

CULTURES AND CIVILISATIONS INITIATIVE

Cultures and civilisations: Terms and Meanings

A draft working paper

by

Adalberto Vallega (a.vallega@iol.it)

The discussion of how to encourage the dialogue among cultures and among civilisations may benefit from some *mises-au-point* of the history of terms concerned and their relevant meanings.

Culture

The etymology of culture derives from the Latin *colere*, which in its turn derived from the indo-European *kwel*, «to take care, to love, to adore». Since the indo-European were riders and warriors living in steppes growing animals, initially this word was referred to horses. Afterward, Greeks referred it to agriculture and the meaning of «cultivating fields» arose and diffuse. During the era of barbaric invasions the word disappeared. Its re-use dates back to the 12th and 13th centuries, namely in the early Middle Ages, when many European regions, particularly in the French and Italian spaces, were undergoing profound changes. In that context, two distinct meanings of the word arose. The original meaning, linked to agriculture, persisted while a new meaning, referred to the spiritual and intellectual manifestations of individuals, came to the fore and expanded. The expression *cultus Christianus*, meant as «cult, veneration of Christ», entered into use. As Bonnemaïson [2000, 66—68] emphasises, the latter meaning is a metaphor of the former: human mind is assimilated to a field that may be fertilised and that, as a result, may provide useful products. The distinction of meanings resulted in distinct words only in the Italian language, where *coltura*, from *coltivare*, is referred to agriculture and, more in general, to physical actions, while *cultura* is referred to the intellectual and spiritual sphere.

Following the Websters Dictionary, at the present time the social perception of the «culture» embraces an ample range of specific meanings pertaining the two above mentioned basis, physical and spiritual. Culture in a tangible sense embraces: i) the art or practice of cultivating, ii) cultivation or rearing of a particular type of crop or stock, iii) refining manners, iv) a complex of typical behaviour or standardised social characteristics, v) cultivating of living materials, such as bacteria. Culture in an intangible, intellectual sense embraces: i) the act of developing by education, discipline, social experience, ii) the intellectual and artistic content of civilizations, iii) acquaintance and knowledge in fine arts, humanities and broad aspects of science, iv) capacity of learning and transmitting knowledge,

It should be noticed that the former meaning, i.e. that of «cultivating the spirit and developing intelligence», is parallel to the Greek concept of *paideia*, which was referred to the

intellectual and spiritual endowment of individuals, and to their ability and inclination to transmit knowledge and values among generations. Moving from that concept, a divide was imagined between peoples that were provided with that endowment and the rest of societies, who were designed as barbarians. As is well known, that distinction exerted profound influence in the subsequent phases of the European history, particularly in the framework of modernity. «Cette généalogie du mot culture est importante — Bonnemaïson notices [2000, 66-67] — car elle implique un double sens et une trajectoire ascendante, allant de l'ordre inférieur de la nature à l'ordre supérieur de l'esprit. La culture repose ainsi sur la dualité profonde — matière et esprit — de l'être humain et de son action: elle révèle l'action que l'homme mène sur lui-même pour se construire; elle révèle l'action que l'homme poursuit à l'extérieur de lui-même sur le monde qui l'entoure, en construisant son milieu. Dans les deux cas, il s'agit de fertiliser ou de développer un terrain brut, qui resterait autrement stérile ou sauvage. Et de lui donner un sens.»

Civilisation

From the etymological perspective, «civilisation» is characterised by as long history as that which marks «culture». As a matter of fact, this word is rooted in the Latin *civis*, «citizen», which in its turn is rooted in the Indo-European language. Initially, it was used to keep distinct peoples living in cities, where the intellectual and spiritual manifestations of the «urban civilisation» were developing, from those living in rural areas. This led to believe that *cives* were peoples that, in principle, were endowed with distinctive intellectual characteristics to some extent wider and higher than those marking peoples living outside the urban contexts. It is meaningful that in 1321 Dante Alighieri was referring this term to those that «have achieved high degrees of social, political and economic development» [Cortellazzo Zolli, 1979, 1, 243]. Fernand Braudel [1987, 33] noticed that this meaning was still in use, at least in France, at the eve of the French revolution, namely in the core phase of the Enlightenment diffusion. It was endowed also with a technical meaning, being used to distinguish a civil procedure from the criminal one in the judicial context.

The modern expression of civilisation as «moving towards a civilised condition» arose in 1752, when it was used by Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot during the preparation of an essay on the universal history, which did not come out. The official debut of the word «civilisation» dates back to 1756 when it was used contextually in two important essays of the Enlightenment era, namely the *Traité de la population* by Honoré-Gabriel Riqueti Mirabeau, and the *Essai sur les mœurs et sur l'esprit des nations* by François-Marie Arouet Voltaire. For the first time it was proposed an expression, i.e. «civilisation», which consisted of a substantivized version of the *civil* and *civilised* adjectives. During the next half century, the term spread out in Europe bringing about different impacts in languages and, therefore, an articulated geography of expressions. «Il est en Angleterre dès 1772 — Braudel reports in his accurate investigation [1987, 34-35] — et sans doute plus tôt, sous la forme *civilization*, qui l'emporte sur *civility*, installé cependant depuis longtemps. *Zivilisation* se loge sans difficulté en Allemagne, en face du vieux mot de *Bildung*. En Hollande, par contre, il se heurte au substantif *beschaving*, formé sur le verbe *beschaven*: affiner, ennoblir, civiliser. *Beschaving* ayant à peu près le même sens se chargera sans difficulté du concept de civilisation et résistera ainsi au mot nouveau qui apparaît malgré tout: *civilisatie*. Même résistance au-delà des Alpes et pour les mêmes raisons: l'italien possède et emploiera

rapidement dans le sens même de civilisation le vieux et beau mot de *civiltà*, dont Dante se servait déjà. Bien en place, *civiltà* empêchera l'intrusion du nouveau mot, mais non les discussions explosives qu'il apporte. En 1835, Romagnosi essaiera en vain de lancer *incivilimento*, qui dans son esprit signifiait le passage à la civilisation, autant que la civilisation elle-même.»

The combined use of «culture» and «civilisation»

Moving from this geographical re-presentation, Braudel [*Ib.*, 35—39] discusses the relationship between the words «culture» and «civilisation» by an approach which could help to tackle this subject in respect with the IGU initiative. To optimise this clarification effort, it would be opportune to distinguish the speculation development concerning «civilisation» from that referring to «civilisations».

Culture and civilisation

Concisely, the following points are worthy of consideration.

- Approach 1, first half of Nineteen century: *Synonymous* — As the «civilisation» concept started enriching the panorama of the scientific language, to some extent the term was widely regarded as synonymous of culture. This approach, for instance, was adopted by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel.
- Approach 2, Mid Nineteen century: *The Marxian approach* — To tailor the duo «culture, civilisation» to materialism, Karl Heinrich Marx moved from the distinction between infra-structures, meant as tangible realities, and super-structures, meant as intangible, essentially spiritual, products. In that context, civilisation was assimilated to infra-structures, while culture was assimilated to super-structures. As a result, the perception of culture as the «upper» component of the history and organisation of peoples and, by way of contrast, the perception of civilisation as something trivial, i.e. the «lower» component of social and economic organisations, spread out in philosophy and common sense.
- Approach 3, first half of Twentieth century: *Primacy of culture* —The duo «infra-structure and super-structure» exerted huge influence in the scientific speculation to the point of under-evaluating civilisation *vis-à-vis* culture. For instance, according to Alfred Weber, civilisation was thought of as a mere assembling of scientific knowledge and operational capability. Shortly, civilisation was reduced to *techne*.
- Approach 4, mid- Twentieth century: *Diverging approaches* — As a consequence of the articulated range of inputs that arose in the past speculation, at mid Twentieth century two approaches were diffusing in the concerned literature. On the one hand, attention was concentrated on civilisation by a number of scientific contexts, particularly by the Anglo-Saxon scientific world, such as the United States and United Kingdom. On the other hand, in other contexts, such as in France and Russia, the culture was conceived as the profound intellectual and spiritual endowment of *individuals* while civilisation was thought of as a

technical *collective product*. As a result, discussion of how to protect culture against civilisation were spreading out.

Civilisation and civilisations

Civilisations — In parallel with the above evolving discussions of the speculative linkage between the culture and civilisation concepts, during the Nineteen century other discussions arose concerning the «civilisation and civilisations» concepts. In this perspective, *the civilisation* was regarded as an abstract, may be as a too abstract, concept to be defined in terms consistent with the scientific investigations, while the consideration of *individual civilisations*, such as the French or the Rome civilisations, was thought of not only as possible but also as productive.

Two conceptual co-ordinates — In this framework, two conceptual co-ordinates arose and solidified. On the one hand, the *geographical co-ordinate*, according to which civilisations were regarded as the whole tangible and intangible endowment which has marked, or is marking, a geographical space, such as the Roman or Christian civilisation. On the other hand, the *social co-ordinate*, according to which the individual civilisation is related to a specific economic or social organisation, such as the industrial civilisation.

Progress, civilisation, civilisations — As a final result of discussions held in recent times, a conceptual trio — consisting of progress, civilisation, and civilisations — is connoting the present theoretical framework. The discussions of «civilisation» are still triggering some speculations more or less rooted in the Enlightenment thought, according to which modernity is sustained by the unavoidable moving along «progress», and civilisation is the historical level to which society has achieved while sailing this route. In this case, a close link between the progress and civilisation concepts has marked the discussions and a hard discourse, hugely marked by the cardinal meta-narrative of modernity, has driven speculations. The discourses about «civilisations» have been characterised by soft discourses, because they leave out the concepts of progress and tend to focus on the peculiar aspects which have connoted the evolution of the individual peoples.

Civilisations against primitive cultures — Essentially as a result of Toynbee's approach, the distinction between civilisation and culture, the latter identified in primitive cultures, has been widely shared in literature. In this respect, civilisation has been thought of as a system of well advanced intellectual and spiritual manifestations, associated with solid and articulated economic and social organisations, while culture has been thought as a set of values associated with simple and poor economic and social organisations. In this respect, only a few civilisations, 22 according to Toynbee, may be found, while a vast number of (primitive) cultures, more than 600, may be identified.