

# A THEORY OF CIVILIZATION

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## ABSTRACT

In the literature of sociology and cultural anthropology there is a multitude of definitions of culture and civilization. Most definitions are in terms of elements of culture. These definitions are alike or different from each other according to what elements are included in the concepts of culture and civilization. In general, the elements like customs, attitudes, life style and mentality, folklore, works of art, religious beliefs are included in the definitions of culture. Culture is the way of life of a particular society. The definition of civilization, on the other hand, includes material and technical products, organizational rules and formal institutional aspects of societies. Civilization may be common to many societies with their distinctive cultures. British and American social anthropologists held that all peoples have a culture. Even a most primitive people must have developed a culture by sheer biological necessity. In this context, these scholars use the term civilization only for peoples who have developed a high level of culture, who have literacy, who are advanced in scientific achievements, and who have developed high technology and an elaborate social organization. Henri Frankfort says that the terms culture and civilization are generally used interchangeably and adds that any distinction between them is bound to be somehow arbitrary. Ruth Benedict sees the way of life of a society, which we call culture, as a selection from available possibilities. These thoughts remind the dictum of the Gestalt psychologists, “the whole is more than the addition of pieces” that is called the “Gestaltqualitaet”. This is a very convincing intuition, but what we really need is a theory explicitly stating what this Gestalt quality is and giving us predictions of empirical observations in the field.

**Keywords:** culture, civilization, conceptualization, source of civilization, theories of civilization.

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## I. THE PROBLEM

In the literature of sociology and cultural anthropology there is a multitude of definitions of culture and *civilization*. Most definitions are in terms of elements of culture. These definitions are alike or different from each other according to what elements are included in the concepts of culture and civilization. In general, the elements like customs, attitudes, life style and mentality, folklore, works of art, religious beliefs are included in the definitions of culture. Culture is the way of life of a particular society. The definition of civilization, on the other hand, includes material and technical products, organizational rules and formal institutional aspects of societies. Civilization may be common to many societies with their distinctive cultures.

American sociologist MacIver and Turkish sociologist Ziya Gökalp made a distinction between culture and civilization in this vein. In German literature *Naturvolk* and *Kulturvolk* are opposite terms. In this opposition, “*Natur*” implies the absence of “*Kultur*”. With this understanding, Western philosophers since antiquity thought foreign peoples as the opposite of what their own civilization/culture represented. This implied the moral-cultural superiority of their own nation against the cultureless other peoples (Africans, Asians, etc.). This opposition of *Naturvölker* and *Kulturvölker* denied any cultural achievements to *Naturvölker*. *Naturvölker* and *Kulturvölker* correspond to primitive peoples and civilized peoples respectively in Anglo-Saxon literature. But there is an important difference between the two terminologies.

British and American social anthropologists held that all peoples have a culture. Even a most primitive people must have developed a culture by sheer biological necessity. Man cannot survive without adding something to nature. In this context, these scholars use the term civilization only for peoples who have developed a high level of culture, who have literacy, who are advanced in scientific achievements, and who have developed high technology and an elaborate social organization.

After all efforts of definition and classification, there remain ambiguities and incoherencies. In the midst of countless definitions of culture and civilization, one is even more perplexed than before and cannot help asking the following questions.

Does it make sense to make a distinction within the concept of culture as spiritual and material culture? Does culture give rise to civilization or does a common civilization appears in various styles in different nations who participate in it? If civilization is material and technical aspects of human achievements and culture the spiritual part of human endeavor,

how can different cultures be regarded as variations of a common civilization? Are the so-called material and technical elements of culture inherently different from the spiritual elements of culture? Can material elements of culture be regarded as something devoid of human spirituality? Do they not have any connection with the aspirations, imaginations and thoughts of human mind? By what means did the different civilizations in history acquire their distinctive identities when there were no big technological differences between them? If you try to find answers to these questions, you will see that logical definitions of and general views on culture and civilization will not provide them.

Among those historians studying the old civilizations, empires, and states, the Dutch historian and archeologist Henri Frankfort reveals an interesting insight into the conceptual relationship of culture and civilization. Frankfort says that the terms culture and civilization are generally used interchangeably and adds that any distinction between them is bound to be somehow arbitrary. He does not develop a formal theory but believes that the preference of one term rather than the other may depend on certain etymological considerations. In his opinion the word “culture” evokes in the mind irrational associations; the word “civilization” on the other hand, appeals to those who see man before anything else as *homo politicus*.

Another interesting idea in Frankfort’s exposition is his view of civilization as having a “form”. In his view, form is not a concrete mold by which we can decide if our observations fit in. The form represents the quality of wholeness of culture which gives to any element of culture its real meaning. If we cannot grasp the whole, the meaning of the element of culture escapes our understanding. Frankfort sees this whole as civilization. At this point he gets help from American cultural anthropologist Ruth Benedict. Benedict sees the way of life of a society, which we call culture, as a selection from available possibilities. Thus, a society can make a cultural element, which might be a trivial detail for another society, its central point in its activities. The selection is integrative. An action which may be seen in isolation as meaningless may appear quite meaningful when it is related to the aim provided by the central point of the culture.

The arguments of Frankfort and Benedict remind one the dictum of the Gestalt psychologists, “the whole is more than the addition of pieces”. Gestalt psychologists called this something more the “*Gestaltqualitaet*”. This is a very convincing intuition, but what we really need is a theory explicitly stating what this Gestalt quality is and giving us predictions of empirical observations in the field.

## II. THE ASSUMPTIONS OF THE THEORY

Culture and civilization does not reside in nature before the actions of human beings. Nor can these manifestations be conceived as automatically unfolding of human capacities through the activation of genetically programs. Human beings produce them by making selections from alternative actions which are potentially available. This is the starting point of the theory. In consequence of this postulate, the theory includes every action and every product, apart from the reflexes and the instinctive acts, within the concept of culture.

Every human society, let it be qualified as either primitive or civilized, has a culture. No human society can maintain itself only by reflexive and instinctive mechanisms. At this point, the dominant cultural anthropological view holding that any human society has a culture no matter how primitive it may be is right. Human beings everywhere and in every condition create a culture even at the level of meeting just their biological needs. They select and develop a hunting technique; make an instrument requiring some sort of design, think out a suitable way of cooking; adopt a child rearing technique, etc. These activities comprise such actions which are not ready-made in the genetic repertory. They are selected from alternative forms of behavior. Such activities and concrete objects that are instruments and other things brought about by the agency of these activities are all elements of culture. Furthermore an object has not necessarily to be manufactured by a human being in order to be counted as a product of culture. When an individual, using his imagination imputes a function to an object already existing in nature by itself, this object becomes an element of culture.

Indeed, the elements of culture are not the objects themselves. Culture involves the outlook, the feelings, the imagination, the understanding, and the manner of evaluation of the human mind. What produces the concretely perceptible objects and imputes them their functions is the human mind. It is unnecessary, therefore, to say that elements of culture are either material or spiritual since human culture as a whole is essentially spiritual. A work of art, a tale, a novel, a scientific theory, customs, all kinds of technical procedures, social attitudes, a musical composition, an architecture, a calligraphy are all elements of culture. Behind every one of them there is a way of looking at things, a particular feeling, activity of imagination, a style of thought, and the capacity for design. The spiritual quality of these elements of culture is obvious. But the manufacturing of concrete and practical instruments and objects and making them acquire a specific function are spiritual actions just like the elements of culture mentioned previously. The psychological quality of the mental processes

giving rise to them is the same. From this point of view, the distinction between the so-called material and spiritual elements can in fact be properly made on the dimension of concreteness and abstractness of the products of culture.

### 1) More questions

If even on the level of satisfying the biological needs culture comes into play, in other words, if in the anthropological sense there can be no human society without a culture, how does it come about that cultures are classified into separate categories as primitive or civilized? Does such a classification involve a value judgment? Can such a distinction be made objectively, capturing certain features of different societies according to an explicitly stated criterion? By what sort of conceptualization the great civilizations of the past described by historians appeared as civilizations? Is the conceptualization of historians regarding the past civilizations based on the same principles as the distinction made by cultural anthropologists and sociologists between primitive and civilized cultures?

### 2) The facts agreed on

When the works of historians, sociologists and cultural anthropologists concerning civilization are studied, one can see certain features common to all of them: a) an organized state with clear boundaries, b) appearance of social classes and the existence of individuals working in different branches of business like farming, commerce, trades, and industrial production, and c) adoption of a writing system, and appearance of works of art and literature.

The ordering of the above mentioned common features one after the other, however, does not throw any light to the problem of the birth of a civilization. If these features do exist in some degrees in all civilizations what, we can ask, gives its distinctive identity to each of them? It is clear that a conceptualization must be made to explain the different identities of particular civilizations. In other words, what is the source of those features common to all civilizations?

### III. THE THEORY: THE *SINE QUA NON* OF THE POSSIBILITY OF ANY HUMAN SOCIETY AND THE REAL SOURCE OF CIVILIZATION

The fundamental motive which creates a civilization is the awareness of human beings of their own minds as the source of countless possibilities. When human beings can envisage their own existence and their own minds as if they are looking at themselves from outside and at a rational level of thinking, there is the necessary condition for the birth of a civilization. From this point of view, every civilization is the production of actions in a conscious spiritual orientation determined in the mind by making one rise above the level of sheer necessities of biological survival. In that case, civilization is the consciousness of a rational spiritual elevation. Civilization is not making reaction to nature. Direct reaction to nature remains at the level of meeting biological needs and is charged with impulsive emotions. Civilization involves conscious rational plans. A civilization brings about new areas of action other than the area of biologically driven acts through conscious rational considerations. This is the source of great works of culture within the sphere of a civilization.

Vis-a-vis the harsh forces of nature to reckon with there are uncertainties in life and the future seems perilous. We know from modern psychological studies that the human mind cannot bear the burden of uncertainty and indecision for long without falling pray to mental illness. So it is quite natural that a human group should resolve its uncertainties by arriving at a comprehensive belief as a method of solving the riddles of life and thereafter.

As far as anthropological studies show us even the most “primitive” human groups do this. Without a common belief and the rules of living attached to it a gathering of individuals is either so precarious that it soon disbands or a deathly struggle of individuals with each other annihilates it. So we can infer that if there is a more or less stable society there must be a common belief and the rules of living, which produce the order holding the members of the society together. The so-called primitive human groups hold to a belief which is adopted by way of spontaneous emotional reaction to nature. The practical impositions of the belief concerning everyday life constitute the morals and customs of the group. They are jealously kept without any change for fear of upsetting the delicate balance between the people’s lives and the nature. A culture produced in this way is also an integrated whole but it is frozen so as to obstruct any possibility of change, variation, ramification, or development. Culture stays as it is. Primitive culture is primitive not because of any inherent incapacity of the people living

in it but because somehow the way toward change and development is irrationally closed. The genetically make-up of human species has the seeds of both irrationality and rationality. To hit upon rationality or to stick in irrationality is a matter of circumstances and chance. And it is also true that an individual who is able to maintain rationality in one sphere of life may at the same time perfectly easily fall into the traps of irrationality in another sphere without awareness.

What makes a culture within the sphere of a civilization radically different from a primitive culture is that there the comprehensive belief resolving the uncertainties of life is somehow realized at a rational level of thinking. By the term rationality I don’t mean the truth of the belief but its conscious logical quality which permits to draw inferences from it. Practical implications of the belief are the morals and customs of the society just as it is in a primitive culture. The important difference is that a culture attached to a rational belief is open to variation since people can decide without irrational fear and anxiety what is harmonious with the belief and what is not as the life goes on.

The theory of civilization proposed here presupposes that a belief which is to be the source of a civilization must be at the conscious and rational level of mind, it must appeal to the innermost layers of human spirit, it must shed light to man’s relationships with nature, life and hereafter, and it must set an ethical discipline to regulate the interactions of individuals. The theory, claiming to be a general scientific theory, does not concern itself with the actual contents of the belief nor does it concern itself with the actual contents of the ethical prescriptions attached to it. The theory is abstract and general so as to be valid for every civilization irrespective of the actual content of the belief underlying it. In other words, the theory aims to conceptualize what is common and necessary to all civilizations no matter how different they may be in other aspects. The logical status of the theory is such that it does not separate civilizations according to their different *contents* but unify them conceptually according to their common *functions* in the life of societies.

#### IV. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CULTURE AND CIVILIZATION AND OTHER CONSEQUENCES OF THE THEORY

1. Civilization is the source which gives the inspiration to produce great works of culture and sets the spiritual targets worth striving to reach, giving actions their direction, displaying a selective function, and finally evaluating but not beforehand limiting the potential products of culture.
2. The theory conceptually differentiates culture and civilization unambiguously. It should be clear from what went before that culture and civilization are not at the same logical plane. Civilization is the comprehensive and productive spiritual source; culture is all kinds of acts manifested in social life and all kinds of products of the human mind. So the theory at one act of conceptualization makes both a clear distinction between culture and civilization and relates them to each other.
3. The theory makes the distinction between material and spiritual culture superfluous.
4. It puts forward a criterion to distinguish the so-called primitive and civilized cultures, uncontaminated with subjective attitudes.
5. It explains the fact that a culture is an integrated whole by the configurative and selective function of a belief and an ethical system attached to it.
6. It explains why primitive cultures dissolve when they come into contact with Western civilization. In a primitive culture there is no conscious and rational basis to provide rational and flexible ways of adaptation, so in the exigency of change forced by an external power culture dissolves. Some civilizations also shatter if undesired circumstances make people doubt the value of their own civilization. Generally speaking, however, there is no problem for a culture within a civilization to borrow elements from other cultures or create a new element provided that there is no incompatibility with the central tenets of the civilization. But when the belief system of a civilization loosens, the integrity and the selective power of the culture weaken. Cultural elements from foreign cultures are borrowed randomly and the culture becomes a patchwork of elements incongruously staying side by side. Consequently, the life in such societies becomes unstable, disharmonious and afflicted with conflicts. The theory puts the facts of cultural change in a comprehensible framework.

The adoption of another civilization is altogether a different matter. It is not an everyday affair. There have been examples of it in history. Successful implementation of such a fundamental change in a society requires the reorganization of the existent culture and assimilation and creation of a whole array of new cultural elements so as to insure a harmonious relationship of the culture with the belief and ethical system of the adopted civilization.

7. In view of the theoretical understanding of the concept of civilization expounded here, the argument that the basis of Western civilization is science and technology appears to be an illusion. A field of human activity which is understood by only a limited number of specialists cannot be the mainspring of a society as a whole so as to hold the interacting individuals together. Western civilization is a belief and an ethical system just like other civilizations of the past and the present. The study of Western civilization is altogether another problem but I want to describe briefly the belief system of Western civilization in order to point out that the concept of civilization delineated in the theory also subsumes the Western civilization.

Western civilization is an amalgam of three beliefs. The first element of this amalgam is Christianity. Although it appears to be relegated to the background of the working of Western societies, historically and psychologically it has been an important factor in the creation of Western civilization. The second element is the cult of power and success borrowed during Renaissance from Greek and Roman civilizations. The third element is humanism and its logical extension individualism. There is an ethical system in harmony with this amalgam of beliefs.

There are countless elements of culture emerging as a natural consequence of Western civilization. Among them science and technology are very important elements of culture encouraged and regarded highly in the societies of Western civilization.