

“Global Concepts? Keywords and Their Histories in Asia and Europe”

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On the Dialectics of Culture and Civilization in Critical Cultural Studies

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The concept of ‘culture’ (*Begriff der Kultur*) came into existence as a specifically European crisis-concept. It was the response of old Europe to the loss of anthropological and metaphysical certainties during the evolving modern times. Cultures based on metaphysical certainties do not yet need an own concept of culture. The concept of ‘culture’ only got into the focus of human self-reflection when it became possible to recognize the radical contingency of human cultural achievements:

Culture [as a performative concept] only becomes possible in the modern society, which for the first time reflects on itself as structural contingent and at the same time may reflect on itself only in such a way.

Kultur [als performativer Begriff] wird erst in der modernen Gesellschaft möglich, die sich erstmals als strukturell kontingent und zugleich nur noch so reflektieren kann. (Niklas Luhmann, 51)

The concept of ‘culture’ comes into existence, when the cultural self-certainties of the human are dwindling. In this respect the concept of ‘culture’ is from the outset fulfilling compensatory and ideological functions. In 1994 Georg Bollenbeck has redrawn in detail how the terminology of culture first develops into an emphatically used collective singular (*Kollektivsingular*) *Kultur* during the 18th century in the realm of the German language. Thereby it tries to suppress (*verdrängen*) the imposing (*sich aufdrängende*) insight that in modern times the concept of human *Kulturen* (cultures/civilizations) is turning into a *plurale tantum* which cannot be synthesized.

The German concept of *Kultur* is not from the outset in opposition to the French concept of *Civilisation*, as Norbert Elias thought. Rather the German and the French term are by far carrying the same meaning until the late Enlightenment (Bollenbeck, 93-96). Both are covering in the broadest meaning all human achievements in culture and civilization, ranging from the technical-craftsmanship, from the economical-judicial-political to the religious-moral all the way to the artistic and scientific sphere.

The German *Sonderweg* (special development) only starts with the German *Idealismus* (Idealism), during which the meaning of the term culture is turning successively into an intensifying opposition to the term civilization. In his work *Culture. The Anthropologist's Account* (1999) Adam Cupper is already pointing out that this so called German *Sonderweg* for some time had an equivalent in the Anglo-American language. The opposition between *Kultur* and *Zivilisation* (culture and civilization) is working then in the following way: *Zivilisation* is covering the area of the means-end (*zweckrational*) organization of human *praxis* while *Kultur* is emphatically targeting the supposedly higher spheres of the projection of meaning in value-rational (*wertrational*) areas like morality, religion, esthetics, and the arts and humanities.

This emphatic meaning of *Kultur* is fulfilling three different and partially contradicting functions in Germany of the 19th century through the first half of the 20th century and even into the 1960s. First it is critically turned against the capitalist economical order, which is reducing the dignity of a human being to a price-equivalent. This role of criticism of civilization (*zivilisationskritische Funktion*) is continuing to have an effect into the neo- and post-Marxist *Frankfurter Schule*. Secondly the German *Kultur* is directed in a compensatory way against the French Revolution, whose dubious effects are contradicted by an imaginary revolution of the way of thinking (*Revolution der Denkungsart*). And thirdly during the 19th century this compensatory function is turning into affirmation and ideology once the German understanding of *Kultur* is positioned against the *Civilisation française* in an increasingly polemical and generalizing opposition. This is also because the opposition of the terms *Civilisation/Culture* is not existing in the French language and *La Civilisation française* is as emphatically loaded as the German *Kultur*. By its turn against the French *Civilisation* the German *Kultur* is adopting the pretence of transcending time and civilization and is in reverse indirectly affirming the predominant conditions. The peak of this process of ideologization was reached during WW I as the following quote by Thomas Mann may demonstrate:

The difference between *Geist* (mind and spirit) and politics is containing in itself the difference between culture and civilization, of soul and society, of freedom and the right to vote, of art and literature; and *Deutschtum* (Germanness), that's culture, soul, freedom, art and *not* civilization, society, right to vote, literature.

Der Unterschied von Geist und Politik enthält den von Kultur und Zivilisation, von Seele und Gesellschaft, von Freiheit und Stimmrecht, von Kunst und Literatur; und Deutschtum, das ist Kultur, Seele, Freiheit, Kunst und *nicht* Zivilisation, Gesellschaft, Stimmrecht, Literatur (Thomas Mann, XXXVf.).

After the shipwreck of the old European and especially German culture during the two world wars and in the course of the globalization, it seemed that cultural studies (*Kulturwissenschaft*) could only be carried on in a serious way through the liquidation of emphatic cultural concepts. Rating (*wertende*) cultural comparisons and models of cultural typologies were since then considered to be scholarly and politically not correct and reactionary. Only criticism of emphatic concepts of high culture (*Hochkultur*) was still acceptable. The theoretical safeguard of cultural plurality became the regulating principle in cultural studies.

The rejection of the emphatical concepts of high culture was flanked by the de-differentiation of the terminological opposition *Kultur/Zivilisation*. In 1927 Sigmund Freud was one of the first who stated:

I scorn to separate Kultur and Zivilisation.

ich verschmähe es, Kultur und Zivilisation zu trennen (Sigmund Freud 1927, 110).

And in his essay *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* from 1930 – interestingly translated into English as *Civilization and Its Discontents* – Freud is already pointing towards the direction into which the de-differentiation of the terminological opposition of *Kultur* and *Zivilisation* would proceed. Not - as one may have expected – did the term civilization increasingly incorporate the term culture, but the other way around, civilization was increasingly incorporated into the term culture. The leading academic discipline in this process was the American cultural anthropology which paradoxically had its roots in the German *Kulturtheorie* of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century, not least in the works of Max Weber and Ernst Cassirer, who are also my most important guarantors (*Gewährsleute*) for the drafting of Critical cultural studies (*Kritische Kulturwissenschaft*). Cultural anthropologists – we would more likely call them ‘ethnologists’ – studied primarily cultures/civilizations, which I would call with Ernst Cassirer *mythische Kulturen* (‘mythical cultures/civilizations’). Analysing those cultures/civilizations, a clear terminological differentiation between culture and civilization is not yet possible, because all realms of means-end (*zweckrationaler*), ‘civilizational’ organization of human praxis (*menschlicher Lebenspraxis*) are highly transcended with the projection of ‘cultural’ values and symbolic meaning. The way Ernst Cassirer formulated it:

The mythical world is ‘concrete’ [...] in the way that in it the real thing or action and his symbolic meaning indiscriminately merge with each other, so that they have grown together [konkresziert <lat. concrecere] into an immediate unity.

Die mythische Welt ist ‚konkret‘ [...] dadurch, daß in ihr die beiden Momente, das Dingmoment und das Bedeutungsmoment, unterschiedslos ineinander aufgehen, daß sie hier in eine unmittelbare Einheit zusammengewachsen, ‚konkresziert‘ [<lat. concrecere] sind (Ernst Cassirer, 32).

Generalizing this specific, ethnological understanding of culture into Culture in itself (*an sich*) then it will be impossible to catch the peculiarities of more complex forms of cultures and civilizations. In them, speaking with Max Weber (1920, 564), many parts (*Teilbereiche*) of the material organization of the human praxis are “disenchanted” (“entzaubert”). They are separated from transcending projections of sense (*von transzendierenden Sinnprojektionen freigesetzt*), while the other way round the transcending projections of sense themselves are moved into a position of critical-reflective distance to their basis of human praxis. On the other side the ethnological understanding of culture reduces the term harmonistically to its affirmative and compensatory functions. The nowadays dominating *symbolic interactionist concept* of culture defines culture as

culture is the ‘order’ corresponding to meaningful action (Jeffrey C. Alexander, 1f.).

This corresponding relationship between meaningful actions and action-oriented orders of sense and values functions in 'a routine way', 'regularly', and 'collective', as the most common vocabulary goes. Critical feedbacks of cultural projections of meaning on interrelations of practical life (*lebenspraktische Zusammenhänge*) are just as little looked at as critical differentiations of relevance (*relevanzkritische Differenzierungen*) between symbolic forms like fashion, dining habits or Homer's and Joyce's *Ulysses*. Ultimately the concept of culture of the Anglo-American *Cultural Studies* is presenting itself without any relief (*relieflos*). The reception of which in Germany has led to a kind of voluntary auto-sociologization (*Selbstsoziologisierung*) of broad areas of the traditional philologies:

Culture [...] is denoting the whole of institutions, actions, processes, and symbolic forms, which are transforming, preserving, and improving the 'existing nature' with the assistance of methodological techniques into a social sphere of life .

Kultur [...] bezeichnet das Gesamt der Einrichtungen, Handlungen, Prozesse und symbolischen Formen, welche mit Hilfe von planmäßigen Techniken die ‚vorfindliche Natur‘ in einen sozialen Lebensraum transformieren, diesen erhalten und verbessern (Böhme/Matussek/Müller, 104).

This definition is pure nonsense or tautological. The terminological differentiation between human practice of life and symbolic forms is simply discarded, which was at least still preserved in the symbolic-interactionist understanding of culture. Here culture is reduced to what T. S. Eliot defined in 1948 as "way of life":

By culture I mean first of all what the anthropologists mean: the way of life of a particular people living together in one place (T. S. Eliot, 120).

Besides the formation of theory there seems to exist a certain desire for preserving or rather reviving a conceptual differentiation between culture and civilization – not only in the German language area. We already mentioned the English translation of Freud's *Unbehagen in der Kultur*. The English title *Civilization and Its Discontents* takes into account that Freud is primarily talking in this essay about phenomena which Norbert Elias in 1936 is dealing with under the title *Prozeß der Zivilisation (The Civilizing Process)*. In the other direction it is notable that Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations* from 1996 is called *Der Kampf der Kulturen* in the German translation – which is also rather suitable for the intention of the book. Huntington himself is using the terms *culture* and *civilization* synonymously, thereby giving his thesis an artificial plausibility.

At this point I want to formulate the thesis that for a better understanding of the functioning of highly complex modern societies in the process of transculturalization and globalization a terminological differentiation of culture and civilization is necessary. Nowadays there are fewer and fewer communities, which may be sufficiently described and understood by using the concept of culture from the field of cultural anthropology. Collective patterns of meaning and interpretation have become more and more rare because modern societies are no longer communities. Therefore a scholar who is studying processes of transculturalization and globalization may not learn anything from the ethnological allegoresis of Balinese cock fights.

In modern societies cultural projections of meaning are always of limited range and are in competition and in conflict with other projections of meaning. The spheres of meaning are in many ways mediated (*vermittelt*) with the economical, technical, political, judicial spheres, but those processes of mediation are by now way harmonious, they are instead a struggle about the power of interpretation (*Kampf um Deutungshoheiten*). For understanding and analyzing the process of transculturalization and globalization there has to take place a change of paradigm in cultural studies (*Kulturwissenschaft*): Instead of focusing on relationships of correspondence within the concept of culture they must focus on relations of difference and conflict between different cultural patterns of meaning and sense and between cultural patterns of meaning and sense and their basis in practical life, namely its *civilizational* foundation. Culture is not anymore, as Jeffrey Alexander thought, “the order corresponding to meaningful action” but instead culture has become – following Stefan Heidenreich – an agent of differentiation (*Differenzagent*) which is producing conflictual relations of interpretation and criticism (*konfliktuelle Deutungs- und Kritikverhältnisse*).

The conclusion drawn from that is: Cultural studies have to become critical again. Not in the sense of the Marxist or Conservative cultural criticism of the past, which still believed to have objective criteria at their disposal for their critical endeavor – criteria which by the way may for both be traced back to the same neo-humanist concept of *persona* (*Personbegriff*) of the German Idealism. Critical cultural studies themselves do not exercise criticism of culture or civilization. Their understanding of criticism has the structure of doubled negation. Clifford Geertz introduced it into the discussion with the term of “anti-anti-relativism” but did not sufficiently explore the term. Geertz’s understanding is that someone who is against substantialist yardsticks for values by this is not bound to fall into aimless-arbitrary descriptions and the loss of any standards. This may now be stated more precisely in the following way: On one side Critical cultural studies are describing and comparing the inner- and trans-cultural production of values and criticism; on the other side – following Max Weber - they are disclosing contradictions between the explicit and the implicit yardsticks for values:

the critical treatment of judgments of values may not only want to understand and relive the ends of action as well as the ideals they are based upon, but may also want to teach critical “assessment”. This criticism [...] may help the intending subject to self-reflect upon the last yardsticks for values, which are the basis from which he is unconsciously proceeding or which should be this basis, if he wanted to be consistent.

die wissenschaftliche Behandlung der Werturteile möchte nun die gewollten Zwecke und die ihnen zugrunde liegenden Ideale nicht nur verstehen und nacherleben lassen, sondern vor allem auch kritisch „beurteilen“ lehren. Diese Kritik [...] kann dem Wollenden verhelfen zur Selbstbesinnung auf die letzten Wertmaßstäbe, von denen er unbewußt ausgeht oder - um konsequent zu sein - ausgehen müßte (Max Weber 1904, 151).

Critical cultural studies make transparent the choice of values, which are behind patterns of cultural interpretation and behind guidelines for actions; they compare explicit cultural values with their implicit practical functions; they look at the relationship between cultural and economical values; they analyze the disguised claiming of cultural values for economic interests or in the interest of ruling power; they

bring to light, which anthropological models (*Leitbilder*) stand behind certain legal conditions and political decisions and to which degree economical and technical evolutions are changing anthropological models. In addition Critical cultural studies decode false naturalistic conclusions, which are claiming the normativity of the factual. The concept of critique used by Critical cultural studies will not criticize concrete conditions of civilization or certain cultural models but instead compares, does make the implicit explicit and sharpens the sense for contingency and changeability. In the words of Nancy Weiss Hanrahan:

The structure of contingency as a difference between what is and what could be (or could have been) corresponds with the distinction between the actual and the potential that is the basis of critique (Nancy Weiss Hanrahan, 38f.)

In the end Critical cultural studies will regain by this – in an indirect way – a critical potential for differentiation between levels of relevance (*relevanzkritisches Differenzierungspotential*) with regard to the ‘cultural facts’ (*kulturelle Tatsachen*, Ralf Konersmann) they are dealing with. Indeed there is a difference whether a cultural fact is disguising or laying open the struggle about interpretations, which is always a real power struggle. It is important to know which interests does a cultural fact serve. There is a difference whether a cultural fact is contributing to the game of confusion of cultural and economical values or not. It is also a difference whether a cultural fact is cementing the normativity of the factual or whether it is clearly separating the spheres of the factual, the contra-factual, and the possible. Only if they are differentiating in those areas will cultural studies in the future be in the position to not only describe but to critically accompany the process of civilizatory globalization – which implicitly is also demanding global cultural validity. Only then cultural studies may be in a position to sharpen the senses for the thinkable and the possible in culture and civilization, sharpening the senses, too, for totally different forms of organizing human existence.

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