes; each one of them has its own culture that differs, sometimes substantially, from the cultures of the other two classes.

Today, as the knowledge age advances, societies are being divided into groups along sociocultural lines more than into socioeconomic classes. However, each sociocultural group has within its ranks socioeconomic classes. In the United States, there are religious groups that have their own cultures, but since all such groups have to go to the same schools and abide by the same laws and work for similar institutions and corporations, their cultures tend to have many things in common; and this makes all subcultures components of one colorful national culture. Nevertheless, cultural diversity based on different religions and perceived different races makes the management of cultural diversity rather difficult; it also makes conflict easy to ignite and hard to control.

***Prof. Rabie** is a distinguished professor of International Political Economy; he attended 5 universities and taught at 10 others on four continents. He has published 57 books, about 200 scholarly papers, and over 2000 newspaper articles. Books are 16 in English, one in Albanian, and 40 in Arabic. English Books include Saving Capitalism and Democracy; Global Economic and Cultural Transformation; A Theory of Sustainable Sociocultural and Economic Development; The Global Debt Crisis and its*

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¹ Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language (New York: Portland House, 1989, 270-271)

² Ibid, 353

³ Stuart Chase, *The Proper Study of Mankind*; New York: Harper & Row, 1962, 61

⁴ Constantine K. Zurayk, "Cultural Change and Transformation of Arab Society," *The Arab Future: Critical Issues*, Michael C. Hudson, ed., Washington, DC: Georgetown University, 1979, 17

⁵ Thomas Sowell, *Race and Culture*; New York: Basic Books, 1994, 10

⁶ Michael Naumann, "A Dialogue of Cultures," *Deutschland*, No. 3, June/July 2000, 3

⁷ Jack Weatherford, *Savages and Civilization*; New York: Ballantine Books, 1994, 26

⁸ Jack Weatherford: *Savages and Civilization*, Ballantine, 45