

Culture and Society

Prof. Mohamed Rabie

World history is the record of past events that are universally recognized as important and interesting to most people. Such events include war and peace, the creation of states and religions, the rise and fall of empires, and the consequences of such changes. While it has always been difficult to determine the nature of the forces that control the course of history, it is thought and often claimed that the environment, circumstances, political leaders, ideologies, technological innovations, states, cultures, and ambitious leaders and empires have been responsible for making history and what we think of it. This paper aims to explain the historical process and highlight the interaction of culture with society and describe the consequences.

No matter how many forces control the making of history, these forces cannot be separated from one another; they are linked to each other and through their actions, reactions, and interactions cause history to evolve and form a process of continuous change and transformation. This process is an unconscious and unregulated movement of individuals, groups, nations, states, ideas, inventions, cultures, and economies toward higher goals and more complex organizations and societies. And because this process is self-propelled, it has no particular point of departure, no predetermined objective, and no defined destination. As it moves, it causes conflict, effects change, and transforms people's attitudes, ways of thinking, values, perceptions, economic conditions, and social and political structures that, in the process, change people's fortunes.

Regardless of time and place, all individuals, groups, institutions, organizations, societies and states are continuously faced with issues to consider, complex decisions to make, and multiple actions to take. People have contradictory goals to pursue, varied problems to solve and situations to manage, unforeseen circumstances to prepare for, and emerging internal and external challenges to face. But for such tasks to be accomplished, people and the institutions through which they function must change, anticipate change, and accept change as inevitable. People are social actors and products of different life experiences and religious beliefs and cultural backgrounds, as well as economic conditions and environmental settings; as a consequence, they tend to function according to different sets of

values, traditions, and laws. Diversified human outlooks, largely incompatible religious beliefs, different cultural values, and competing social and economic interests are causes of conflict and forces of change that never stop influencing the nature of social transformation and the course of history.

History, most people seem to think, holds the key to understanding change and identifying the major forces that shape human life in general and influence its future course in particular. Because of this belief, theories of history were written and continue to be written to explain the nature of the historical process, its course, and its final destination. But no matter how much we write about history, how hard we may try to be neutral, and regardless of the purpose of why we write and what we write, we will never know what had exactly happened in the past or how it happened; all that we can possibly know and should strive to know is the trends of change and the major transformations of the past and their consequences on our lives.

Whatever one reads is important; it usually affects his life and outlook. But where that person lives and what kind of cultural, educational, and socioeconomic backgrounds he has are as important as what he reads; they affect the way he interprets what he reads as well as how he uses the knowledge he gains from reading. Culture and class and education, therefore, are very important to understanding the meaning and importance of knowledge and determining its societal role. A computer, for example, can be used by a student to do research and gain more knowledge, by a policeman to spy on people and search for criminals, by a military commander to plan for war, by a businessman to increase productivity, or by others to play games, navigate the Internet and manage investment and banking accounts. Because of the vast differences in cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds of people, nations have repeatedly failed to find ways to cooperate and face their destinies together. Such a failure has caused most nations to struggle, largely alone, to solve problems, set national priorities, and make progress, with some nations having much more success than others.

The Historical Process

Since the dawn of history, humans have formed societies with the primary objective of reaching higher levels of security and satisfaction. At the beginning, the pace of change was very slow, making societies seem frozen in time. But as people developed better tools and more efficient organizations, they attained higher levels of physical and food security, causing the pace of change to accelerate and life

to become more complex and demanding. Complexity presents people with more challenges to face, more desires to satisfy, more opportunities to exploit, more decisions to make, and more change to endure. As a consequence, more players are involved in shaping societal life, causing it to be organized in ways that made people and their social, cultural, economic, and political systems more interdependent and dynamic.

The increasing complexity and dynamism of life has made the breakup of older political and economic organizations and relationships increasingly easier to effect, while making the reorganization of older value systems and social and political structures increasingly more difficult to construct. The first is easier to undo because they are largely driven by interests that keep changing and shifting, while the latter is difficult to redo because they are governed by values and belief systems that seldom change. Traditions, social structures, and value systems are both products and components of cultures that develop over time but never change in time.

As societies change, they move from one stage of societal development to another or from one civilization to another, with each stage representing a fluid station on the road to a new, more complex civilization. The major stages of societal development or civilizations, which the world has witnessed so far, are the pre-agricultural or the tribal stage, the agricultural stage, the industrial stage, and the emerging knowledge stage. No society goes from one stage to another directly; all societies go through transitional periods that connect the past to the present and the present to the future. Since each successive stage represents a more developed and complex society, as well as economy and culture, transitional periods represent historical discontinuities rather than smooth links connecting the past to the future; and because of that, transitional periods tend to be characterized by chaos and social conflict. Each stage of societal development experiences a crisis as it enters a transitional period on the road to the next stage. But after the transition is completed, a new civilization emerges with its social and economic structures, traditions and values, or its unique society, culture, and economy.

During transitional periods, certain agents of social and technological change become more active than usual and new agents arise and intervene, causing complexity to increase and the pace of change to accelerate and its direction to shift. As a result, the pillars of stability in society, particularly established values, and traditions, as well as social and economic structures are undermined. Stability is replaced by instability, certainty by uncertainty, and confusion and fear of the unknown become

prevalent, causing a large segment of society to suffer the pain of change and get in the process disoriented and disillusioned. As a consequence, most people feel impelled to resist change and struggle to abort the process of sociocultural transformation and reverse its course. Nevertheless, humankind has demonstrated a remarkable ability to adapt and persevere, and a strong desire to learn and accumulate knowledge and use it to face challenges and improve life conditions. Edward Gibbon was quoted saying, “we may acquiesce in the pleasing conclusion that every age of the world has increased, and still increases, the real wealth, the happiness, the knowledge, and perhaps the virtue of the human race.”¹

Societies have never failed to use the accomplishments of each passing civilization as a foundation on which to build new social and economic systems, produce more and better products, reorganize economic life and social relationships on sounder bases, and attain higher standards of living. But with every new age, life conditions get more complex and knowledge more sophisticated and specialized, causing our ability to produce and use knowledge to become more decisive in making further social, cultural, political, and economic progress. However, no progress has ever been accomplished without inviting conflict and causing unforeseen change. Conflict and change have kept shaping and reshaping human life, causing the creation of an ever-evolving, self-propelled world of increasing complexity through time.²

Knowledge and the skills associated with it have always been unevenly distributed in society as well as among societies. There exists a knowledge gap between those who know and others who know less; and those who know less are less able to compete in an increasingly dynamic world. Continued change, moreover, has caused this knowledge gap to widen, causing societies to be divided along socioeconomic lines as well as sociocultural divides. Moreover, sociocultural transformation and economic development have never been comprehensive, even or equal; some areas, economic sectors, social classes, and ethnic and cultural minorities usually develop faster and get more, while others develop slowly and get much less.

As the influence of knowledge increases in society, institutions in which knowledge is produced and through which knowledge is processed and disseminated to the public increase as well. And as such institutions multiply they reduce the influence of the individual and the group and weaken their roles in society, causing the need for more complex societal systems to heighten. As a consequence,

change becomes multi-faceted, hardly controllable, and largely unpredictable; it affects all aspects of life, all people, all the time, in all places. The people most involved with the production and application of knowledge tend to change faster, benefit more, gain added power, and achieve higher standards of living, causing socioeconomic gaps and sociocultural divides within and between societies to widen and deepen further.

Historical records suggest that human societies have passed through numerous stages of development on their way to the current stage. Although it is believed that the first human society with a family organization and a language appeared about 95,000 years ago, the first society with a food economy appeared about 30,000 years ago only. For roughly 20,000 years thereafter, human societies were small, and people within those societies lived a nomadic life as animal hunters and food gatherers rather than food producers. But by organizing into small groups of hunters, people were able to improve their ability to hunt and use the meat of some animals for food, the skin and fur of others for clothing, and certain bones as tools and armaments.³ An archaeological discovery made in Ethiopia in 1996, indicates that humans developed appreciation for music 30,000 years ago and used animal bones to make a musical instrument that can play more than one musical tune.

About 11,000 years ago, humans were able to domesticate several animals and use them and their products for a variety of purposes. Animals were employed to ease the burden of migration, carry food across inhospitable terrain, and help man launch and fight wars. Around the same time, people also developed agriculture, or plant cultivation. This development in particular enabled man to produce food in relatively large quantities to satisfy his needs and generate a surplus to trade; it was probably the most important single development in human history. Plant cultivation enabled agricultural people to attain a substantial degree of security and independence from nature and paved the way for people to settle and develop. In fact, with the cultivation of the land and the building of settlements, the ideas of progress and civilization were born, causing populations to grow faster, cities to be built, states to be established, trade to slowly expand, and what is called civilization to appear.

Conflict and Change

Group and institutional relationships in society are based on cooperation and competition whose forces exist side by side in every system and play their roles concurrently. Forces of cooperation create

and sustain societies by integrating systems, fostering harmony, and giving members of society a sense of belonging to a larger community. Forces of competition, on the other hand, provoke individuals, institutions, and organizations to use their particular assets to exploit available resources and emerging opportunities, giving each player a chance to play by the rules of his choice to increase his stock of knowledge, and utilize whatever knowledge and talents he may possess to enhance his social position, sometimes at the expense of others. Nevertheless, people tend to play by the rules of both cooperation and competition at the time, sometimes consciously, but often unconsciously. Culture is the primary force determining the degree of cooperation and competition in each society and system at any time.

In societies where the level of cooperation is very deep due to strict social traditions or environmental constraints, conformity and contentment usually prevail, causing the economic pie to be small and to remain relatively small. Any growth in the pie is usually incremental and unevenly divided, causing the gap between the haves and the have-nots to widen. In contrast, wherever competition is moderately strong but does not threaten the sustenance of society, the size of the economic pie tends to be relatively large and to grow faster, allowing more people to get a share of the increase. Nevertheless, some people usually get more than others and gain more power, leaving the majority of the population to lag far behind, causing the door to open for social conflict that leads to change.

Conflict and change have maintained a mutually reinforcing relationship throughout history, causing people as well as the institutions through which they function to experience the vagaries of conflict and the pain of change without interruption. At times, change precipitates conflict; at others, conflict paves the way for change. Because of this mutuality, the extent of each force has largely become a function of the other, and often a consequence of how the other is managed. People, no matter how hard they may try, can avoid neither conflict nor change, nor can they escape the impact of either one on their personal lives and collective consciousness. The interaction of conflict with change and the accumulation of their consequences over time have given birth to the societal processes of transformation that form together the larger contexts within which all change is introduced, and conflict is managed. These processes are the sociocultural, political, economic, and infomedia processes, to be explained later.

Change is usually caused by the introduction of new ideas that have sociopolitical or sociocultural implications or come in response to technological innovations that have economic or organizational applications. Change may occur first at the intellectual level, creating a new state of mind, which in turn labors, often hard, to change the actual states of sociopolitical and socioeconomic affairs on the ground. Change may start by the introduction of a new technology in the economic arena, changing the economic order, which works in turn to slowly change the prevailing state of mind. This change in particular starts usually as an integral part of the existing social order, not as a challenge to it, and emerges as a natural byproduct of human efforts to become more productive and enhance their life conditions.

Technological developments that precipitate change, such as the invention of the car, the Internet, and the iPhone, tend to follow an evolutionary rather than a revolutionary path and, therefore, they seldom clash with the basic interests of the predominant social forces in society. Gradual adjustments, rather than open conflict, are usually the path through which technological changes travel into the larger society to effect behavioral, attitudinal, and institutional change. New states of sociopolitical and socioeconomic affairs are ultimately created, causing new social gaps to develop and persist in society, and thus instigate conflict and cause further change.

In contrast, change that starts with a state of mind, such as religious fundamentalism, nationalism, and Communism presents a challenge to the existing sociopolitical, socioeconomic, and sociocultural orders, forcing most people to react, sometimes strongly, to arrest change before it undermines their values and traditions and power base. Because of such actions and reactions, actual change precipitated by a changed state of mind is more likely to be revolutionary rather than evolutionary, causing open conflict before effecting the desired change. Change may still occur at both levels without lag, transforming the prevailing state of mind and reforming the economic, political, and sociocultural affairs simultaneously. Change, nevertheless, produces winners and losers; the first tend to accept change, the latter to detest it. Eventually, new states of political, economic, and social affairs appear, causing existing socioeconomic and sociopolitical gaps to widen and sociocultural divides to deepen.

‘Culture’ and ‘Civilization’

The words ‘culture’ and ‘civilization’ are often used alternately to refer to the same thing. Although the

terms bear similar definitions, their connotations differ from each other, which make their usage interchangeably inaccurate. Explaining the meaning of each word requires an explanation of how they relate to one another in a historical context. Such a clarification is important to understanding the course of societal development over time and identifying the issues causing peoples to misunderstand each other and sometimes clash with one another.

Webster's Encyclopedic Dictionary defines 'civilization' as "an advanced state of human society, in which a high level of culture, science, industry, and government has been reached." An alternate definition of civilization by the same source refers to "modern comforts and conveniences, as made possible by science and technology."⁴ 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."⁵ In general, 'culture' stands for the *way of life*, which a group follows, and provides the social cement that binds its members together; while civilization stands for the *state of life*, which a group enjoys, and defines the economic and cultural means that enable people to satisfy their needs and improve the material conditions of their lives.

The first definition of 'civilization' as the achievement of "a high level of culture, science, industry and government," considers culture, just like industry and science, a component of civilization rather than its equal or its other face. The definition also suggests that culture does not include science, industry, or government; it only includes intangible things that can be transmitted from one generation to another, such as traditions, values, and attitudes. Culture, wrote Constantine Zurayk, is "the sum of the creative achievements of the human spirit in society."⁶ Or, in Thomas Sowell's formulation, culture "involves attitudes as well as skills, languages, and customs."⁷ Michael Naumann says, "Culture is a symbol for spiritual innovation, for satirical laughter, for imagination, for intellectual challenge – but also for comfort, for relaxation and for all those forms of entertainment that do not dull people's minds."⁸ Since civilization includes culture, and culture is one component of civilization, neither concept should be used to refer to what the other means or is intended to mean.

The definition of culture concerns itself with the quality of what a society develops in the fields of visual arts, literature, values, traditions, and similar things. It refers also to "the sum total of ways of living built up by a group of human beings," interacting with each other for a long time in what is called society. This suggests that culture includes values, traditions, customs, attitudes, languages, laws, the

arts, belief systems, worldviews, and social organization developed by a people and transmitted from one generation to another. 'Civilization,' on the other hand, refers to both the quality and quantity of human achievements in the fields of culture, science, industry, and technology, which makes it a product of people interacting with each other and with nature over long periods of time in one place.

Civilization thus tends to underline the comforts of life that are attainable through industry, science, technology, and culture. These are comforts that reflect the accumulation and utilization of knowledge developed by all peoples in all places throughout history. 'Civilization,' therefore, concerns itself mainly with the material aspects of life; culture concerns itself mainly with the non-material aspects. Because the interaction of humanity with nature is meant to discover nature's secrets and laws and exploit its resources, economic factors and technological tools have become decisive in making and shaping civilizations and life conditions.

While culture is a product of the efforts of one people in dealing with life challenges that emanate primarily from their social environment, civilization is a product of all peoples' dealings with life challenges that emanate primarily from nature's conditions and fluctuations. Civilization, therefore, is produced by humanity and thus belongs to all peoples; culture is produced by one society and thus it belongs to one nation only. Consequently, culture is more particular and portable; civilization is more global and hardly transferable—the first is communal; the second is universal.

Since culture is a component of civilization and one of its aspects, a civilization can and does produce more than one culture or, to be more accurate, several shades of the same culture. Being an attribute of civilization, culture owes its very existence and basic traits to the civilization that produces it, and therefore, the fate of each culture is tied to the fate of its mother civilization. This means that the development of cultures follows that of civilizations; so as civilizations change, the cultures they produce change as well. This is not to say that cultures do not influence the development of their mother civilizations. On the contrary, after a civilization is developed and become well established, the culture assumes an active role in shaping societal change and influencing its pace and course. Culture, being the sum total of ways of living, helps shape the way younger generations think and the attitudes they adopt toward other peoples, the environment, the economy, science, and technology, as well as work, time and life. However, the most important elements of culture are the values it espouses and the attitudes it impels people to adopt, particularly toward the environment, science, work, and time.

Because culture is a product of people's interactions with one another, it had to wait the formation of societies to develop and be transformed. Though culture appeared during the tribal age, only after agriculture was developed and human settlements were established that culture did begin to influence societal and civilizational change. Since the agricultural age lasted about ten thousand years before the industrial revolution arrived, all cultures produced during the agricultural age were products of one civilization, and therefore they 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."⁹

Culture in Historical Perspective

Ancient 'civilizations', such as the Greek, the Egyptian and the Roman civilizations, were empires that covered large areas of land and ruled several peoples. All such empires had lived in the agricultural age and therefore 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 India, China and Sub-Saharan Africa."¹⁰ 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 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, Roman, Persian, and Islamic civilizations. These were empires having similar cultures and living conditions; however, their architectural and artistic achievements and social organizations were somewhat different. Today, while people may talk of an American or a Japanese culture, no one talks about an American or a Japanese civilization. These are large states having slightly different cultures and economies; both of which, however, were products of the industrial civilization; therefore, they are similar to each other in both their ways of living and states of living.

The industrial revolution of the 18th century has enabled peoples of Western Europe and North America to achieve higher levels of culture, science, industry, technology, and government, causing the

state of human living to be recognized as having reached the highest status of all civilizations. This civilization is commonly known as the “Western Civilization,” but, to be more accurate, it should be called the industrial civilization. In fact, this civilization no longer describes the living 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. The material and non-material achievements of each civilization go hand in hand, and their internal and external dynamics are what makes progress, stagnation, or regression possible.

Some Third World intellectuals, particularly those belonging to older nations and great empires of the past, tend to claim that the Western civilization is a civilization of material and technological achievements, but of little meaningful culture. They argue that human relations in western societies in general and the United States in particular, are superficial, lacking passion and sincerity and, therefore, reflect lack of refined culture. But in so claiming, such intellectuals ignore the western achievements in the fields of visual arts, music, literature, education, laws, sports, and architecture; they also ignore western nations’ contributions to the development of individual freedoms and their espousal of human rights and environmental protection.

Although human relations in Third World societies in general are more personal and passionate, it is doubtful that they are always stronger or necessarily better than those prevalent in the West. In fact, human relations in a large Third World city like Lagos, Cairo, Manila, Calcutta, and Mexico City seem to be not only less conducive to change and development, but also less personal and passionate than human relations in a small Greek, Spanish or British town. A United Nations study declared two decades ago that Manila and Bangkok have more in common with Tokyo and Washington than with their rural hinterlands. Globalization is exposing people to aspects of other cultures and causing all cultures to change and be transformed and sometimes deformed.

Third World intellectuals making the argument about the lack of culture in the West, tend to acknowledge, though unconsciously, that cultures are products of civilizations, and that an industrial civilization produces cultures that give priority to the material aspects of life. What causes human relations to become less personal and spiritual and more formal and materialistic are forces that include urbanization, industrialization, population growth, migration, money, and the diversification of interests and careers. Human relations and the social organizations of today are, as they were in the

past, functions of environmental settings, human needs, belief systems, political structures, economic interests, education, science and technology, and modes of production. Consequently, cultures cannot stay the same while needs and interests, situations and economic activities change and multiply. Every civilization has produced its own cultures, and every successive culture has been less spiritual and more materialistic than the one it replaced.

Most Third World peoples view western cultures as strange ways of living that grew out of a colonialist mentality and are inherently imperialistic, rather than humanistic. Since western societies and cultures are centuries ahead of Third World societies and cultures, they are difficult for Third World peoples to understand and appreciate. On the other hand, Third World cultures stem largely from primitive needs and traditional belief systems and hierarchical relations developed in small villages dominated by family life and the clan system that appeared centuries before the industrial revolution. Because of that, Third World cultures are difficult for westerners to understand and appreciate. While some Third World intellectuals and humanists accuse western societies of becoming materialistic, some western intellectuals accuse the descendants of the great nations /civilizations of the past of becoming the new barbarians of the present.¹¹ Although both sides are wrong, deeply rooted prejudices and failure to understand the dynamics of cultural change within civilizations allow such claims and accusations to be made, believed, spread and persist.

Prof. Rabie is a distinguished professor of International Political Economy; he attended 5 universities and taught at 11 others on four continents. He has published 58 books, about 200 scholarly papers, and over 2000 newspaper articles. Books are 16 in English, one in Albanian, and 41 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 Socioeconomic Implications*. (Palgrave Macmillan 2013-2017) One of the English books, "History of Racism", was translated and published in six other languages: German, French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, and Polish. Arabic Books include 3 poetry collections, 2 novels, and a story; the rest is mostly academic books and collections of ideas and reflections. Prof. Rabie is president of the Arab Thought Council in Washington, DC, a member of the Arab Thought Forum, and a fellow of the Alexander Von Humboldt Foundation since 1992. Grants and scholarships financed his education from high school to receiving his Ph.D. in 1970 from the University of Houston; grants covered studies in Jordan, Egypt, Germany, and America. He is the

winner of the State of Palestine Lifetime Achievement Award for scholarly publications and several other awards. His writings and positions reflect a strong commitment to peace, social justice, freedom, human development, as well as social, cultural, economic, and environmental sustainability.

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