CULTURE, CIVILIZATION, AND HUMAN SOCIETY

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Summary

This article is an introduction to the five main topics of the EOLSS theme on Culture, Civilization, and Human Society. In addition, it is also a contribution examining the complexity of cultural processes. Topics include the following:

- the possibilities and parameters of analyzing cultural processes
- the contradictions within the processes
- the problematic of (public) memory (and in this sense also of history)
- the construction of time, and its meanings for the understanding of culture, civilization, society, the past as the present (as a major element in cultural processes and not only in the sense of heritage)
- concepts of culture (with a multitude of approaches)
- societies and civilizations and the changing patterns of everyday life and power.

The conclusions show the possibilities for cultural processes in the future. The following essay is an analysis, interpretation and description of words and nature, imagination and facts, images and landscapes, with the goal of proving the necessity of

bringing concepts to public awareness in an age of (not in all cases) borderless information and knowledge.

1. Introduction

Culture is the "key" to understanding human life and death, when it is understood as the concept of the way human life is organized. When it is possible to learn what culture (history, present, future) means, it may be possible to find out what meaning life can have for human beings. In this sense civilizations are special forms of cultural organizations. Societies are social forms enabling people to live together.

It is not as easy as it sounds, because it is not just a question of naming. To name means only to say words like culture, civilization, or society, followed by some definitions, which whether short or long, are never clear enough. It may be possible to capture an "object," as happens in some scientific analyses, but not in the case of human processes, which are full of contradictions, multitudes, and complexities. As a result, the analysis of languages plays a role in the understanding of culture, civilizations and societies (see especially section 7.1). It does so not only as a discussion within the context of the theory and history of words and disciplines, because the different lives are seen as the constituting factors for these words.

One basis for such analyses is the variety of cultural and scientific backgrounds of the contributors of this theme and also of the contributors to projects (like the *Encyclopedia of Multilingual Cultural Sciences*), which corresponds to this theme. These authors will be mentioned and quoted here, as will the *Encyclopedia of Multilingual Cultural Studies*. The contributors, representing different scholarly disciplines, come from Africa, Asia, Australia/Oceania, Europe, Latin America, and the USA. Most of them are members of the Research Institute for Austrian and International Literature and Cultural Sciences (INST). A basic document for the contributors was *Our Creative Diversity* (UNESCO, 1995) along with other UNESCO documents. In the sense of creativity, based on diversity, the contributors have been free to take their own different approaches and positions.

It was most important to work out the different perspectives of this EOLSS theme. The topics now bear the titles: "Theory and history of culture," "Cultural heritage," "Mass culture and cultural identities," "Cultural interactions," and "Culture and sustainable development of human society," EOLSS on-line, 2002.

The material for describing these five topics of the theme has been drawn from all continents, using different sources and approaches. To mention just one example: For Peter Horn ("Foundations and characteristics of culture," EOLSS on-line, 2002), culture and civilization are not to be divided. However, others make many divisions between culture and civilization (see "Sorting out culture," EOLSS on-line, 2002) and even use the terms culture and civilization as synonyms. Furthermore, topics such as nature (see "Culture as a manifestation of human activity," EOLSS on-line, 2002) and interpretation (see "Interpretation of symbols," EOLSS on-line, 2002) have to be considered.

Different interpretative approaches are also evident in the other sections. For Kathleen Thorpe (see "Protection of cultural heritage as social, political, and economic issues," EOLSS on-line, 2002) cultural heritage has to be protected, even if what was considered a cultural creation in its own time and is now regarded as part of the cultural heritage contradicts human rights today (see "Cultural heritage," EOLSS on-line, 2002), because the created object was connected with (human) blood (and this is no small part of the world's cultural heritage). Not only the cultural past includes violent and even lethal processes for human beings, but also the present. (Post-) colonialism and imperialism are keywords for that in a contradictory process (see "Modern and traditional cultures," and "Imperialism, resistance, and culture," EOLSS on-line, 2002) of modernization, mass culture, globalization, resistance, and liberation. Perspectives for a humanistic change are seen (see "Global information fluxes and national cultural values," and "Cultural integration and national originality of cultures," EOLSS on-line, 2002), and some ways—based on scientific results (see "West/east and north/south: dialogue of cultures," EOLSS on-line, 2002) were described. But also critical theses like "Structures of culture and communication forms" are included as they are a part of the worldwide discourse about perspectives.

With this theme level contribution there will be a short introduction about the basics, the cultural histories, the memory systems, the time concepts as organizers of life, about the differences between the life processes and their images given for oneself and/or for the public, different concepts of cultures in different languages, human societies, the interaction and differences of cultures and civilizations, and about power and everyday life. It will pick up ideas and theses from other contributors but will also work out its own perspective on the theme (mainly about the analysis and their contexts).

The conclusions will be those of the HTE, utilizing and concurring with the findings of the other contributions in the theme, but also contrasting with them. The conclusions result from a three-year scientific process with about a hundred colleagues involved, and these theses shall be a basis for further analysis and description.

2. Basics

It is not possible here to develop aspects like methodology, multiple-identities, processes, places, differences, shared languages, pluralization, violence in history, and knowledge and work out different possible meanings. It will only be possible to begin by naming the aspects along with a brief description to provide a context for discussing other aspects. From this perspective it seemed necessary to name the elements, which are important for the analysis of the processes, and show their interconnection with the description:

2.1. Methodology

To write about methodology in this context means to write something concerning the results. Within the context of an analysis and description of culture, civilization and society, results are (to state it concisely) narrations or "systems."

Until now narrations about cultural histories or cultures have taken many different forms. They can be grand narratives or the sums of more or less small "narratives." They can also simply be compilations of texts more or less connected by comments or critiques. Usually one finds a combination of these different possibilities.

In the one case (grand narrative) a single perspective dominates (even when a lot of other perspectives are quoted). In the other cases there are different perspectives. But in each case there exists the problem of the abundance of data (including illustrations, images, sounds, and so on) and of the multiperspectivity because of the multitude of lives. These narrations are unable to convey very much of the complexity of processes.

For example, consider the words of the world within their own languages. Even if languages die every day (*Global Trends 2002*, p. 151)—which Harald Haarmann doubts (pp. 7ff.)—there are still thousands of languages and billions of words. The information they convey is very important to understand lives, but it is only possible to deal with a very small number of them, and one cannot make a selection when confronting so much material.

Consider the books: Robert Musil has a character calculate how much time it would take to read all of the books in the Austrian National Library. The entire lifetime of the character would still not suffice. It has no longer even been possible to make a bibliography of bibliographies since the eighteenth century, and with the advent of the World Wide Web, the situation has grown even worse. This predicament has to be viewed critically, because the "grand narratives," which have dominated up to the present, are no longer useful when we confront them with the lives of human beings in different countries. The present knowledge is from a specific, limited perspective (trading, power, etc.), not a broad human perspective. Furthermore, since the nineteenth century, such books were used to legitimize wars. (To involve all the information and knowledge would not change the situation completely, but selections do not help to understand complexity, as seen also in section 6.1.2.)

Take just one example: Samuel P. Huntington's book *Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order,* which is based on a very small number of sources. What Huntington describes as facts is not only a question of perspective. His views are simply not true in many cases, and his simplifications lead to confrontations (even though Huntington himself emphasizes several times that everything is more complex). These simplifications are now used as a basis for power and war.

Knowledge, which is only connected with high technology, weapons and power, is heavily criticized (Bassam Tibi, 1991). At the end of the twentieth century, however, there was more and more interest about people and their lives (for example, the books of Ariès about death or everyday life). It seems that knowledge of everyday life seems to grow increasingly important (see especially section 10). In this sense the big discovery can begin, as can changes in science and education (see section 11).

One of these grand expeditions of today is found in the writings of Amartya Sen (*Development in Freedom* and other publications). He, too, focuses on everyday life and shows how important these processes are for the world's development. In his view,

violence cannot be the "locomotive" but rather the possibility of learning to read and write or of having a good health system. The main points in this contribution are languages, descriptions, and processes within the world of human beings and their contexts. He also uses images to convey cultural knowledge. Particularly in the twentieth century images have become increasingly important in the public sphere (for example, to guide human beings in subways or airports). Sounds have also gained increased importance.

What seems to be an ocean of differences, when the human beings are the basis of analysis and descriptions, also displays common elements. Consider the example of museums (see section 4.5). These common elements also provide an opportunity to work out systems. With regard to cultural processes, however, it is necessary to understand that words, which seem to have the same meaning, are not the same (see also section 7.1), while things, which do not seem to be the same (for example, different words for culture) mean the same.

The common basis for this analysis is the concept "Human Being," which does not divide humankind into different "tribes," "races," or "nations." It does not contain any valuation of human beings.

Thus the first methodological conclusion (for others, see section 11) has to be that only multiperspectivity and critical word usage can serve as the basis of a project that wants to learn more than the identity of the identity. The "objects" of this study are human beings and their activities, that is, their culture. This might be useful in discussing terms like imagination and processes.

2.2. Multiple-Identity

In current discourses the word or concept "identity" plays a large role. Often this word means one subject, one identity or one culture, one identity. But in life it is different. We know from Freud that a person in "normal life" has several identities. The same is true for cultural identities. This is true not only for exiles like Jura Soyfer, Elias Canetti, Salman Rushdie, Franz Fanon, Edward W. Said, Homi K. Bhabha, and many other intellectuals, including the Hollywood school with its fifty languages (see "Global information fluxes and national cultural values," EOLSS on-line, 2002), but it is also true for all cultural processes. The most productive processes were those with the most interchange, as in "classical" Greece.

The mixing did not start between "Europeans," "Arabs," and "Asians": the first mix took place between nomadic, rural and urban environments, and also between production and imagination.

These mixtures and changes had important consequences. A look at the different countries of the world will reveal not only "traditions" (tools, houses, holy places, temples, churches, mosques, the arts, knowledge), but also (and in most cases) constructed and invented identities (negritude, Tyrolean folk art, English culture), elements like McDonalds (which are only elements and not a "new culture" like

MacWorld, which would have to include more from everyday life; to be just a symbol is not enough in complex processes) or (grand) narratives.

The narratives tell stories of tribes or describe behaviors the tribes were supposed to have had. The scientists, movements, or parties using such narratives (such as the fascists) are also using modern technology. Their image of the human being is one of hunters and peasants, but the environment is a rural one. The "invention" of such "traditions" aims at violence and legitimizing wars.

In the twentieth century there was a major migration of population from the rural environment to the cities. For example: New York in 1950 was the only Mega City in the world with 12.3 million inhabitants. In the year 2000 there were nineteen Mega Cities with Tokyo in first place with a population of 26.4 million and New York in fifth place with 16.6 million population. Currently, for the first time in the history of human beings, nearly 50 percent of the world population lives in cities (*Global Trends 2002*, p. 104).

This also plays a role in the relations between genders and in the change of identities, because the changes in working conditions brought new possibilities for women. Intelligence and education became more and more important and (brutal) force lost its fascination, as it is no longer of any use in production.

Thus in this article the term multiple identities means the identities of individuals, which by virtue of being human beings have different identities, as well as different forms of life (rural, urban) with many interchanges, as these forms differ widely in different countries.

2.3. Processes

As we can see it is not only a question of multitude, but also this multitude is connected with dynamism in quantity (for example, 2.5 billion human beings lived on this earth in the year 1950 and 6 billion in the year 2000 with a rate of increase of 78 million a year) and in forms (for example, changes of labor, communication, mobility).

So one central concept with respect to culture, civilization, and society is process. Even if there are a lot of cultural elements that are stable for a long time for human beings (fire, signs etc.), the cultural processes themselves are changing all the time. With the cultural process also the thinking about behavior, laws, and power—the environment (especially civilization and society to put it in other words)—remains in a process of change. Also the "stable elements" are renewed continuously, as no material or process can remain stable either in nature or within memory.

Thus there is nothing new about the world changing. The novelty comes with the speed of the growth of world population, the mobility, the flow of information, the changes of labor. However, the speed and its globality still did nothing to eliminate hunger, thirst, heat, cold, injustice, and violence, war. Although these remain stable elements, for the first time in the history of human beings it would not be impossible to enable all people to enjoy a wealthy life.

In conclusion, process is a concept within time, and its changes are also within time (see also section 5). Everything is to be understood as process.

2.4. Places

Even the life space is changing. Men and women, who have a choice, no longer live in a nice, comfortable place (for hundreds of years Italy was such a place for many Europeans and it is today for millions) alone. Since the eighteenth century they have been climbing mountains in Europe, building houses, and even hotels for tourists. In the twentieth century they have begun building little towns even in the Antarctic, and the first settlements on the moon and other planets are being planned. Even the oceans are new places to be "conquered," to be used, and spoiled.

Such despoliation is also a "cultural process," as Jura Soyfer stated in 1936: "And land turns into maps." Within this process more and more states have been established. In 1870 there were about fifty nation-states; in the year 2001 there were 193 (see integration and national originality of cultures," EOLSS on-line, 2002). They were the cause of wars in the twentieth century (even if they had a progressive role to stop the wars between "tribes" or feudal lords in former times and even now in some parts of the world).

With this process, maps not only get more colors, but also violence is increasing. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, some problem areas, especially water, which may lead to war, have been identified (see "Culture and the environment," EOLSS on-line, 2002).

Space ("territory") again becomes important, despite great mobility so that human beings no longer have to spend their entire lives in the same place. In this sense, geography also becomes a political discipline, which can sometimes have important consequences even today (see also Section 4.3).

2.5. Differences

From the beginning of time there have been differences between human beings. These differences have led to diversity and conflicts. Human beings have killed each other to survive (and later on to gain power). Canetti (1994) tells us about kings who murdered rivals and as "survivors" grew powerful. The more they murdered, the more powerful they became.

But life is not only a struggle for survival and power. It also has a long history of solidarity. Culture is such a system of solidarity (sometimes only for a group, excluding others, but over time every culture has had to open itself to other cultures and finds that it grows in value because of it). That does not mean, however, that there are not differences in interests. Contradictions have persisted up to the present, such as: hunger/destroying food, poor/rich and homeless/ speculation. In many societies sharp contradictions also exist between men and women. There has to be a change.

As can be seen, differences derive from the existence of human beings, but the ways of living with these differences take very different forms. Norbert Elias (1976) even sees a history of "civilization" (meaning less use of violence). The reduction or avoidance of violence seemed to be a main point in the development of behavior ever since the eighteenth century in Europe. It also brought about more understanding in other parts of the world (see also sections 7.1, 9, 10, and 11).

2.6. Shared Languages

Languages are in most cases "shared languages." These possibilities of change are even expressed in the cultures of states, which have fought against each other for a long time, as, for example, England and India. For many years India was a British Colony. Everything was organized in the manner useful for the British. The British organized language schools, the railroads, the system to collect taxes, etc. But life (history) was shared and expressed through the language. The English of the colonists contains thousands of Hindi-words or words from other languages. This is documented in *Hobson-Jobson, The Anglo-Indian Dictionary*. These borrowings also have consequences for other languages that interact with English.

Take, for example, the word "shampoo." A German speaker (German uses the word "shampoo") would perhaps guess that this is a French word, as many words in German are French words (English and many other languages have also borrowed many French words). *Hobson-Jobson*, however, present numerous quotations containing the word "shampoo," documenting that this word stems from the Hindi verb "champna," which means to "knead and press the muscles with the view of relieving fatigue" (p. 821). *Hobson-Jobson* show that customs and/or words like "shampooing" came to Europe in reports of voyages (they were known early in Europe and in the Roman Empire and then were forgotten for a long time). A word can take on a new meaning within this transformation, but it is still connected to a similar custom. To "cleanse" languages (a process which caused several catastrophes not only in Europe in the twentieth century) would mean to lose this knowledge again. In terms of cultural richness such a development would not be useful.

2.7. Pluralism

Multiple identities, shared languages and shared cultures (histories) are facts, but they exist within different processes. They can be established within colonialism, imperialism or within open societies (or usually mixtures of them).

This situation has major consequences, because cultural multitude always means a multitude of interests as well. It is usually not possible to make one's interests heard or (better) to realize them within structures of violence, which is an obstacle to creativity (see section 2.8). This realization opened the way for pluralism, especially in the twentieth century. Pluralism in this sense means not only the acceptance of a multitude of diversity, but also synergies and creativity. Thus to search for pluralism means to seek to discover creativity.

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Biographical Sketch

Herbert Arlt was born 1958 in Bregenz (Austria). His interests include literature and theater. He has undertaken study trips and studies to/in Italy, Spain, Portugal, England, Hungary, Germany, and Yugoslavia. He was awarded a Doctorate 1988 at the University of Salzburg (Dr.Phil.), and has taught at the Universities of Berlin, Vienna, Salzburg, and Innsbruck. He has been Secretary of the Jura Soyfer Society since 1989, and Scientific Director of INST since 1994. Editor of *Jura Soyfer* since 1992 (International Journal for Cultural Studies), of the book series *Austrian and International Literary Processes* and *East-, Central- and Southeast Literature, Theatre and Linguistic Studies* since 1995. Dr Arlt is a Member of the Austrian UNESCO Commission (1998–2001), and of the board of the Elias Canetti Society (since 2001).