

**THE CULTURES AND CIVILISATIONS INITIATIVE**

*Cultures and civilisations: A Tentative Discourse*

A draft working paper

by

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**1 The issue**

This working paper is concerned with the paper by Jean-Robert Pitte and Adalberto Vallega, which was adopted by the Executive Committee of IGU as a basis for convening an international initiative about the dialogue among cultures and among civilisations. In particular, this document leads to designing an initiative aimed at mobilising policy makers, science and the humanities, together with media, towards:

- illustrating the width and depth of the endowment the civilisations human mankind has developed since the Neolithic constitute;
- demonstrating how this extended endowment has been built, not only through the evolution of individual civilisations, but also, and especially, because civilisations have interacted positively with each other;
- reaffirming the universal value of the dialogue among cultures among civilisations and of the existence of conditions that could lead to advanced and constructive forms of civilisation, bringing about increasingly progressive stages of human development;
- promoting initiatives that — in the frameworks of education, communication, and relations with the public — aim to strengthen and diffuse an accurate and positive vision of civilisations and the awareness of the values appropriate to intercultural and intercivilisational dialogue.

Moving from this framework, what conceptual approach to culture(s) and civilisation(s) could be adopted in order to carry out the IGU initiative will be tentatively explored in the following sections. The conceptual menu provided by literature in the field will not be discussed per se but rather with reference to the goals defined and pursued by the IGU.

**2. The concern**

There is a social perception that the relationship among cultures and among civilisations should move not only towards more peaceful conditions but, more important, towards co-operation. Since the late 1990s this perception has been strengthening and diffusing to the point that an ample number of persons believe that «cultures and civilisations» concern has become at least as important as the global change one. Hence, the need to deal with this newly-arisen issue by adopting effective initiatives, where science and policy-making are intimately associated, has solidified.

In this respect, the approach which science has produced may appear weak, maybe too weak to meet the demand for successful political strategies. This is due to the circumstance that culture, and even more civilisation, are weak concept not per se but because they are referred to a hard issue. Essentially, this episteme is weak because it cannot be built according to rationalism, namely using the Cartesian precepts and a hard rhetoric. Differently from global change, which may be faced by using analytical approaches and hard rhetoric, the episteme of «culture and civilisation» may be dealt with basing on non-Cartesian approaches, essentially approaches based on the pertinence, holism, teleology and aggregativeness principles [Le Moigne, 1977].

This intrinsic difficulty acquires special relevance when scientific approaches tailored to the need to design political strategies are required. In this case, a positive feedback between science and policy-making, logos and praxis, arises: the epistemological weakness brings forth weak and hesitant political approaches; hesitancy in politics contributes to increase weakness in science. Hence the more the IGU initiative on «Cultures and Civilisations» moves from the awareness of this difficulty the more the prospect of achieving successful targets solidifies. Difficulty is not so binding as regards the concept of culture, since the discussions in the framework of cultural anthropology have led to design a menu of concepts that could form a good basis for encouraging interaction between science and policy making. By way of contrast, difficulty becomes demanding when attention shifts to the concept of civilisation, and to its relationships with the concept of culture.

These two questions, namely the concept of civilisation and its linkage with that of culture, will be discussed in the following sections.

### 3. **An exploration**

#### *Two couples of concepts*

Where the goal which is pursued by IGU (See Section 1) is assumed as the reference framework, the conceptual exploration of useful scientific concepts may be rooted on two couples of theoretical approaches. The first couple comes from anthropology and was presented, respectively, in the *Primitive culture* (1871) by Edward Burnett Tylor, and in the *Science of Culture: a study of man and civilization* (1949) by Leslie A. White. The second couple comes from history and was respectively presented in the *Untergang des Abendlandes* (1918-1922) by Oswald Spengler, and *A study of History* (1934-1961) by Arnold Toynbee.

#### *The concepts of culture*

Although culture has been defined in many ways, to the point that Alfred L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn (*Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*, 1952) listed 164 definitions, the Tylor approach maintains a cardinal role because it referred the concept of culture to the human community as a whole. Therefore, the concept relating to the individuals, which was a key point of the Enlightenment speculation of progress, was complemented with a new concept tailored to the consideration of social contexts. In this respect, for the first time, a broad design of culture was adopted. «Culture (...) — Tylor proposed — is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits.» As can be seen, the menu embraces some elements that pertain to tangible realities, which may be easily represented by adopting analytical, structuralism-based approaches, and other elements which are intangible and pertain to the spiritual sphere, therefore not apt to be represented by using analytical approaches. The culture as essentially consisting of intangible components came to the fore as a result of the White's speculation, according to which «when things and events are considered in the context of their relation to the human organism, they constitute behaviour, when they are considered not in terms of their relation to the human organism but in their relationship to one another, they become culture by definition. (...) Culture, therefore, is the name given to a class of things and events dependent upon symboling (*i.e.*, articulate speech) that are considered in a kind of extra-human context. (...) Human behaviour it to be defined as behaviour consisting of, or dependent upon, symboling (...)» [*The Concept and Components of Culture*, *The New Encyclopædia Britannica*, 16, 874-875, 1991]. The uninterrupted attribution of symbols to things and events, and the subsequent accumulation of knowledge, is the speculative reference point. Moving from this basis, it may be assumed that the culture building is a permanent process which may be framed in a triangle embracing:

- the vertex of *things and events*, which pertains to the *ontological co-ordinate* of the cultural discourse;
- the vertex of *signs* (symbols, according to White), which pertains to the *semiotic co-ordinate* of the cultural discourse;
- the vertex of *signifieds* (discourses, narratives, meta-narratives, values), which pertains to the *hermeneutical co-ordinate* of the cultural discourse.

These three components are linked by a semiosis [Peirce], since the individual signified leads to re-turning to reality, and a subsequent new representation of things and events comes to the fore, therefore giving birth to new signs, and so on.

This concept of culture allows us to focus on the relationships between the representations of reality and the subsequent values attributed to signs. For this reason it is close to the discussions about civilisations and the subsequent design of codes of conducts tailored to implement the dialogues among cultures and among civilisations. Therefore it may be assumed as the reference basis for an approach consistent with the IGU initiative.

*The concepts of civilisation(s): the Splenger's approach*

Shifting from anthropology, and specifically from theory of culture, to history, and specifically theory of civilisation, attention may focus on the Spengler's and Toynbee's approaches and speculations. They are closely concerned with the «problématique of dialogue».

Where the IGU initiative is borne in mind, the relevance of the Spengler's approach may be found, first, in a concept of culture which is specifically referred to the episteme-building of human communities. According to Spengler, culture embraces the scientific and philosophical knowledge, the moral system, and other components of the intellectual and spiritual endowment of the individual communities. Hence, two consequences. First, to some extent this approach is close to White's definition of culture, which has just been identified as the definition well tailored to the IGU initiative. Secondly, the focus of attention is not «culture» per se but «the cultures of the individual human communities». The manifestations, which the individual culture consists of, form an organism in the sense that they are connected each other by organic linkage. As any kind of organism, culture is evolving, and evolution consists of the birth, maturity and senility. As a consequence, fatally any culture berths a declining phase, which leads to collapse. This final, declining phase is that of civilisation. In other words, the civilisation is not something differing from culture but the final stage of its evolution.

Moving from this approach, Spengler assumed that — in the early Twentieth century, when he enunciated his theory — the Western civilisation was entering an inevitable declining phase. This approach was widely influenced by some romantic conceptual categories, particularly by that of necessity, that were provided by German historicism. The «necessity of progress», which was the leading category of Enlightenment, was replaced by the «necessity of organic cycle of cultures». The design of history as infallible prediction *post factum* was replaced by the design of history as infallible prediction *ante factum*. It should be noticed that this determinist approach, according to which civilisation arises when culture is declining, and decline is connatural to culture, is far from being demonstrated by empirical investigations. Moreover, it does not offer any useful input to provide room for dialogue among cultures. As a result, its relevance to the IGU initiative is weak.

*The concepts of civilisation(s): the Toynbee's approach*

Much more interest may be attributed to the Toynbee's speculation. Two distinctive features may form the starting basis from which to evaluate it. First, to some extent, the concept of cultures is deeply rooted either in the Enlightenment speculation and in some approaches from anthropology. Secondly, the concepts of culture and civilisation are kept distinct, although complementary.

*Roots of the concept of culture : Kant*— The Kantian thought of culture may be regarded as the philosophical root of that concept of culture the main features of which may be found in the Toynbee's approach to civilisations. Howard Cayll [*A Kan Dictionary*, 1995, 149-150] summarised the Kantian design by noticing that it led to define culture as the 'ultimate end which we have cause to attribute to nature in respect of the human race' and consists in the 'aptitude and skill for all manner of ends for which [humanity] may employ nature both external and internal' [Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 1790, §83]. «It is characterized — Cayll outlines (*Ib.*) — by two, often antagonistic features. The first is the ability to choose ends, the second is the skill to realize them. The discrepancy between the two [features] provides for both

the progress and the ruination of culture. Kant discovers the origins of culture in the restriction of human freedom ‘all the culture and art which adorn mankind... are the fruits of their unsociability’ [Immanuel Kant, *Ideas for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose*, 1784, p. 22, p. 46] and describes culture as a discipline of the will and inclinations. However, the discipline of the will and inclinations in the choice of ends has no necessary relation to the ability to realize them. This results in a social conflict between those who, ‘in a mechanical kind of way that calls for no special art, provide the necessary conveniences of life’ and others who ‘apply themselves to the less necessary branches of culture in science and art’ [Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 1790, §83]. The former are kept in a state of imposed tutelage ‘in a state of oppression, with hard work and little enjoyment’ unable to develop the aptitude for choosing their own ends, while the latter, who do not have to labour to gain the skill necessary to realize their ends, become over-civilized and pursue luxury and superfluous ends. Kant sees this ‘splendid misery’ of culture as tending to catastrophe at the same time as developing the ‘natural tendencies’ of humanity towards a cosmopolitan civil society in which the aptitude for choosing ends and the skill to realize them will be in harmony.»

*Roots of the concept of culture : Anthropology* — The basis of the Toynbee’s theoretical design may be found in an original concept of culture. During their life, human communities should face the day-by-day challenges brought about by the context, particularly the natural context, within which they live. The response they address to the individual challenge consists of culture. Therefore culture is marked by the willingness and ability to design responses — hence the linkage with the Kantian thought — and the design of content and tools of the individual responses. This approach, which leads human communities to make projects, is consistent with that by those anthropologists who are inclined to identify culture in the project-building ability [Nicola Abbagnano, *Dizionario di filosofia*, 251]. Nevertheless, it should also be taken into account that project-building implies a cumulative process of knowledge-building, which is operated by attributing symbols and values to the components of reality, namely by carrying out that uninterrupted symbolising which White discussed of. As a result, it may be stated that, differently from the Spengler’s approach, the Toynbee’s approach is not only compatible, but to some extent linked, with fundamental conceptual endowment of anthropology.

*Shifting to the concept of civilisation* — As culture consists of project-designing and value-building, civilisation consists of instruments through which projects, in their turn sustained by values, are designed. Culture is to goals as civilisation is to tools. According to this vision, Abbagnano (*Ib.*) emphasises that instruments, which civilisations consist of, embraces two categories. Techniques form the first category, which includes either traditional and primitive tools and sophisticated, modern ones. Symbolic forms give shape to the second category and embrace any kind of knowledge, from the rationalist one, performed by science, to the non rationalist ones, performed by religion and art. A feedback links the technique- and symbol-buildings: the more symbol-building expands, the more technique-building strengthens and offers increasingly wider developmental possibilities to the local community; the more the technique-building expands, the more symbol-building improves. As a result, culture responds to challenges while civilisation is the instrument through which response is operated.

*Civilisation and civilisations* — The Toynbee’s approach is very far from that designed by Spengler to the point that they argued intensively. One of the cardinal consequences which arose

from such diverging approaches pertains to the level on which civilisation is considered. Spengler considers *the civilisation* in itself, therefore it is inclined to design an abstract, determinist, historical model and, then, to try to frame the individual case into this. He shifts from *theoria* to *empiria*. Hence the assumption according to which Western civilisation is inevitably moving towards its collapse. By way of contrast, the Toynbee's approach moves from the investigations of the individual realities, namely the individual cultures and civilisations, and is not inclined to discover the destiny of the latter. He shifts from *empiria* to *theoria*. This approach leads Toynbee to avoid considering civilisation per se and building up general models about the its evolution, but rather leads to considering the individual civilisations in their concrete features.

*Civilisations and (primitive) societies* — Toynbee assumes that close linkages between civilisations and cultures occur in a few cases, most of which relates to contemporary societies. The rest of the world is inhabited by human communities endowed with a limited range of tools. They cannot be ascribed to the category of civilisations but rather they may be defined just as primitive societies, where the word «primitive» essentially denotes the existence of poor tools to respond to the challenges that the individual communities have to face. According to this view, only 21 civilisations have marked the history of mankind, while more than 600 primitive societies may be identified.

#### 4 Conclusions

Where contributions and discussions from literature considered in Sections 2 and 3 are referred to the goals of the IGU «Cultures and Civilisations» initiative, as they have been presented in Section 1, a sort of conceptual matrix could be sketched. This matrix comes to the fore by crossing the cardinal themes, consisting of concepts and topical foci of the discussions, and the levels of discussion, consisting of cultures and civilisations. The boxes, where columns and lines cross, lodge areas where useful scientific products may perform in order to help IGU. The breakdown may condense the problématique pertinent to the IGU initiative.

<i>Themes</i> <i>Levels</i>	1 <i>Concepts</i>	2 <i>Foci</i>
1. <i>Culture</i>	<i>Discussion area 1.1</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Culture: system of knowledge and values</li> <li>▪ Dialogue: communication tailored to value cultural identities</li> </ul>	<i>Discussion area 1.2</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Cultural identities of peoples</li> <li>▪ Prospects of implementing inter-cultural dialogue</li> <li>▪ Prospects of valuing cultures facing globalised processes</li> </ul>
2. <i>Civilisation</i>	<i>Discussion area 2.1</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Civilisation: endowment of technical and symbolic tools tailored to respond to the challenges addressed by the context</li> </ul>	<i>Discussion area 2.2</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Inter-civilisation dialogue</li> <li>▪ Moving towards the building up of a universal civilisation which is able to exalt cultural identities</li> </ul>