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## **Culture, Diversity and Identity**

### **Preface**

It has been usually said that culture is a compound concept including various aspects of human life, such as customs, art, music, literature, legal systems, religion, philosophy, morality, language, types of economy and technology, modes of entertainment, systems of education and upbringing.

Cultures are, by their very essence, everchanging and evolving, open to influence from outside and inside in unpredictable ways, liable to be divided into subcultures, and to generate offspring with their own lives and development. The present paper is going to deal with two of the most important and controversial intellectual issues of our age, that is, the problem of Diversity and Identity and their relation to culture.

Subjects like cultural differences, cultural pluralism and cultural relativism have raised serious questions and difficulties for all nations and societies all over the world and have absorbed attention of many social thinkers, philosophers, theologians, sociologists and religious leaders to these issues.

The main thesis of this paper is that cultural differences, should not be denied, neglected, rejected or excluded, rather, we should try to recognize them, through continuous education and creative dialogue, and learn to deal with them reasonably, academically and appropriately. \*

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## **Definition of Culture**

Culture is doubtless a complex and compound concept that comprises those aspects of human activity which are socially rather than genetically transmitted. Each social group has its own special and distinct culture, which shows the thought, activity, norms and behavior of its members.

The concept of culture gained prominence at the end of the eighteenth century, as a reaction against the Enlightenment's belief in the unity of mankind and universal progress and indeed the problem of culture today, is a central one for the whole world. How to reconcile cultural identity and modernity, modernization and modern world is a question that every nation and every people has to face today. I will deal with this question later in the present article. Now I try to examine some of definitions of culture.

According to J. G. Herder, each culture is different and has its own systems of meaning and value, and can not be ranked on any universal scale. Followers of Herder, such as Nietzsche and Spengler, stressed the organic nature of culture and praised cultural particularity against what Spengler called civilization, the world city in which cultural distinctions are eroded. It is difficult, however, to see how Herder and his followers avoid an ultimately selfdefeating cultural relativism; The task of those who understand the significance of human culture is to make sense of it without sealing cultures off from one another and making interplay between them impossible.

Over and above the anthropological sense of culture, there is also the conception of culture as that through which a people's highest spiritual and artistic aspirations and ideals are articulated. Culture in this sense has been seen by Matthew Arnold and others as a substitute for religion, or as a kind of secular religion. While culture in this sense can certainly inveigh against materialism, it is less clear that it can do this effectively without a basis in religion. Nor is it clear that a rigid distinction between high and low culture is desirable.

It is, in fact, only the artistic modernists of the twentieth century who have articulated such a distinction in their work, to the detriment of the high and low culture of our time.

Sociologists, anthropologists, philosophers, social thinkers, even theologians have dealt with the question of culture and represented different definitions for it.

In the broadest sense, culture is the way of life, thinking, value system including religion, education, art, customs, language, ideology, architecture and

technology and in short, culture is the very core and basis of our identity and mode of being. According to Herder, each of us is what we are because of the group to which we belong. Activity and selfexpression are valuable in the degree to which they express the personality of the individual agent and that of the group to which they belong. Stressing the organic nature of human societies and the interplay between societies and cultures, Herder rejects centralization, bureaucracy, the elimination of cultural diversity and, above all, imperialism.

He writes: Can you name a land where Europeans have entered without defiling themselves forever before defenceless, trusting mankind?...our part of the earth should not be called the wisest, but the most arrogant, aggressive, money-minded: what it has given these peoples (the colonies) is not civilization but the destruction of the rudiments of their own cultures wherever they could achieve this.

The world in which each of us lives is a particular cultural inheritance, binding us to our forefathers and to our descendants, and distinguishing us from members of other cultures. In my view, Herder is right to make the distinction between causal explanations and explanations in terms of meaning. Human beings are not machines, and our actions and behavior can not be accounted for in terms of scientific psychology; while we doubtless have animal needs and urges, our lives are lived for the most part in realms of meaning, even in pursuit of such elementary needs as food, shelter and sex. The human *Lebenswelt* is a world of intelligibility, of norms and normativity, of activities regulated by standards and criteria demanding our allegiance, on pain of lapse into brutishness, outlawry and, ultimately, incoherence.

If Herder had done no more than draw attention to the importance of culture and meaning in human affairs, and to the equivocal essence of the concept of progress, there would be few who would dissent. His position, however, becomes more problematic when wrestling with consequences he derives from it. The final destination of Herder's idea of culture is a cultural relativism which involves many theoretical difficulties.

Spengler distinguishes between culture and civilization. For him, the very idea of a cosmopolis, a world city, is a symptom of decline from the higher state of culture. In his view civilization is the movement away from the strong local and unquestioned bonds which constitute organic culture:

In place of a true people, born of and grown on the soil, there is a new type of nomad, cohering unstably in fluid masses, the parasitical citydweller,

traditionless, utterly matter-of-fact, religionless, clever, unfaithful, deeply contemptuous of the countryman, the country gentleman.

Along with the decline of organic culture comes science, rationalism, socialism, internationalism, a preoccupation with trade and luxury, and all the manifestations and characteristics of modernity.

Like Herder, Spengler does not see any of this as progress, although one wonders the deep-seated relativism to which both are committed entitles them too see it as decline either.

In attempting to lay out the various meanings attached to the word “culture”, Clifford Geertz refers to the important anthropological work, Clyde Kluckhohn’s *Mirror for Man*, in which the following meanings are suggested:

1. “The total way of life of the people”
2. “The social legacy the individual acquires from his group”
3. “A way of thinking, feeling, and believing”
4. “An abstraction from behavior”
5. “A theory on the part of the anthropologist about the way in which a group of people in fact behave”
6. “A storehouse of pooled learning”
7. “A set of standardized orientations to recurrent problems”
8. “learned behavior”
9. A mechanism for the normative regulation of behavior
10. A set of techniques for adjusting both to the external environment and to other men
11. “A precipitate of history”
12. A behavioral map, sieve, or matrix

He writes:

The concept of culture I espouse...is essentially a semiotic one. Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning. It is explication I am after.... ( pp.45)

Geertz compares the methods of an anthropologist analyzing culture to those of a literary critic analyzing a text. He says that knowing a culture is like reading a manuscript. Once human behavior is seen as symbolic action-action which, like phonation in speech, pigment in painting, line in writing, or sonance in music, signifies-the question as to whether culture is patterned conduct or a frame of mind, or even the two somehow mixed together, loses sense. The thing to ask (of action) is what their import is (pp 9-10).

Geertz argues that culture is “public because meaning is “- systems of meaning are necessarily the collective property of a group.

When we say we do not understand the actions of people from a culture other than our own, we are acknowledging our” lack of familiarity with the imaginative universe within which their acts are signs” (pp.12-13).

I have full agreement with this kind definition of culture that emphasizes on the cognitive, interpretive, epistemic, semiotic, and hermeneutical dimension of this concept.

The modern technical definition of culture as socially patterned human thought and behavior, was originally proposed by the nineteenth- century British anthropologist, Edward Tylor. This definition is an open-ended list, which has been extended considerably since Tylor first proposed it. Some researchers have attempted to create exhaustive universal lists of the content of culture, usually as guides for further research. Others have listed and mapped all the culture traits of particular geographic areas.

There has been considerable theoretical debate by anthropologists since Tylor over the most useful attributes that a technical concept of culture should stress. For example, in 1952 Alfred Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn, American anthropologists, published a list of 160 different definitions of culture. Although simplified in the brief table below, their list indicates the diversity of the anthropological concept of culture.

Table: Diverse Definitions of Cultures:

Topical: culture consists of everything on a list of topics, or categories, such as social organization, religion, or economy
Historical: culture is social heritage, or tradition, that is passed on to future generations
Behavioral: culture is shared, learned human behavior, a way of life
Normative: culture is deals, values, or rules for living
Functional: culture is the way human solve problems of adapting to the environment or living together
Mental: culture is a complex of ideas, or learned habits, that inhibit impulses and distinguish people from animals
Structural: culture consists of patterned and interrelated ideas, symbols, or behaviors
Symbolic: culture is based on arbitrarily assigned meanings that are shared by a society

So far, we have realized that culture involves at least three components: what people think, what they do, and the material products they produce. Thus, mental processes, beliefs, knowledge, and values are parts of culture. Some anthropologists would define culture entirely as mental rules for correct behavior and what people actually do.

Consequently, some researchers pay most attention to human behavior and its material products. Culture also has several properties: it is shared, learned, symbolic, transmitted crossgenerationally, adaptive and integrated.

Other thinkers like T. S. Eliot, Raymond Williams, Claude Levi Strauss, Robert Bellah, Peter Berger, T. Adorno, and theologians like Paul Tillich, Richard Niebuhr and many philosophers and epistemologists have thought and written on culture, its meaning and importance and cultural issues. All these efforts are the sign of special value of this subject.

### **Cultural Relativism**

It is obvious that existing cultures are different. In our time, epistemologists and philosophers have dealt with this cognitive and epistemological dimension of culture. Some of their questions are:

Under what conditions may we judge the practices or beliefs of another culture to be rationally deficient?

Is it possible that cultures can differ so radically as to embody different and even incommensurable modes of reasoning? Are norms of rationality culturally relative or are these culture-independent norms of rationality that can be used to judge the beliefs and practices of all human cultures?

Certainly in order to be in a position to make judgments about the rationality of another culture, we must first understand it. Understanding a very different culture itself raises philosophical difficulties.

How do we acquire the initial translation of the language of the culture?

Can we use our categories to understand the social practices of another culture, for instance, our categories of science, magic, morality, and religion?

Is judgment about other thoughts, values and beliefs basically possible or not?

A lively debate has revolved around these questions. Part of the debate is related to the question of rationality and cultural relativism. What sort of judgments of rationality are appropriate and effective?

Judgments about how agent's reasons relate to their actions? Judgments about how well agent's actions and social practices conform to the norms of their culture? Or judgments about the norms of rationality of cultures as such?

Can relativism be given a coherent formulation that preserves the apparent disagreements for which it is meant to account?

Can there be incommensurable cultures, such that one culture could not understand the other?

There are different views among epistemologists like Quine, Popper, Tarski, Wittgensteine, Kripke, Dilthey, Ricour, Gadamer, Habermas, Donald Davidson and many others. For example, according to D. Davidson's theory of interpretation, radical translation requires the use of a principle of charity that in effect rules out the possibility of incommensurable cultures. If this result is accepted, then a strong form of cultural relativism concerning norms of rationality is also ruled out.

Of course, some thinkers argue that Davidson's theory of interpretation, does not eliminate the possibility of attributing irrational beliefs and practices to agents in other cultures, and thus still leaves some room for debate about how to understand and evaluate such beliefs and practices. Three positions frame the debate. The intellectualist position holds that judgments of rationality are in order across cultures. The symbolist and functionalist positions, here taken together, try to avoid such judgments by attributing functions or symbolic meanings to cultural practices that are generally not understood as such by the agents. The fideist position, wary of too easily being ethnocentric, assumes a more relativist stance with regard to cross-cultural judgments of rationality.

According to my opinion neither postmodern claim of incommensurability of cultures, nor epistemological relativism are logically defensible. The author of this paper believes to realism in the field of philosophy, morality, rationality and epistemology.

### **Cultural differences: obstacle or value?**

Before discussing cultural differences, a brief survey of cultural identity and crisis in culture is necessary. If cultural identity means that a person achieves the fullest humanity within an accepted context of traditional symbols, judgments, values, behavior and relationships with specific others who selfconsciously think of themselves as a community, then it must be seen as a great contemporary challenge to many western philosophical assertions about the person, society, meaning and truth.

### **Philosophy and Cultural Identity**

In the twentieth century western philosophy has endured many assaults of the claims of some of its practitioners that it somehow constitutes a foundational discipline whose concerns are basic to any comprehensive analysis of what it means to be human. In some intellectual quarters the most formidable challenges arise from both scientific practice and the dominant models and images therein.

This view is often found among analytic philosophers trained in the Anglo-American traditions. These traditions have emphasized the close study of “linguistic claims” and sentences whose truth these philosophers seek to ascertain by appealing to logic and “common language usage”. Usually quite separate from that tradition have been other continental ones whose fundamental texts were first written in German, French, or more rarely for English-speaking students of philosophy, Russian, Italian, or Spanish.

At least some of these European advocates have been influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche and other thinkers (including those commonly called philosophers but also literary figures, artists and social theorists) of an intellectual tradition descended from Nietzsche.

From such a Nietzschean perspective, concepts like cultural identity pose problems of the range of possibility of philosophy quite different from those of science. The Spanish thinker José Ortega Y Gasset has described himself as a human creature who is both “myself and my circumstance”. In that duality Ortega Y Gasset demonstrates what it means to have become aware of context, or what some existentialists have called “situationality”. Even when people think it is better to seek truth, they still exist within a situation of having been influenced both consciously and unconsciously by their circumstances in the world. Thus issues of cultural identity can cause a crisis of legitimacy for any human activity which stressed the search for basic truths, fundamental realities and those thoughts or ideas which serve to ground our lives. If we are creatures with identities rooted in specific cultures, then the ancient western idealist sense of the humanly universal is either suspect or defunct. This might be because we become products of cultural contexts so that we and the people we encounter across the world may be more fundamentally different than similar.

The purpose of pointing to the philosophical discussions is that before any judgment or assessment, we should become aware of difficulties of the question of culture and the related issues. “Identity” is a term most often used in psychology. “To say that a person has a strong sense of identity is to say that, that person has integrity, coherence and continuity so that he or she is able to maintain a consistent life pattern with overall purposes and meanings”.

Identity confusion “, on the other hand, refers to a person who lacks such coherence, continuity and purpose.

Cultural background is one of the primary sources of identity. It is the source for a great deal of self-definition, expression, and sense of group belonging. As cultures interact and intermix, cultural identities change. Sociologists believe that this process can be enriching, but disorienting. The current insecurity of cultural



identity reflects fundamental changes in how we define and express who we are today. This situation sharpens a longstanding dilemma:

How can universal values and beliefs exist in a culturally diverse world?

As the international community becomes increasingly integrated, how can cultural diversity and integrity be respected? Is a global culture inevitable? If so, is the world ready for it? How could a global culture emerge based on and guided by human dignity and tolerance? These are some of the issues, concerns and questions underlying the debate over culture, cultural diversity and cultural relativism. We should not forget the challenge of Modernity. Modernity is not without its effects on everyday life: The phenomenon concerns every aspect of society, from culture to religion to government. It also raises considerable questions. For example, how does modernity affect relationship within and external to a society?

It has become a cliché to say that machines and technology will kill mankind, but to what extent is modernity a threat? Information is the major in almost every corner of the world. Media is extremely powerful: culture has become the one with information. Newspapers remain an important means of communication concerning events on both the local and global level. Radio and television are two of the most important technological developments of the past century. We now have the Internet as well. Never before were men able to communicate, work and even play with so many different people at the same time all over the world. This is a great cultural revolution. Everything can be found or accomplished thanks to the Web: shopping, learning, and even exploring new countries without leaving one's armchair! Culture can be and is electronically transmitted. We no longer make the effort to open a book or pick up a pencil to write because these actions can be done using a computer. Many things have changed. Prior to these cultural changes and technological developments, if people wanted to create social and cultural links, they were forced to travel to meet the others, to speak with one another, and to interact personally and physically.

With the progress of science, appeared the notion of scientism in the century, which challenged this thought. Scientism contends that science offers a solution to each of the world's problems. In the beginning, technology brought hope to men seeking to improve the conditions of their lives.

Could we discover how the universe works? Could we foil death through medicine?

This evolution eroded the place of religion and ethics in society. Development of biotechnology has had a great impact on morality. Genetics, cloning, and reproduction in laboratories have taken man beyond his natural limits: He can

now act as God himself! Life has become a great field of experimentation. This is affecting religion: Belief in God made man realize he had limits:

Nature remained mysterious because men were not able to decode its secrets. As a result, it was possible to remain humble in the face of the universe and its secrets. Religion is crucial in society in so far as it outlines what one may or may not do. Due to science, men are lost in a world suffering from a kind of fever: We always want to know and learn more and more. The danger is that men may not know when to stop and reflect rather than keep on discovering.

Technology has changed the world. History now runs with the rhythm of networks. We must take care to ensure that its vibrations do not destroy our cultural bases. This is a reality which we can not deny that we live in a world of great diversity. There are many peoples and nations in the world whose language, customs, beliefs and worldviews, value systems, race, ethnicity, cultural background and national identities are totally diverse and different.

Where we were born, how we were raised, what schools we attended, our religion, our habits, what company we work for, in what profession we work, are all important factors contributing to our own individual culture. Now, the question is that how can we deal with these differences and preserve our culture and identity? Is it possible for us to keep our cultural identity in a diverse universe and live with others and have good relations with them?

Or, we must ignore all differences and forget any cultural diversity and do nothing?

### **What is to be done?**

In my opinion we should recognize the importance of dealing with cultural differences and the possible consequences of taking no action. We should try to manage cultural differences, learn to appreciate various cultures and have peaceful coexistence with other peoples and nations.

I believe that cultural interaction and intellectual exchange today is a necessity for whole humankind and all nations in the world. But the precondition for any real and healthy cultural exchange is to prepare ourselves for understanding others and their cultures impartially.

The promotion of education and knowledge of the masses, increasing our capacity for tolerance, and neglecting violence, prejudice, fanaticism are other true conditions for this enterprise. In short, Dialogue is the best way for dealing with cultural differences. Diversity is often perceived as a threat to ones own individual or group identity. Dialogue however, aims at better mutual understanding: of the values, norms, historical experience and cultural reality underlying the words and actions of others.

Once knowledge takes the place of preconceived opinions, stereotypes and prejudices about others, “otherness” will be perceived less as a threat than as an enrichment.

## **Conclusion**

At the end of this article I would like to emphasize once more that culture is a multidimensional concept. And cultural differences are undeniable facts. Each nation has the right of living with its own culture, values, beliefs and customs and keeping its own identity.

But we should not forget that the whole humanity in depth, is one single family with many similarities and a shared culture with common values. This conviction can be the basis for a creative and continuing dialogue among all nations and countries of the world.

Dialogue can lead to a better and deeper understanding which in turn, is the ground for coexistence, realization of true and sustainable peace and cooperation of all nations.

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