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CULTURE AND CIVILIZATION

Note

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CULTURE AND CIVILIZATION

Notes

Culture is everything we have created on this Earth beyond our mere biological existence. Its achievements can serve us well or work against us, depending on how well we are able to cooperate with one another. For this reason, behavioral culture—which we also refer to as civilization—is important. In this lecture notes, I analyze the relationship between culture and civilization. The course material is designed for one semester (15 lectures and seminar sessions). First, I will briefly summarize the theses to be discussed, and then I will elaborate on each topic in detail. At the end of the lecture notes, we will review brief outlines of each class session as a summary.

I. Theses

1. The Declining Civilization and the Enduring Culture

Modern industrial society is in decline and will soon give way to another civilization, which will presumably be called the information society. Transitions between civilizations can involve destruction and devastation. Our cultural achievements to date, however, have accumulated over the course of multiple civilizations, so they will obviously survive our current civilization to some extent. Our high level of scientific and technical, organizational and managerial, moral and religious, artistic, and other forms of culture may help us make a smoother transition to the next civilization. We will then test this initial thesis using scholarly literature on civilization and culture drawn from a wide range of disciplines. It may not be possible to prove it².

2. The concept of culture is too general

In every area of social life, we follow patterns and rules established by our ancestors, which we in turn pass on to our descendants. It connects and shapes us and our communities across an indefinable expanse of space and time. Compared to this, the basic concept of culture can be nothing other than “the way we live.” Because of this, however, so many things fall under the concept of culture that it becomes unclear what to make of it. This may also be the reason why no scientific consensus has emerged regarding the definition of such an important concept. We can choose to accept this general definition, but it may also be the case that whenever we speak of culture, we always strive to make it clear whether we are referring to behavioral or material culture, or to the culture of different eras, regions, or professions and disciplines.

3. The Diversity of Cultures as a Value

¹ The author is a lawyer and psychologist and an associate professor at the University of Public Service in Budapest; in addition to this subject, he teaches sustainable development, environmental law, and communication theory.

² Given that I wrote this work primarily for educational purposes, I try to begin each topic with questions—real questions, in fact—to which I cannot provide a definitive answer, at least not at this time.

Ever since—essentially since the dawn of industrial capitalism—the various scientific disciplines began to follow their own distinct paths, each with its own methodology and conceptual framework, they have accumulated an astonishing amount of specialized knowledge. This, of course, fragments reality and is not really suited to addressing a range of complex, multidisciplinary (involving multiple disciplines), interdisciplinary (requiring collaboration across disciplines), or even transdisciplinary (encompassing multiple fields of study and their practical applications) problems. It is possible, however, that this diversity holds value in and of itself, since—measured on a historical scale—natural and social conditions, which change from moment to moment, may always demand different things from a civilization in terms of adaptation and survival. Thus, alongside the need for synthesis and unification, as well as a more comprehensive application of the systems sciences, specialized solutions perfectly tailored to specific situations are also necessary. Of course, we cannot be certain that we possess the capabilities required to apply these two approaches together.

4. Cultural Literacy and Individual Uniqueness

At the individual level, cultural diversity is a gold mine: those who come into contact with many different cultures can freely choose from what is on offer, though they must pay for the things they “purchase”: they can only acquire cultural values by becoming, in some way, a member of a group that represents and practices that culture. This involves constraints, effort, and even a little self-sacrifice. The richness of one’s personality may thus arise from a series of actual or symbolic acts of submission to groups; we might even say that we must first be humble in order to later become confident. I propose the term “*the paradox of individualization*” to describe this phenomenon. The question is: if the phenomenon of the individualization paradox continues to spread, how will increasingly unique personalities coexist with one another?

5. Civilization is a fundamental prerequisite for the success and survival of societies

Humans are social beings; they can only survive in groups. However, due to the increasingly complex division of labor and exchange within these groups, a higher level of behavioral culture is required—that is, people must behave in a civilized manner. The progress of civilization has been documented by thinkers such as Aristotle, Erasmus of Rotterdam, and Norbert Elias. Throughout history, groups have become larger and more organized; the urban and state apparatus—which provided mutual support and, later, monopolized the use of force—has guaranteed ever-greater security and prosperity. Of course, this comes at a price: the raw, violent forms of self-assertion must be increasingly curbed. Is there such a society where everyone can find their rightful (worthy) place in a community, large or small—that is, where contentment and mental well-being are nearly universal?

6. Many academic disciplines deal with civilization

The fact that civilization—sometimes under different names but essentially with the same meaning—can be found in various academic disciplines suggests that the concept is of particular importance. Civilization has its counterparts in psychology (e.g., the ability to delay gratification), sociology (mutual control over fate), mathematics (game theory models, e.g., the prisoner’s dilemma), in philosophy and economics (social capital), in political science, in law (the institution of property, procedural rules that enforce cooperation during disputes), as well as in the interdisciplinary field of sustainable development (*Fish Banks* and other similar demonstration games). Similarly to the fragmented,

specialized approaches to the concept of culture, it is clear that here the legitimacy of individual disciplines in examining civilization or its various aspects cannot be denied. However, it may also be important to point out that there is significant overlap among these research areas, which can enrich our knowledge and make it more systematic. I can only hope that the general concept of civilization is not a mere illusion or a meaningless simplification, and that the aforementioned disciplines are, after all, discussing the same human and social essence.

7. Barbarism Is on the Rise

The importance of the concept of behavioral culture is also underscored by the many forms of uncivilized behavior and, according to many, its growing power and intensity. The division of labor is becoming increasingly complex; more and more people are becoming increasingly dependent on one another, and people are “tired of being good.” It is clear that we have strong impulses not only toward cooperation but also toward competition and toward subjugating our rivals, driven by a complex interplay of biological and social factors. This can manifest itself in aggressive, violent behavior or in more subtle, socially more acceptable—yet still quite destructive and disruptive—actions. At the same time, the question arises: just because some people have a different cultural background, different customs, and different values, can the majority (host) society still label them as deviant?

8. There are many possible responses to uncivilized behavior

It is obvious that our instinctive response to an insult is an insult, and to violence is violence, since, as is well known, fights begin when someone strikes back. However, we must also set limits on retaliation against uncivilized behavior, and in this regard, human behavioral culture has developed numerous effective solutions, ranging from withdrawal, gradual de-escalation, and appeasement all the way to tolerance and acceptance of the situation. The latter, however, must be handled with caution, as violations of certain fundamental values—ones that are rightly considered universal—can hardly be tolerated, even if our short-term interests might dictate otherwise. We can find balance in this area by preventing the escalation of the inevitable conflict, which we might also call “secondary civilization.” Pacifism, the love of peace, was a dirty word in certain systems and eras. Is it still?

9. The Process of Civilization Takes Many Forms

We are civilized by social pressures, upbringing, etiquette, morality, and the law; we incorporate some of these into our personalities as a kind of superego. Generally, we also participate in our own upbringing and are responsible for the outcome. This process unfolded differently in the past and today; it unfolds differently in the Western and Eastern halves of the world; and it differs between families that adhere to liberal educational methods and those that cling to strict communal traditions. Building on the previous chapter, the question is to what extent we can be different and to what extent we must respect the fact that others are different. Furthermore, communities do not merely civilize individuals; entire communities and societies are also civilized by other communities and societies—sometimes forcefully, sometimes less so. The big question here is to what extent education, socialization, and “civilizing” can serve the self-interest of the head of the family, a dominant social group, or even countries or groups of countries in positions of power—interests that may not even be related to the purported positive changes.

10. The relationship between culture and civilization remains largely unexplored

There is a vast body of literature on both culture and civilization/civilizedness, but it tends to focus on them separately. Nevertheless, we can conclude from the previous chapters that the relationship between cultural sophistication and civilizedness warrants detailed exploration; a parallel examination of the two concepts is insufficient. When we compare them, we can see that their psychological backgrounds, social institutions, and even their measurability are quite different. It is also evident that the relationship between culture and civilization consists of many factors; numerous examples can be cited of how the lack of an appropriate civilizational background hinders the utilization of certain cultural achievements, or conversely, how culture—such as nationalist literature—can disrupt normal, civilized relations among people, communities, and countries. But culture can also become an important factor in civilization by promoting empathy and universal human values. Conversely, by conveying shame as a fundamental factor of civilization, significant cultural progress can be achieved in areas such as general education or even personal hygiene. Perhaps those who, because of this intricate web of interrelationships, do not attach too much importance to the conceptual distinction between culture and civilization are right?

11. Civilization plays a decisive role in the rise and fall of civilizations

The downfall of great civilizations is usually attributed to their depletion of resources. In contrast, at least our current civilization has reached such a level of cultural development (scientific, technological, etc.) that it could, in fact, ensure the replenishment of any resources that might run out. At the same time, existing economic and political systems only fuel irrational and self-destructive competition, while the prevalence of civilized, community-oriented behavior is declining alarmingly among their ruling elites and in the societies they govern. Will the development of our current global civilization repeat the patterns seen throughout history?

12. A “clash of civilizations” would require distinct civilizations...

It is curious that the “clash of civilizations”—the highlighting of irreconcilable differences between them—is taking place precisely at a time when, in our globalized world, the differences between them are disappearing at a breakneck pace. Social scientists—whether acting in good faith or merely suffering from a craving for attention—may find themselves in a situation where their theories about civilizations are used to support crude political ideologies. Do the irrational and aggressively acting political forces sense only their own demise, or that of civilization as a whole? Some authors also ask to what extent the rapid spread of ideas regarding women’s equality might play a role in the radicalization of Islam?

13. Adapt, adapt, adapt!

It is possible that by understanding the cultural and civilizational background and processes of the multifaceted crisis threatening the collapse of our current civilization, humanity will have a slightly better chance of averting or at least mitigating these drastic changes. But it is far more likely that this global historical “*perfect storm*” cannot be stopped—or even slowed down. In that case, as millions of our fellow human beings already believe today, we must somehow consider the possibilities for the

survival of our families, communities, and culture. And since these possibilities are increasingly closing off at the societal level—and are hopeless at the individual level—attention is turning toward viable, sustainable local communities. On the ruins of every great civilization that has fallen so far, smaller autonomous groups have emerged. Will this be the case in the future as well?

14. But what will happen until then?

As long as the current civilization functions on some level, everyone knows their role. Once it has collapsed, some of the small local communities will obviously be able to overcome the difficulties as well. The truly important question is what will happen in the interim. It is nearly impossible to formulate general rules for such transitions. However, we can already begin to consider which cultural achievements will be most useful in the new situation, and what the fundamental civilizational (i.e., related to civilization) conditions for survival will be.

15. What practical benefits can the questions raised in this lecture outline yield?

In summary, I will review the connections between the individual observations and the issues raised, and attempt to uncover broader contexts. In practical terms, this chapter will serve as an outline for teaching this subject.

II. Elaboration of the Theses

1. The Declining Civilization and the Enduring Culture

(Rising and Falling Civilizations) Our current global civilization is in a deep crisis; many believe it has reached the brink of collapse. While this is by no means the whole story, attention is often drawn to the interconnected, mutually reinforcing system of ecological crises, which the world's leading universities—organized by the Karolinska Institute in Sweden—presented in 2009 using the famous spider web diagram (Rockström 2009); barely a decade later, they reported a further dramatic deterioration of the situation (Rockström 2023). Kate Raworth vividly illustrated these natural processes using the equally famous “doughnut” diagram, showing how they interact with the most important social processes—ranging from poverty and hunger to the escalation of social conflicts (Fanning 2025). These warnings came at just the right time; consider, for example, the Club of Rome's first report (Meadows 1972), which used precise calculations to outline the scenarios awaiting humanity if it did not change its production and consumption habits, population growth, and environmental pollution. Unfortunately, a 2004 review of these projections showed that the most unfavorable scenarios had come to pass (Meadows 2004). In later chapters of this paper, we will examine the warning signs of our civilization's not-too-distant collapse from multiple perspectives.

Nevertheless, many believe that our highly advanced scientific and technical culture, complemented and supported by other cultural sectors, can save this civilization and guide it toward a sustainable state where—albeit based on a different logic—it can begin to develop anew.

Every civilization known to date has risen and then fallen, even though the knowledge of its scientists, artisans, priests, and artists did not vanish. It was simply that circumstances changed so drastically that these cultural achievements were of little use at that time and in that place.

Our current situation is different from that of previous civilizations. Its duration, geographical extent, and the unprecedented level of complex cultural development may well point to a different fate for us. However, it is not only the age, size, and level of development of our current civilization that are greater than those of previous ones, but also the problems it faces.

(civilization, sustainability) It is therefore possible that this time we must gain a slightly deeper understanding of the laws governing civilization itself, in which “civilization” may be a key concept. Within the context of civilization, we must examine both the network of relationships among major civilizational blocs and the processes unfolding within individual national civilizations, smaller communities, groups, and even individuals—as well as the degree of civilization, which determines the conditions for peaceful cooperation or, conversely, may trigger competition and conflict.

We know full well that the minimum requirement for sustainable development *across generations* is that the consumption of resources and the pollution of the environment remain at a level that still ensures sufficient freedom of choice for those who come after us—future generations. This is naturally complemented by the conditions for sustainable development *within a given generation*, since there is little chance for rational, frugal consumption and only moderately polluting production if tensions within society are too high, and poverty and discontent undermine the state's capacity for organization and tie up a large portion of its resources (Fülöp 2016). In this context, therefore, on the one hand, we must treat one another fairly, and on the other hand, we have similar obligations toward our descendants. These requirements are natural during certain phases of a civilization's development, but at other times they are difficult to fulfill.

(*civilization and culture*) However, with regard to the second point mentioned—sustainability within generations—it is worth examining in greater detail what general conditions exist for peaceful cooperation among members of society and to what extent the inherited and further developed body of moral, political, scientific, technical, and aesthetic knowledge can contribute to this. In other words, we should examine in detail the civilizational and cultural conditions that underpin sustainable development.

What may be truly interesting to us is the relationship between these two concepts and their mutual influence. Civilizations rise, then exhaust their resources and inevitably decline; this has always been the case (Toynbee 1971, Diamond 2009). But along with the current global industrial-capitalist civilization, might the vast cultural wealth accumulated thus far—the myriad manifestations of human goodness, beauty, knowledge, and creativity—also be destroyed? Will the pages in the last libraries rot away, and will the paint run down the Mona Lisa’s face? Will there be no one left capable of reading a Beethoven score, repairing a broken bicycle, or even a windmill? Or perhaps there will be? Could our culture outlive our current system and help us build a new civilization in the near future?

These are questions worth pondering, for we may find hope in times of decadence, decline, general despondency, and hopelessness—characteristics of civilizations in decline. After all, it was on the ruins of the crumbling, decadent Roman Empire that flourishing, cohesive communities emerged—and organized themselves into strong, effective states—with the help of the Christian culture of love. The system of medieval feudal absolutist rulers also collapsed; however, with the help of the Industrial Revolution and scientific and technological culture, an unprecedented level of development unfolded in Western societies, at least. The capitalist-imperialist world order has likewise exhausted its resources, become deeply divided, and its rapid decline seems inevitable. Perhaps the new rules of the information society, like a fresh cultural infusion for a dying patient, can put human societies back on their feet?

But it may also be that even this faint hope is deceptive; indeed, it cannot be ruled out that societies placing excessive trust in certain select branches of culture may even find themselves in an even worse situation.

The central theme of our paper is therefore culture and, within it (outside it, inside it, above it, alongside it?), the culture of behavior—that is, the relationship between culture and civilization. Culture is characteristic of a given civilization, though it also contains elements from eras preceding individual civilizations; furthermore—insofar as multiple civilizations exist simultaneously (which has generally been the case thus far)—it borrows from or shares elements with the cultures of other civilizations. A key aspect of culture, however, is behavioral culture—that is, the level of civility (both individual and collective) observable in a given society. Civility plays a key role in a given community, society, and indeed in the international community as well. Indeed, a lack of civility poses a threat to the values accumulated through culture.

2. The General Concept of Culture

(*etymology*) The origin of the word dates back to ancient Rome, at least as far back as Cicero, who wrote about the cultivation of the soul (*cultura animi*) using an agricultural metaphor. In Middle English, the word “culture” meant plowed land, derived from the Latin *colere* (to settle, to care for, to

honor). The term “*cultus*,” which was closely related in meaning to “,” was understood primarily to refer to religious worship (Wikipedia).

(Culture is everything) The range of phenomena and things falling under the concept of culture is so broad that culture itself is very difficult to define. At a general level, of course, it is a concept that can be easily and briefly described: “*the way people do things*” —Cambridge English Dictionary, Unacademy 2021–22), as we have learned from our parents and, of course, from our peer groups and every social interaction, including what we read and the internet.

As early as 1965, Lewis counted 160 definitions of culture in English-language publications alone. According to a typical definition that elaborates a bit more on the Cambridge one, culture refers to learned ways of acting and thinking, offering each person ready-made, tried-and-true solutions to important life problems. This definition (too) does little to capture the richness of meanings that are openly or implicitly present in society and condensed into the concept of culture. As Jablensky exclaims: “Culture is a woefully poorly defined, arbitrary term applicable only to large masses, encompassing everything from child-rearing customs to religious practices to the preferred size of passenger cars” (Jablensky 1975: 114, 120). I believe, however, that we must accept this, since as soon as we attempt to narrow down the most general concept of culture, important elements may immediately be left out. In order to perhaps view and apply all of this as a unified whole again, we would need a level of interdisciplinary collaboration that is currently almost unimaginably close. This may one day come to the forefront as postmodern culture—which does not place too much emphasis on boundaries but is more effective in solving tasks and problems—reaches its full potential.

If existing definitions of culture do not convince us based on their content, we might consider listening to arguments based on authority. We must not forget that the United Nations has a global organization dedicated specifically to culture: UNESCO.³ In its 1982 Mexico Declaration on Cultural Policies, UNESCO defined culture (and continues to uphold this definition to this day) as “consisting of specific *spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional* aspects that characterize a given society. It encompasses the arts, lifestyles, human rights, value systems, traditions, and beliefs alike. Culture shapes individuals and communities and fosters unity through shared values and traditions.” UNESCO emphasizes the importance of preserving culture in the face of *global challenges* such as conflicts, pandemics, climate change, and new technologies—for both individuals and societies. It also highlights the rich interconnections between culture and sustainable development (SDGs 2030). According to UNESCO, culture contributes in countless ways “to building *inclusive, innovative, and resilient communities*, and to addressing the challenges of our time, such as climate change, poverty, inequality, the digital divide, and other increasingly complex threats and conflicts.” “Through culture, we can achieve people-centered solutions, mutual understanding and dialogue among different cultures, and lasting peace” (UNESCO, 2026).

(The ecological validity of definitions) A potential unification—or rather, integration—of the definition of culture might nevertheless prove useful. The Hungarian psychological community became familiar with the philosophy-of-science concept of *ecological validity* largely through the work of Professor Zsuzsanna Kulcsár. A related concept is “valid truth,” which enhances the performance of a given

³ I had forgotten this. Gábor Trombitás brought this omission in the original manuscript to my attention.

system (theory, economic system, political regime) (Brunswik 1944, Lányi 2020: 25, Szokolszky 2021: 639–645).

In his influential 1962 book **The Structure of Scientific Revolutions**, Thomas Kuhn argues that there is always a dominant scientific theory, and when results contradicting it come to light, scientists—rather than creating a new one to replace it—continue to cling to the old one, even though it has long been refuted. When the old theory finally collapses under the weight of new evidence, a paradigm shift does occur. As Nobel laureate Max Planck said in an interview in 1931: “Scientific theories do not change because old scientists change their views, but because old scientists die”. Heisenberg later added to this by saying that the problem with physicists is not that they cannot learn, but that they cannot forget. (Horváth 2020, p. 489.)

Let us acknowledge, despite all these pointed remarks, that in the overwhelming majority of cases, science establishes a set of definitions for a given field—whether automatically, “through evolution,” or even by direct consensus—and then applies them consistently until the time comes for another review. It is peculiar that, in the case of such fundamental concepts as culture (and civilization), which are receiving increasing attention, we are still very far from unifying and integrating the diverse, divergent definitions. Obviously, every researcher publishes their own version with the ambition of uniting the rank-and-file soldiers of the “army of definitions” under their banner (in fact, in this way, this army consists entirely of generals...). The outcome of this struggle depends on many factors, most notably on the ecological validity and relevance of the proposed definition—that is, on the extent to which it helps us describe, understand, and address the most important problems in the given field of study. Yes, but the concept of culture spans many disciplines, and dialogue among them is halting—or rather, there is just enough of it to prevent a single definition, or at least a single type of definition, from gaining dominance. Furthermore, due to principles such as “Respect for our predecessors!” or the pragmatic “We don’t throw away intellectual products!”, any definition with a chance of prevailing must also be integrative—that is, it must adequately reflect the most important existing definitions and groups of definitions—which makes it even more difficult for a single definition to gain dominance. Until that happens—if it ever does—certain conceptual groups are more manageable than the general concept of culture, foremost among them the *material and* immaterial aspects of culture, as well as the definitions of culture *used by various professions*, which we will examine in greater detail below.

(*living, organizing, “soft” culture*) Indeed, a great many definitional elements can be gathered from various scholarly and other sources. Some of these refer to the practices cultivated by people and human communities—a kind of “soft culture.” According to these views, culture is a social product or achievement that manifests itself in various forms of expression and networks of relationships, which define social life, presupposing a certain degree of stability, predictability, and enduring and universal values. Organizing culture encompasses social systems, institutions, and norms, as well as the specialized knowledge, beliefs, scientific knowledge, art, and legal and customary systems accumulated in societies or in specific sectors and fields, at both the individual and group levels. In contrast, (soft) culture is considered the subject of research by countless disciplines, ranging from anthropology and sociology through literary studies and philosophy to history (Lowry 2009, p. 303). Soft culture is often distinguished geographically, by ethnic group, or by community, but there are always significant overlaps, and, of course, there are general or even global cultural elements.

According to another relevant definition, “culture is a network of meanings (or things that have ‘significance’) that are connected to a larger whole at (at least) one point.” This overarching significance may stem from historical precedents, traditions, or, at the same time, from the fact that

smaller or larger communities—or even networks of communities—share these meanings, thereby maintaining a conventional order. Thus, texts or other cultural expressions, myths, and symbols are capable of revealing something *about* a higher-level, overarching *social essence* that is not directly visible (Lowry 2009: 318). Here, then, culture appears as one of the most essential descriptive elements of a given civilization's fabric, network of relationships, structure, and so on.

Lowry also cites another definition, according to which culture is a kind of atmosphere, an atmosphere that we breathe in everywhere but can never fully make our own—much like myths and symbols, from which we can decipher much but can never fully grasp their complete meaning (Lowry 2009: 333).

A relatively early author, Lyndel V. Prott, clearly still sets out with the ambition of providing a comprehensive and precise definition: *culture* is every trace of human life that we strive to preserve—the things and traditions that express our way of life and way of thinking within a specific society, serving as a testament to all our intellectual and spiritual achievements. For this reason, Prott prefers the term “heritage” or “*cultural heritage*,” but he strongly opposes the use of the term “*cultural property*,” as it also implies appropriation or expropriation (Prott–O’Keefe 1992: 307–9). In any case, this definition expresses the concept of soft culture a bit more succinctly and clearly than the previous ones.

Note that, at the same time, a key common formal element of definitions of soft culture is that they are built on paradoxes and irresolvable contradictions: concrete meanings linked to an elusive greater whole, the atmosphere in which we live, and traditions we have inherited but can never fully call our own. Such intricate, complex systems truly cannot be described using traditional linear logic; understanding them likely requires a new, complex set of scientific tools capable of simultaneously addressing temporal and sociological-psychological variables.

(material culture) The historical documentation and preservation of a particular way of life can also be achieved through material objects, such as monuments and memorial sites. Other examples include the ruins of ancient cities, historic sites, architectural complexes, and even gardens and parks. All of these can be important because they illustrate how modern life has evolved, as well as the practices we once followed but have since abandoned—even when looking back to the era of our human ancestors’ development, to cave dwellings or, even more so, to the world of cave paintings. However, not every historical community’s cultural energy manifested itself in buildings or the transformation of the landscape. For some, rituals and ceremonies were what mattered; others, on the other hand, saw spiritual significance in natural objects—rivers, mountains—and built a significant part of their culture around them.

Culture can thus be preserved not only by real estate but also by movable objects, including all kinds of works of art (paintings, drawings, sculptures, ceramics, textiles, and much more). This includes remains and everyday objects unearthed during excavations at sites and habitats of purely historical significance, which can, in some cases, reveal skills that have disappeared from today’s culture but whose influence is certainly still felt. Contemporary material culture—our architecture, the forms of our everyday objects, our clothing, and so on—thus grows out of a kind of historical background and reflects our values, aspirations, and sense of belonging.

The intangible and material aspects of culture are, of course, closely intertwined. On the one hand, ideas, discoveries, our knowledge, technology, and abilities have evolved to create a complex material world; on the other hand, far-reaching conclusions can be drawn from material culture regarding the most important elements of intangible culture. Cultures—partly conceptual and partly material—such

as songs, dances, and tales and legends were accompanied by appropriate costumes, sets, and so on, and similar connections can still be discovered today. We can learn a great deal from these about the lives and ways of thinking of our ancestors, especially if their context has survived in some form. But these objects are equally revealing about contemporary culture—and indeed about our own culture—thereby enriching our self-knowledge. Obviously, we have not been able—and cannot—preserve everything from the continuity of material culture between the past and the present, but the nature and significance of these objects can still provide us with guidance today in illustrating human cultural development (Prott–O’Keefe 1992: 307–9).

(sectoral cultures) From all these extremely diverse attempts at definition, we can also draw the conclusion that less might be more. For now, rather than continuing to collect more and more social phenomena and classify them under the broad concept of culture, we should try to narrow the concept in some way and thus make it more useful. This narrowing can go beyond the above-mentioned, all-too-obvious distinction between ideal and material cultures; it can be based on geographical or social criteria (e.g., global culture, national culture, local culture), but an equally obvious method of classification is to distinguish cultures based on specific forms of social activity and living conditions.

Some definitions explicitly serve the purposes of a particular sectoral theory. For Lebow, who seeks to distill international and societal-level relationships into a comprehensive theory, culture is a structure consisting of a network of norms that defines social interactions within a given area and among specific (e.g., professional) communities (Welch 2010: 447).

As we have seen, at the level of social psychology and communication theory, culture is “the social interpretation of life.” People fulfill numerous roles in the most diverse branches of culture and, through these, can view themselves as “persons” who exist within the world of meanings. The world of meaning here refers to a historically developed situation in which we are able to categorize and interpret our experiences with the help of symbols. Abstract symbols are the most important sources of associations and, thus, of imagination and creativity (Fülöp 2018). Other professions, of course, work with a different concept of culture. We will address this in more detail in the next chapter.

(Culture and Power) We must not assume that defining culture is merely a question of epistemology; the stakes are, in fact, very high. The difficulty of defining culture is thus highlighted by the statement that in human societies “there is hardly anything that is not culture”; consequently, it is said, since the definition excludes nothing, it also explains nothing. This vacuum—this open-ended possibility, as American cultural researchers point out—provides an excellent opportunity for those in power to declare culture their own domain. Culture can thus be defined as both a tool for exercising power and an embodiment of power. Defining meaning and interpretation is a fundamental tool of domination, but it can, of course, also be a tool of resistance (Lowry 2009: 313). However, if we conceive of culture as a tool in the power struggle among individuals, groups, and societies, then—as we shall see—it falls largely under the concept of “civilization,” which has a much narrower scope.

Based on all this, it is clear that culture is a broader concept than civilization (which, for this reason, we might also call “behavioral culture”); it largely encompasses the latter, just as the learning and adoption of culture are inseparable from the acquisition of appropriate behavior—that is, from the process of civilization. Lowry’s quoted text makes it even clearer that certain aspects of culture can be used to define and shape status relationships among people—that is, for specific civilizational

purposes. This will be a recurring theme in approaches examining the relationship between culture and civilization.

3. Cultures

(*various layers and sectors of culture*) Some people see a significant difference between the “hard” (natural sciences, technology) and “soft” (humanities and social sciences) aspects of human knowledge—a distinction that has long been present in education and in social and professional selection. The preference for politically neutral technical expertise may preempt—or even render seemingly unnecessary for those in power—a better understanding and discussion of human, economic, and political relationships. However, a problem with technical culture is that it often blurs the distinction between people and things, leading to serious moral and psychological problems (Appiah 2017: 517).

Decades ago, Chinese authors considered it important to distinguish between the traditional, intellectual, and aesthetic—and *thus elite*—connotations of the term “culture,” and the once-suppressed and marginalized cultural elements that, under current conditions, might correspond to *mass culture* or popular culture. Current Chinese cultural studies—similar to their Western counterparts—seek to differentiate between, on the one hand, postcolonial, minority, and diaspora studies, as well as studies focused on specific regions such as Asian and Oceanic studies, and, on the other hand, the cultures of feminist, and gay cultures; and, on the other hand, media studies in the fields of film, television, and the internet (Wang 2003: 183, 189).

Political culture—which is generally only recognized when things are not going well in a country—is composed of political discourse, behavioral patterns, and political (leadership, etc.) styles. This also includes the political activity of various social groups—first and foremost, of course, how they respond to political campaigns and how they vote in light of those campaigns. The study of political culture brings down to earth the narratives otherwise associated with the movements of high politics and major events. With all this in mind, we can define political culture as a pattern of widely accepted values, assumptions, and forms of behavior related to public life. Interestingly, these can best be inferred from the emotions of the masses: what they are enthusiastic about, what they abhor, or what they fear—these are the most reliable indicators of the political culture of the masses (Freeman 2004: 139).

Certain branches of culture are more appealing for teaching and more obvious choices for research, while others may seem boring or uninteresting. When teaching ancient Greek culture, for example, teachers are advised to focus on anything other than history itself—such as literature, material culture, and the characteristics of the Greek way of thinking. In contrast, literature teacher and author Alan Towey reports that he was able to capture and sustain his students’ attention through a detailed analysis—filled with quotations—of Plato’s **The Republic**, even among students who struggled, for example, to read through Orwell’s **Animal Farm**. Of course, one might say ironically, this is easy to teach, since Plato himself wrote about proper teaching methods. Incidentally, he adopted his dialogue-based method from Socrates, who, for his part, would (also) have taken offense if he had been called a philosopher. Plato’s dialogues did not convey Platonism (that was only derived from them centuries later), but rather offered his students questions and tentative answers that were sincere and could be taken seriously. This, therefore, provides insight into *educational culture* as a distinct culture of cultural

transmission. (Towey 2023: 165–6). We will discuss the acquisition and teaching of culture in modern times in more detail in the following Chapter 4.

(Culture in Communication Studies) Communication is a fundamental tool for shaping and disseminating culture. From a communication-theoretical perspective, the concept of culture refers to the totality of *meanings* possessed by a given community. This definition further clarifies the elements of meaning and significance inherent in the concept of “soft culture” discussed in the previous chapter. Thus, within a given culture, virtually everyone understands a given thing in the same way, and the interpretation of phenomena is identical⁴ within the group. Here, however, it is worth referring once again to the definitions of soft culture, which emphasize its historical continuity and roots. According to this view, culture is a system of various meanings, basic tenets, rules, and symbols created and passed down through communication within a given community. The relationship is two-way: on the one hand, the communication of the community (and its predecessors) has created this aspect of culture; on the other hand, the culture of that community naturally determines the manner of communication among its members.

There are at least six levels of communication: internal, interpersonal, group, organizational, and mass communication, to which is added a level—one that builds upon the previous levels but is, in fact, more of a global level—namely, internet communication. Culture *is* a *ubiquitous* concept present at every level of communication. It appears, for example, in connection with the underlying cultures that shape group formation and group communication, or the common roots of mass communication and mass culture; it is also mentioned and interpreted in contexts such as global culture, multiculturalism, and cultural identity (Fülöp 2016: 25).

Yong Wok Lee also analyzes the role of discourses and narratives in the process of civilization from the perspective of communication theory. The interpretation and description of the world in public discourse *frames* reality, defines what is legitimate, what is normal, and what is permissible, and ultimately helps people select appropriate and effective courses of action from among the millions of theoretically possible variations. This narrative weaves the facts of the world into a coherent system, so that alternative courses of action are not only permissible and possible but also *logical* (Lee 2020: 462). Once again, we see an example of the close connection between culture and civilization.

(culture and psychology, the subconscious and archetypes) The reception and interpretation of communication are influenced by conscious and subconscious processes. Moreover, certain subconscious processes are characteristic of a given culture and its history. These include, in particular, archetypes and various widespread stereotypes. We postulate the existence of historical words, symbols, codes, instinctive attractions, and aversions in the cultural unconscious, all of which are

⁴ Csaba Kiss wittily points out that this identity cannot always be complete. There is a certain degree of leeway as long as people interpret—or can interpret—certain things differently, yet still belong to a given culture. To a certain extent, we can deviate “safely” from the single “truth” while still being part of that culture. Take, for example, the culinary arts and the culture of taste: certain regional variations of goulash soup still fit within Hungarian gastronomic culture, but the German “Gulasch” (which is a stew) does not. Obviously, tolerance varies across different branches of culture and between central and less important issues, but it also varies geographically; for example, rural culture may generally be less permissive than urban culture on the same subject.

characteristic of the people of a given era and society. This makes it possible for the products of a given culture—especially works of literature and the visual arts—to be evaluated in a similar manner.

For Freud, the *unconscious* is a dynamic psychological function in which desires, emotions, repressed thoughts, and memories interact with one another and influence an individual's thinking and behavior. Prenatal influences and genetic predispositions can also be decisive factors, and the first six months after birth constitute a particularly sensitive intermediate phase—one that remains equally inaccessible to the consciousness of later ages. He depicted the ego, situated above the unconscious, and the superego—which in some way rests upon it, exerting influence at times more strongly, at times more weakly—as a sort of iceberg, where only the ego and a part of the superego emerge from the depths to the surface. An important function of the unconscious is to bury socially or even aesthetically unacceptable experiences, such as defeat, frustration, pain, and trauma (defense mechanisms). At the same time, immense energies can accumulate in the unconscious, which play a role in memory and even in creativity.

It was Jung who elevated the structural model developed for the individual to the communal and societal level through the concept of *the collective unconscious*. An important difference between the two is that while Freud was a physician and insisted that the structural model of personality had an anatomical basis, Jung did not reject philosophical, historical, linguistic, literary, or cultural approaches in general. Lacan went even further, arguing that the unconscious has the same structure as *language* itself. In his view, even in the use of language, an unconscious process triggers conscious thoughts or reactions that can be expressed linguistically. In my opinion, this can also be understood as the interaction between nonverbal (motor, visual) thought processes and verbalization. From Jung and Lacan, it is only a short step to the concept of *the cultural unconscious*, understood as a kind of shared perception and universality existing within a community. Accordingly, internalized linguistic and cultural elements also exert an influence in the unconscious. (Ming 2023: 45–49).

From the moment of birth, humans live in a world of symbols, of which language is undoubtedly the most important. Both the conscious ego and the culturally determined unconscious function primarily on a linguistic basis, where the sign is conscious expression (thought or speech), and the signified is located somewhere in the unconscious. It is precisely this connection—which reveals the contents of the unconscious—that proves the cultural determinism of the unconscious. Roland Barthes refers to cultural phenomena as modern myths, that is, in his conceptual framework, as semiotic (sign-theoretical) systems. He uses the term “myth” to convey that the deeper meaning of cultural phenomena remains hidden from individuals. This is particularly true because primary cultural signs become secondary signs over time—essentially due to random coincidences and external social and communal demands—to the point where hardly anyone remembers the sign's original, primary meaning, let alone how and why it became a secondary sign. This is the process by which, in semiotics, secondary meanings—or connotations—are superimposed onto the original meaning, or denotation.

According to Ming, the cultural unconscious also contains political, gender, linguistic, ethnic, and other similar layer-specific elements. (Ming 2023: 54–55). It is clear that this theory deals with cultural influences; however, within the context of culture, it also places great emphasis on those elements that regulate impulse control and acceptable social behavior—in essence, the factors of civilization. This overlap between culture and behavioral culture—or, in other words, civilization—was, of course, already very pronounced in the work of earlier authors. This element is even more strongly present in the concepts of cultural refinement and cultured behavior.

4. Culturedness

(the elements of culture and their transmission) The first question that arises in this context is: what is the unit by which we measure, transmit, and acquire culture? Lyman proposes the term “*cultural traits*” to designate the units that members of a community transmit, learn, borrow, adopt, etc., in the process of spreading culture. This generally—though not always—occurs through personal interactions.⁵ Defining the unit of culture, much like defining culture itself, is clearly difficult. We do not define what these units actually are, but rather what we do with them and what they are good for. Of course, supplemented with a few obvious, illustrative examples, this suffices as an initial definition. For Lyman, for example, cultural traits range from the way a vase is painted to a complex 19th-century exorcism ritual. Others include fashions, pop songs, or even jokes in this category; the cultural embeddedness of the latter—and their connection to society’s collective unconscious—can be quite deep and complex. We’ll discuss the social and societal significance of humor later.

A slightly more substantive definition of a cultural trait often employs a common methodological and theoretical device—an analogy: it is like a recipe, specifying which ingredients to use and how to produce a cultural product or its behavioral manifestation, or byproduct. The authors, however, fail to specify exactly what these ingredients might be, though we can make an educated guess: values, expectations, social performances, abilities, and knowledge. These can then be passed on and processed individually or in packages (curricula, subjects, cultural sectors, etc.). An important element of the “recipe”—as we’ve already briefly noted in a footnote—is the degree of deviation from the original description that is tolerated. This is crucial precisely because, when consuming the finished cultural product, the recipient integrates it into their own cultural system. Of course, for the sake of adaptation, these characteristics may be modified—even on a massive scale, in line with group or societal trends. According to Boas, this *integration* is one of the most important, if not the sole, creative driving force behind cultural development (Lyman 2006: 357–8).

(the paradox of individualization) Communication—as becomes evident at the level of internal communication related to the acquisition and functioning of culture—plays a decisive role in the formation of identity; at the same time, identity filters and shapes our knowledge and beliefs. It is in this sense that schools of *thought* falling under the umbrella term “*American studies*” examine the identities of women, African Americans, Indigenous peoples, and various immigrant groups, as well as their power to shape history. These cultures—which often contradict one another in many respects—contribute a significant portion of the energy of American culture in the world’s first and largest experiment in creating and sustaining a multicultural democracy (Lowry 2009: 315–7).

Accordingly, the role of culture is also decisive at the level of personality development and the personal, internal communication that accompanies it. The more diverse and higher-quality the cultures with which a developing personality comes into contact (and, of course, the more deeply it is able to assimilate them), the more valuable, useful, and hopefully successful that person will become.

⁵ Csaba Kiss drew my attention to Richard Dawkins’ concept of the “*meme*,” which refers to the unit of cultural transmission and, by extension, to imitation, acquisition, and transmission. Dawkins raised the possibility that the theory of evolution could be extended to elements of culture. Thus, drawing an analogy with the “gene,” he coined the term “meme” to denote the hypothetical, replicable, and self-replicating basic units of culture. Memes do this through the processes of variation, mutation, competition, and inheritance, all of which influence a meme’s reproductive success. According to Mihály Csíkszentmihályi, a transmitted meme can spread further depending on its “quality” (interest, relevance, etc.). The “most important” ones are the survivors, which can then shape the thinking of an entire society (and ultimately, all of human civilization). (Wikipedia)

In a peculiar way, the more someone is a faithful child of culture—or rather, of cultures—the more independent and unique they become. We might call this *the paradox of individualization*. To explain the paradox of individualization a bit more fully, it means that, on the one hand, culture chains us to itself, regulates us, and imposes a series of obligations on us: how to behave, dress, speak, work, and so on. On the other hand, however, culture provides us with an increasingly rich and effective set of tools for self-actualization.

In contrast, if someone—especially during a formative stage of life—is exposed to little or unacceptable cultural influence, they may suffer from cultural deprivation, along with all the signs of depression that result from it: they cannot find their place, are unmotivated, moody, and listless. According to American psychiatrist Hugh C. Hendrie, this may have happened to Canada’s Indigenous peoples, whom the Catholic Church, as is well known, attempted to “extract” from their original culture through boarding schools—and whom the psychiatrist treated in their later years, when they still exhibited symptoms of depression. Hendrie notes that during his visit to Canada, Pope Francis referred to this former “socialization” practice *as cultural genocide* and, expressing deep compassion, offered a retroactive apology for it (Hendrie 2022).

Iván Vitányi applies the concept of individualization *at the societal level*, using similar logic. He vividly demonstrates that a national culture—whether it wants to or not, whether it is aware of it or not—is inevitably bound by a thousand threads to other cultures and to global culture. A national culture is all the more unique—and perhaps, as a result, all the more valuable (to itself, to others, and to the global fabric)—the deeper and more multifaceted its connections are to other cultures and to various branches of global culture (Vitányi 2022). As we have seen in the example of the rise of English society and economy, the closer interconnection of individual communities was itself one of the fundamental prerequisites for the Industrial Revolution. Technical and social conditions reinforced one another in a virtuous cycle: with the development of waterways, land routes, and railroads, not only the flow of goods but also that of ideas and thoughts accelerated; moreover, this technological advancement fundamentally contributed to political awakening, debates, and the formation of alliances (Acemoglu 2012, p. 198.)⁶ . Throughout history, as individual civilizations have evolved, the degree of individualization among the masses—and with it, their freedom, dignity, etc.—has always risen to a new level: from slave to serf, then to wage laborer, and from there, in all likelihood, to a member of numerous virtual communities via the World Wide Web (as a new, more effective means of communication than any that had come before) (Lowry 2009: 318).

Also addressing the study of cultural particularities at the national level is the exploration of various branches of contemporary Nigerian artistic culture—including music, literature, fashion design, television production, and filmmaking—and even the culinary arts (if one may call it that)—which proved to be a rich source for Trish Lorenz. In studying these cultural sectors, the author highlights the importance of articulating and experiencing African *identity*, as well as the pursuit of this goal—a common thread among the book’s authors, who otherwise come from very diverse backgrounds. Paradoxically (and this, too, falls within the realm of the paradox of individualization), most authors emphasize the importance of *cultural diversity*. In bookstores and on TV programs, they want to see content in both English and Yoruba; they want to enjoy the flavors of world cuisine, but they also want to introduce their customers to local, seasonal delicacies. Younger generations, in particular, are receptive to this pluralistic identity, and some authors hope that through them, perhaps even the perspectives of older generations can be transformed (Lorenz 2022: 33).

⁶ Gábor Bertók drew my attention to the book **Why Nations Fail** by the Nobel Prize-winning authors Acemoglu and Robinson.

The authors in this volume simultaneously protest against the dominance of international commercial culture and express their hope that Lagos can become a defining center of African culture . What is this if not a power struggle within culture? Money, of course, plays a significant role in this as well; for example, Nollywood, Nigeria's film production hub, accounts for approximately 2.3% of the country's gross domestic product.

Wendy Brown argues that individualization is linked to liberalism, in which the group is the antithesis of individual autonomy (she bases this claim on Freud's work in group psychology), namely, that there is a contradiction between the community/group/culture and the individual's moral autonomy (individualization), and that this can only be resolved *through the subjugation of culture* by the individual's freedom (Vakulenko 2008: 328). This idea—perhaps somewhat exaggerated—is, in my opinion, nothing other than the paradox of individualization; it may represent an extreme case in which group norms hold the individual so tightly in their grip (Ibsen's **Norah**) that the only way to break free is through rebellion. Yes, but the fact is that rebels most often become the most devoted followers of that very system of norms—its creators and further developers. How often do we see this: the teenage girl, often disowned by her family, who dresses provocatively, associates with certain circles, and adopts habits that outrage the older members of her family, becomes the central figure of the family a few decades later, organizing family dinners on major holidays. The process of rebellion and the subjugation of culture described by Brown, therefore, does not refute the paradox of individualization; rather, it simply presents it from a new perspective. (Brown 2006)

In any case, the paradox of individualization is a historical phenomenon, a sign of the times. Carvalho cites a number of authors who, while labeling our era in different ways (Giddens: late modern, Rose: advanced liberal, Bauman: postindustrial, he does not mention Castells with the "information" label, but he clearly belongs here along with many other social scientists), unanimously conclude that today a coherent and stable sense of belonging—social identity—is in short supply, yet there is great demand for it amid conditions of ontological uncertainty and fragile autonomy (Carvalho 2016, p. 10). We still have a great deal of work to do—at the individual, group, and societal levels—to process the diverse cultural influences, integrate them organically into our own personal cultures, and thereby be unequivocally enriched, so that we do not feel lost in the wider world.

5. The Concept of Civilization

In contrast to the concepts of culture and cultural sophistication, the concept of *civilization*—as a culture of behavior—covers a narrower scope; thus, although there is also a lack of consensus among the relevant academic disciplines regarding its definition, its fundamental, general characteristics can nevertheless be better grasped. Civilization is, in a sense, a conceptual counterpart to *dignity*. Both concepts can be described as products of the social division of labor; furthermore, respecting the dignity of others and preserving one's own dignity are central elements of civilized behavior.

(Competition and Cooperation) There is a vast body of literature on competition (see the Wikipedia summary under the entry "*Competition*"). What is even more interesting is that there are species in which cooperation reaches a very high level, and this may have even greater evolutionary significance (Hardin 1960). Civilization, simply put, is the degree of this cooperation. This may well have been one of the most important factors in the rise of the human species. However, the necessity for cooperation,

as well as the ability and willingness to engage in it, varies historically; at times it shows an upward trend, at other times it declines, in a cyclical pattern⁷. The concept of civilization, which we have been using for thousands of years, has—much like the concept of culture—still not been clearly defined in the social sciences; nearly every academic discipline and every prominent modern theorist uses their own distinct concept.

Hunter-gatherer peoples who roamed vast territories managed well for roughly 200,000 years through hunting and gathering; however, about 12,000 years ago, a climatic change occurred that caused them to transition to agriculture within a relatively short period of time. This, in turn, required a much higher level of organization and cooperation. In the cities that emerged in the next stage of development, people were crammed together in a way never seen before, and thus had even less tolerance for quarrelsome, violent individuals. According to Wikipedia, the root of the word “civilization” derives from the Latin **civitas** (a city of free citizens), likely via the Latin **civilitas** (courtesy, decency).

It is clear that even our early ancestors faced social problems essentially similar to those of modern humans. Genetically, their personalities did not particularly limit aggression; however, because of their group existence, they were forced to establish internal and external boundaries against their violent, aggressive impulses. Increased collective power—the strength of the group—enabled them to effectively address deviance within the group and to assert their interests vis-à-vis outsiders, but this, too, required a heightened sense of internal order (Chong 2017: 644).

Life in medieval Austrian and French cities was still shaped by the citizens’ deep-rooted fear of all forms of disorder. Changes generally brought trouble, and overcoming various natural disasters—such as fires, floods, and epidemics—also required great collective effort and organization. Then, once the danger had been averted or had passed, basic order and routine were restored (Dixon 1997: 829).

Modern psychology distinguishes between the happiness derived from competition and that derived from cooperation. In the former, the motivation is to defeat others and gain some form of power; according to Morris (2004), this is what drives heartless bosses and bullies. Since this leads to unhappiness for the defeated rival, many civilizations strive to curb the competitive spirit. According to Draper (1976), the Busmen systematically strive to do this; thus, they do not allow boasting about prey, and they do not teach their children games that provoke competition. According to Buddhist teachings as well, a competitive person may experience great joy once, but if they achieved their victory at the expense of others, society views this negatively, and in the long run, they are highly likely to lose a great deal overall as a result of their actions. This is the fate of criminals, tyrants, and social climbers. In contrast, a cooperative person stands to gain twice over: on the one hand, their actions bring them a sense of joy; on the other hand, the person they helped—as well as other members of the community—surround them with gratitude and appreciation, not to mention that they may later reciprocate their kindness. (Horváth 2020, p. 99.) According to this, even psychological-level analysis cannot avoid the issues of group dynamics (as mentioned above: group power) and, indeed, the social influences that steer behavior toward civility. This harmonizes well with Elias’s configuration theory, which we will touch on in the next paragraph.

In his analysis of Elias’s body of work, Goody writes that it is an inherent feature of social life anywhere in the world (and obviously at any time in history) that individuals are, to some extent, mindful of other people, and in doing so, they restrain their negative emotions and the associated behavior, if for no

⁷ Numerous factors influence such cycles, but in my opinion, the logic of processes within a given society plays the greatest role. Throughout human history to date, as Csaba Kiss has pointed out, these cycles have unfolded differently in geographically distant locations, influencing one another only to a limited extent and mostly in indirect ways. The situation of our current globalized civilization, however, is radically different in this respect.

other reason than for the sake of *reciprocity* (Goody 2003: 66). Elias's goal was to gain a deeper understanding of this sociogenetic process of change—the formation of *social configurations*. Elias's theory of social configuration (*figurational sociology*) can broaden the concept of civilization. According to this theory, people live in groups, states, and societies organized according to various networks of relationships, characterized by patterns of interdependence—that is, cooperation and conflict—which, however, rarely remain static. In a social configuration in flux, patterns of human behavior—including culture, taste, intellectual ideas, and social stratification—change within complex interrelationships. (Goody 2003: 67)

(*the curse of civilization*) In fact, the dichotomy between competition and cooperation may resolve the debate (or pseudo-debate?) spanning world literature over whether civilization is a blessing or a curse for humanity. In any case, if we focus only on one side—competition—we paint a very bleak picture of civilization. Jean-Jacques Rousseau's tirade against civilization is often quoted, in which he laments that civilization has swept away the age of paradisiacal innocence: "The first man who fenced off a piece of land and said to the others, 'This is mine,' and the rest of humanity was so simple-minded as to believe him—well, he was the founder of civilized society. How much sin, war, murder, how much misery and horror could have been prevented if there had been someone who had pulled out the boundary stakes and cried out: 'Look at this impostor! We will all perish if you forget that all the fruits of the Earth belong to all of us and to no one alone!'" According to less romantic philosophers and other thinkers, of course, civilization is precisely about people getting along better with one another.

Bowden, however, also sees some truth in the idea that warfare—at least a certain "advanced" form of it—is somehow connected to the emergence of civilization. The connection, however, is quite complex. There is a theory that civilization and war stem from the same source, since war requires a level of resources that only a relatively more advanced, organized civilization can provide. Thus, groups that engage in war presumably possess more wealth than is necessary for their mere survival; they may also have a certain surplus population, and they require a certain level of technological advancement as well as organization.

It is perhaps not even an exaggeration to say that wars have contributed to the development of civilization through coercive force—which, it should be added, is by no means true only of ancient times, since in modern times and even today, wars have served as catalysts for numerous technical innovations (of course, money is no object, and we send the best scientists to Los Alamos). Bowden also points out that for war to have this effect on societies, a certain basic level of development is necessary—namely, the ability to "produce" surplus food and labor, which was obviously made possible only by the agricultural revolution. And here a similarly controversial yet fundamentally important social development emerges: through specialization, some individuals undertook to fulfill the community's military duties. And of course, once they had weapons in their hands... In this process, unfortunately, it was not the smartest or even the most capable who became leaders, but those who really wanted this and recognized and exploited the opportunity arising from the conflict.

In this way, it can be said that civilization was both the product of war and its root cause. And this, it seems, continues to this day—perhaps until war destroys civilization itself. Unless, of course, environmental destruction proves to be somewhat faster—but the most likely scenario is that civilization's two main enemies will carry out this task hand in hand. (Bowden 2016, pp. 8–9.)

(*Aristotle, Erasmus, and other authors*) For the purposes of this note, the concept of civilization developed by Aristotle is perhaps the most appropriate; according to him, the emergence of larger, organized communities—cities—demanded entirely new forms of interaction among people, primarily because—even due to the necessary and possible division of labor—greater *differences* arose among them (Lukácsi 2003). In his work **Freedom of Speech**, Timothy Garton Ash, also following Aristotle, asserts that the behavior of civilized people (in his terms: cultured, but since civilization, as a culture of behavior, is indeed a subset of culture, let us not get hung up on this; we will see that most sources use the two terms interchangeably as synonyms), refers to the organized efforts of the inevitably diverse people living together in cities to maintain order and effective cooperation (Garton Ash 2022: 467–8).⁸ Note that, in contrast to Rousseau and his contemporaries, the authors cited here essentially limit themselves to the other half of the dichotomy—cooperation. But of course, not everyone takes such a one-sided view.

Lányi also emphasizes the connection between cooperation and diversity: “Because meaningful dialogue and mutual respect are only possible when we are aware of our differences (...)”, and goes on to say that “in medieval cities (...) increasingly differentiated groups emerged, among which interdependence and a complex division of labor simultaneously fostered solidarity and fueled bloody conflicts, until gradually a *political* culture of nonviolent conflict resolution and a willingness to reach agreement began to take shape” (Lányi 2020: 53, 80, emphasis added). Lányi traced this approach back to Erasmus of Rotterdam. Erasmus’s handbook on the “proper upbringing of children” (*De civilitate morum puerilium*, 1530) discusses the issue in detail, as it is here that the specific meaning of “civilization”—which continues to define the guidelines for social behavior to this day—is articulated. According to Lányi, it was largely on the basis of this book that the term “civilization” itself became established, referring to the desirable refinement of human behavior.

Building on these fundamental observations, Elias also based his theory of the civilizational process. In this process, the progressive division of social roles, increasing rationalization, and—in connection with this—the ruling classes’ monopolization of violence (since this, too, is merely a form of labor; at the same time, through the gestures of maintaining order, an important personal and emotional element of physical violence fades away) played the most significant roles. These factors led to a higher level of civilization compared to pre-modern societies. This was accompanied by a longer-term foresight, as well as a refinement of the previously extreme black-and-white dichotomy in the perception of others (friend vs. enemy). To put it another way, within increasingly complex chains of interdependence, friendly or hostile behavior on the part of the observer depended not on momentary emotional dispositions or inclinations, but on interests tied to long-term cooperation (Braun 2019: 289). Elias’s observation aligns with the concept developed by Otto Kernberg—who was also inspired by psychoanalysis—according to which, in the modern era, extreme perceptions of others and the associated extreme emotional responses are characteristic only of so-called *borderline* personality disorders, whereas a healthy psyche is capable of differentiated social perception and responses (Kernberg 1975).

(*definitions of civilization*) In a relatively recent study, Bowden went so far as to offer a relatively concise definition: “Civilization is both a process and a goal. It describes the process by which a society becomes civilized, starting from a natural, wild, barbaric state. It defines what a society looks like when

⁸ Without wishing to divert the line of thought (even further), I note that the diversity and variability of elements may be of fundamental importance in systems theory and network theory (Meadows, 2003, Barabási, 2020) in that it may explain why individual elements interact with one another in the first place.

characterized by significant urbanization, social and professional stratification, the luxury of leisure time, and the accompanying development of the arts and sciences. “The ability to establish a reasonably complex socio-political organization and self-government in accordance with the standards of the given era has long been regarded as a central requirement of civilization.” (Bowden 2016, p. 2.) In this comprehensive concept of civilization, therefore, the elements of civilized behavior and cultural refinement are almost inseparably intertwined. Surplus production and leisure time simultaneously led to higher levels of social order and organization and to the development of the arts and sciences.

In his excellent overview, Bowden compiled dozens of definitions of “civilization” from the best-known and most respected authors. The rather tautological 19th-century Western concept of civilization (“civilized means what we are”) soon lost the approval of the academic community, as Huntington himself pointed out in 1998. As a result, more detailed, more incisive, and more substantive definitions emerged. For example, as articulated by Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss: “Civilization represents a kind of moral milieu accepted by a certain number of nations, within which the differences between nations are merely specific forms of the general concept.” According to Arnold Toynbee, civilizations come and go, but Civilization, with a capital “C,” successfully moves forward and endures. A civilization with a lowercase “c,” by contrast, is a historically defined manifestation of the abstract idea of Civilization. For Toynbee, as for many authors, Civilization is a kind of spiritual concept that arises when at least a small minority within a society is freed from the burdens of the struggle for survival and can thus engage in economic and commercial activities in the modern sense of the term—activities that are of fundamental importance for the survival and development of that society. Interpreted in somewhat broader terms, Toynbee’s concept of civilization is closely linked to the social division of labor and the emergence of elite professions—that is, the efficient use of time freed from direct productive tasks. Hobbes had already articulated this idea at the time, stating that the wealth accumulated alongside the struggle for survival laid the foundation for social peace and leisure, which in turn led to the emergence of philosophy in large and flourishing cities.

According to Bowden’s observation, civilization, the maintenance of society’s vital functions, and governance are all included in most definitions of civilization. He quotes Anthony Pagden, who states that, in a philosophical sense, the history of civilization is the history of progressive complexity—the free expression and development of human capabilities within society. R.G. Collingwood highlighted three aspects of civilization (here, “civilization” is an umbrella term encompassing both “cultural development” and “civilized society”): economic, social, and legal dimensions. Economic civilization does not simply mean the accumulation of wealth—which, incidentally, has a destructive effect on economic civilization—but rather refers to true civilized wealth (here: multifaceted, imbued with culture, embedded in a system, resilient, etc.). Social civilization is, in fact, the realm where humanity’s social capabilities can be realized through collective action, or simply within a genuine community. The third conceptual component of civilization, meanwhile, refers to a society governed by law—not so much by the punitive rules of criminal law as by the provisions of civil law that promote cooperation. For Collingwood, therefore, “civilization is what happens to the community; it is progress toward a kind of ideal state.” Collingwood argues that a civilized society—and thus civilization itself—functions in accordance with the principles of the rule of law. The three elements he raised are interconnected in a community that is capable of governing itself through laws—or, if you will, a constitution. In this regard, Bowden also quotes Adda Bozeman, who pointed out that, in contrast to the ideal of civilized coexistence outlined by Collingwood, the perpetual, unregulated conflicts have, over the millennia, achieved nothing but the repeated redrawing of national borders, while sacrificing a significant portion of humanity’s artistic—and especially architectural—heritage, squandering wealth in the true sense of the word, and extinguishing the lives of hundreds of millions. This kind of barbarism is a needless, repulsive process that runs counter to universal human culture. Bozeman consequently concludes that,

rather than politics and history between states, true progress has been brought about by the peacefully established network of relationships between peoples and individuals. (Bowden 2016, pp. 2–4.)

(dignity) In my view, human dignity is a key concept of civilization. One of the most important tasks of human communities is precisely to ensure that, in accordance with the division of labor at the societal, group, or family level, as many members as possible can find their own dignity—that is, their social position—in which they are recognized, valued, and accorded the respect to which they are entitled. This is what distinguishes a civilized community. Behind the concept of dignity lies the enduring recognition of social status—a position within a given community that is not threatened by anyone—which is capable of firmly securing the framework for cooperation and strictly limiting competition, almost automatically, through symbolic yet effective means.

It is no coincidence that constitutions place special emphasis on the protection of human dignity. The preamble to the Hungarian Fundamental Law declares that “human dignity is the foundation of human existence,” and then reinforces this fundamental human right in dozens of places, such as in Article II: “Human dignity is inviolable. Every person has the right to life and to human dignity.” In the German Federal Constitution, too, human dignity ranks first among fundamental rights: “Article 1 (Human Dignity—Human Rights—Binding Force of Fundamental Rights) (1) Human dignity is inviolable. Every state authority has a duty to respect and protect it.”

Even in 19th-century English politics, fundamental political demands such as universal suffrage were linked to human dignity. As J. R. Stephens, a representative of the Chartist movement, put it: “...by universal suffrage, we mean that every working person should have the right to a good coat on their back, a good hat on their head, a good roof over their head so they can keep their household safe, and a good dinner on their table.” (Acemoglu 2012, p. 312.)

On the other hand, however, antisocial behavior is very often driven by envy of status, the desire to attain a higher, more powerful rank, or the need to defend one’s existing status. This motivation is so strong that we insist on satisfying it, even if only temporarily and symbolically. This is why we cut in line, why we get upset when another car passes us, and why our fellow human beings tell small or big lies and commit fraud; but it is also because of more serious forms of status envy that we lose sight of ourselves and hurt others—or even cause harm or injury to them. Raise your hand if you’ve never done any of these things.

The desire for social status, acceptance, and recognition manifests itself in status consumption and, in a narrower sense, in fashion. The ripple effects of this phenomenon can be enormous. Castells points out that one characteristic of postmodern culture is the increasing diversification of demand for consumer and fashion goods (consumer and commercial individualization), which requires production structures quite different from those of simple mass production, giving rise to new types of communication needs. In this context, the Internet was clearly in the right place at the right time to bring about massive social transformations itself; however, for Castells—whose work has its roots in Marxism—the information age did, after all, originate from “relations of production” (Castells, 2009). Interestingly, fashion may have played a very significant role even in the onset of the Great Industrial Revolution, since it is hardly a coincidence that in England, “the textile industry was the driving force behind the Industrial Revolution, which simultaneously revolutionized the global economy, as it was also the leading factor behind the doubling of English exports between 1780 and 1880” (Acemoglu 2012, p. 205).

As Lebow points out: “We have always been burdened by an ingrained desire to be recognized and to achieve a good social position—and competition is inextricably linked to this. Yet, throughout history, there have been glimmers of hope—perhaps even a trend—that this competition is becoming increasingly peaceful” (Welch 2010: 449). In any case, family, close friendships, and joy found in work are the three most important factors in personal happiness. Measurable levels of happiness correlate more strongly with the number of friends one has and how often one meets with them than with any other factor, including income, physical appearance, or intelligence. The media-driven market economy may expand one’s social network, but it does not increase the number of close friends. On the other hand, one of the very strong factors contributing to depression—which we can safely call pathological unhappiness—is low status within various social hierarchies. More generally, the greater the inequality in a society, the higher the prevalence of depression and other similar mental illnesses. (Horváth 2020, pp. 40 and 52.) We will address this issue further in the next section.

At the same time, the rules of social competition are far from fair: whoever wins once can use their winnings to ensure that the playing field tilts in their favor in subsequent rounds—and, if possible, to eliminate any real competitors altogether. By possessing a great deal of wealth (land, factories, valuable information), we can effectively “freeze” our achieved social status; in some cases, we may even have enough to engage in philanthropy or otherwise attempt to defuse the discontent of the destitute. For this reason, as we have already noted, boasting and showing off are forbidden moves in the social game, even if they would provide visceral satisfaction on an instinctual level. After all, this is the essence of socialization: to restrain our raw impulses in the interest of peace and cooperation (Belk 2006: 180).

The level of development of architectural culture can also contribute greatly to creating the conditions for human dignity. At the dawn of the modern era, major cities in Western Europe were designed to reflect personal freedom. Wide streets were opened up; in Paris after the Revolution and the Napoleonic era, one could walk from one side of the city to the other without having to interact with anyone, either verbally or physically. However, these wide open spaces were occasionally filled with celebrations and festivals, and they became part of the everyday life of spontaneous local communities. The interiors of the houses were also increasingly designed so that the privileged residents living there did not even have to be aware of what was happening in the city. The city—in contrast to villages, where physical exertion and physical violence were part of everyday life—thus also represented a liberation of the body in this sense (Dixon 1997: 826). Although this idea is fundamentally linked to the topic of human dignity, we must refer, on the one hand, to the fundamental conditions for the emergence and further development of civilization—the increase in individual freedom—and, on the other hand, to the paradox of individualization: people who were recognized and successful within their groups could afford to behave like oddballs and even express this by demanding more *personal space* for themselves (Hall, 1969).

(*happiness*) As we have seen, when examining the motivational basis of civilized behavior, it is difficult to avoid the topic of the pursuit of happiness. András Horváth, who devoted an ambitious monograph of more than 500 pages to the question (noting that Buettner counted 4,000 scientific publications on the topic in 2011—in the 21st century alone), writes the following in the preface: “From Aristotle to today’s psychologists, everyone agrees that happiness is the highest good, and it seems that the desire to attain it is the ultimate driving force behind all our actions.” (Horváth 2020, p. 17.) If I can be considered a psychologist to any extent (at least according to my degree), let me point out that, based on what has been said so far about the cooperation-competition dichotomy, I would find it difficult to fully agree with this statement. In line with this, as we will see in later chapters, I would like to structure

my discussion of culture and civilization—including the rather relative distinction between the two concepts—by referring to the dichotomous motivational system inherent in human beings.

In contrast, the pursuit of happiness does not stand on its own as a motivation. It suffices to quote Professor Attila József: *“I saw happiness; it was soft, blond, and weighed one and a half mázsa. Her curly smile swayed on the stern railing of the courtyard.”* (Eszmélet, XI.) As experimental psychology has extensively documented, every mammal works with greater motivation to avoid punishment than to seek simple rewards, and with even greater motivation to understand the patterns of its environment. Life, then, is a complex pattern; anyone who wants only the fluffy cake for themselves will be bitterly disappointed. Horváth himself quotes Lane’s 2000 observation that “it is not happiness, but rather dissatisfaction that makes us productive, and it seems we are even willing to accept this,” and then from Layard’s 2005 work: if we were to lose any of those technological advances that enhance our comfort—which, incidentally, have not made us significantly more satisfied with our lives anyway—it would certainly cause serious emotional pain. Furthermore, the psychological cliché that the search, the anticipation, and the effort invested are an essential part of happiness—and that the excitement and effort of getting there are at least as important as being there—also underscores the interplay of approaching and receding, positive and negative experiences (Horváth 2020, p. 24, 27, and). Once again, referring to the professor already cited, who teaches us all so profoundly: “He who wishes to be a bagpiper must go to hell!” (This medieval folk song served as the motto for both the volumes **Külvárosi éj** and **Medvetánc**.)

However, we must certainly agree with Dutton’s 2012 observation that the Western (Northern) world has now given rise to “the most competitive, most money-hungry, most self-aggrandizing, most self-absorbed, and most individualistic generation that has ever existed.” (Horváth 2020, p. 29.) It is also true, however, as Szondy wrote in 2010, that even in our time there are stable democracies where governance is effective and reliable, free from corruption, and guarantees adequate political freedoms to its citizens. In these countries, people have more trust in one another and do not perceive each other as a physical or any other kind of threat. Empathy, tolerance, and helpfulness are indispensable to happy societies, whereas injustices have a destructive effect. (Horváth 2020, p. 31.) These concepts already point toward a more detailed examination of civilization.

6. Civilization in psychology, sociology, philosophy, economics, political science, and law

The concept of civilization outlined in the previous paragraph is reinforced by the fact that corresponding concepts—which are identical or largely overlapping in terms of content and essence—can also be found in other disciplines, such as psychology, sociology, philosophy, economics, political science, and law. It appears that this concept is of fundamental importance to a number of disciplines.

(The psychology of delay) An obvious parallel with civilization emerges from the fields of brain anatomy (e.g., the role of the cerebellum), experimental and behavioral psychology, and personality psychology. In social psychology and group psychology, the ability to delay gratification also appears as a fundamental requirement of civilization; the greedy pursuit of immediate gratification and gluttony are uncivilized behaviors, and our environment punishes them. On the other hand, good manners—as our fundamental starting point in life—can go a long way toward social acceptance. As we often say, we’ve learned to eat with a knife and fork; we’re not living in the woods, and so on. As far as eating is

concerned, the culinary arts and the *slow food* movement elevate slow consumption to an aesthetic value, so the requirements of civility interact not only with the broader concept of culture—specifically, the culture of behavior—but also with other areas. Of course, we must also learn to enjoy the pleasures of slow . There are obvious parallels with sexual culture, the lack of which makes many, many people unhappy, even though it can be learned (obviously not from pornographic content), which would be natural and easy in a less hypocritical culture. Culture is not always a perfect supporter of civility.

(mutual control of fate) The fields of sociology, social psychology, and game theory also study situations similar in nature to civility, which we might classify under the umbrella term “mutual control of fate.” People who are compelled to cooperate generally—whether to an equal or unequal degree, but certainly to some extent—exert influence over one another’s well-being and success; thus, they mutually control one another’s fate (Kulcsár 1994-7, Márta Fülöp 2013). A particularly interesting case of mutual control over one’s fate arises when the actors are in a situation of explicit competition yet must still cooperate. Márta Fülöp refers to this situation as “*coopetition*.” Among her examples are the various stores within a department store, which engage in fierce competition with one another but are forced to act in unison when dealing with the landlord or catering service providers (Márta Fülöp 2013). I believe that a wide variety of sports can also serve as good examples of coopetition; world-famous chess players, for example, create—so to speak—works of art from their games, all while seeking to defeat one another. In combat sports, too, that aggressive drive to win at all costs comes back to haunt them; without respect for the opponent, the competitors get nowhere. Even in soccer and other team sports, while the team’s victory is the most important thing, players strive to stand out—for a better contract or, above all, for the audience’s recognition. But anyone who is too selfish is quickly excluded from the team. In other areas of social life and other fields of study, the pattern of mutual control of fate is also clearly evident. The tragedy of the commons, the prisoner’s dilemma, and various sustainability model games are, in fact, different formulations of mutual control of fate.

(The Tragedy of the Commons) Perhaps the best-known manifestation of mutual control over fate—and a textbook example in sociology—is the tragedy of the commons, which Garrett Hardin described based on medieval English village land registers that precisely tracked the evolution of land tenure. The starting point for the tragedy of the commons was that, in the Middle Ages, undivided village pastures were used collectively by peasants for their livestock. The tragedy actually began even when everything was going well for a while. At that time, farmers began to see slow growth in their herds, which meant that at first, the most resourceful and enterprising among them were able to increase the number of cows, sheep, and other animals they drove out to the common pasture; then, naturally, the others also sought to follow their example. According to the meticulously kept English land registers, this led, from time to time, to the complete depletion of the common pastures, and all those who used them became landless and sank into the ranks of tenant farmers. (Hardin 1968) Given that the depleted pastures became usable again after a considerable time and the process began anew—and generally ended in the same way as in previous instances—the tragedy of the commons also serves as a good illustration of the cyclical nature of civilizational histories.

(prisoner’s dilemma) Modern sociology and social psychology have constructed numerous similar models based on the concept of mutual control over one’s fate, such as the classic prisoner’s dilemma. In this hypothetical but mathematically well-founded scenario, a judge shuffles the cards so that, by

confessing or denying the charges, the defendants can determine the severity of their own punishment as well as that of another prisoner. They can cooperate—in which case both fare relatively well—or they can try to outmaneuver the other—which, if successful, results in one of them (the “winner”) faring very well, while the other (the “loser”) fares very poorly. This latter maneuver—trying to outmaneuver the other—is generally unsuccessful, and since most of the time both prisoners choose this path, according to the prisoner’s dilemma framework, both end up faring quite poorly. (Mérő 2009)

(sustainability games, systems science models) Systems scientists studying sustainability also frequently model mutual control of fate, for example in the *Fish Banks* game. This game, like many other demonstrations in systems science and sustainable development, was developed by Dennis Meadows, the systems-oriented pioneer of sustainable development, and is widely used by systems scientists around the world. In Hungary, it was primarily popularized by János Zlinszky, one of the leaders of the Balaton Group founded by Meadows. In the *Fish Banks* game, players decide how many fish they will catch from a given area of the sea. They must take into account the natural regenerative capacity of the fish stock, the maintenance—and, if possible, the expansion—of their own fleet, and, of course, they must keep a constant eye on their competitors. I haven’t really come across a game of *Fish Banks* yet where there were still fish left in the sea after more than four or five rounds...

(Politics as Mutual Control of Fate) In the writings of political scientists and philosophers such as Posner, Rorty, Dewey, and others, politics is viewed as a formalized resolution of social conflicts, where differences in interests and opinions can come to the surface and members of society can agree on solutions that are livable for all of them (Appiah 2017: 517). When things are going well in a modern democracy, citizens leave the management of public affairs to professional politicians and, apart from certain exceptional cases when they resort to the tools of direct democracy, they have a say in the shaping of policy only during elections. As long as they do not hear about or experience abuses or mistakes, they trust their elected politicians, who in turn strive to carry out their duties to the best of their ability, with the help of the best experts, and—not least—as economically as possible (Pápay 2010). It is not difficult to recognize in this as well a particularly complex and intricate version of mutual control over one’s fate.

(Legal culture and the enforcement of justice) It is also evident that one of the most important roles of the legal system in societies is precisely to ensure social peace and cooperation among citizens; procedural laws, in particular, are those that regulate the unique blend of competition and cooperation. Disputes brought before the courts inherently entail that the inevitable conflicts of interest in society be resolved—not through brute force—but before impartial officials, judges, or even an entire community, in accordance with defined rules and guarantees of equality and transparency. At the same time, one could argue that when Anglo-Saxon and other procedural legal systems entrust the burden of proof to the parties rather than the judge—thereby abandoning the principle of equality of arms—what happens is precisely what Jerome Frank’s famous statement (allegedly) referred to: “American legal practice is based on the theory of struggle, not on the theory of truth.”

For quite pragmatic reasons (at least to relieve the burden on the courts and prevent legal disputes from dragging on indefinitely), procedural rules may keep proceedings brief and confine the conduct of the case, the parties’ arguments, and the presentation of evidence within a framework that is

generally unfamiliar and difficult for the parties to understand. Moreover, in law—unlike in most of the natural and social sciences—there is little room for a probabilistic, “a little of this, a little of that” approach. Judges are not socialized in a way that fosters a strong tolerance for uncertainty. That said, if they manage to reach an understanding with experts or even take the initiative to seek an “*amicus curiae*” opinion independent of the parties, they may come closer to substantive truth and justice. As Scheppele puts it: if both lawyers and representatives of the sciences approach legal proceedings in an open and receptive manner, then the differences between the two cultures may be bridged (Scheppele 2003: 364–5).

(*property*) In a civilized society, where, on the one hand, the state’s monopoly on violence and, on the other, established civilizational norms and moral rules preclude raw, direct violence, property serves as one of the most effective means of satisfying the desire for dominance over others and for social status. It is easy to see that there has historically been a very close connection between property and violence. We have already noted that groups providing armed protection to prehistoric communities initially demanded only *wartime taxes* in return; later—as their rule became more firmly established and institutionalized—taxation became a permanent means of covering the costs of the state and its administration, and as a result, a wealthy ruling class emerged (Braun 2019: 290).

Religious communities generally recognize and respect property, just as the Bible does. They view independence from the government and administrative leaders, the dignity of work, and people’s creativity as a guarantee and a blessing from God. In his argument on this topic, Bishop Harries refers to Deng Xiaoping’s property rights reform, through which China doubled the income of 800 million peasants in just six years. Nevertheless, he also acknowledges that the market economy has brought with it an unprecedented deepening of inequalities, along with a weakening of social solidarity.

Religions, just like various non-economic global and regional networks, can play a major role in restoring the dignity of the dispossessed, which is not possible without reliably meeting their basic needs. Every major world religion therefore regards property as a responsibility—something its owners have received on loan from God in order to do good with it and support the destitute. According to Harries, civilizations cannot survive by relying on their strength, but rather by how they treat the weak, the poor, and the powerless. In contrast, global capitalism—unleashed by the neoliberal (counter)revolution—promises, on the one hand, to improve human living conditions, but on the other hand, threatens to increase inequalities, destroy the environment, and cause cultural vandalism. (Gorsky 2004: 113)

Belk disagrees with those who argue that our craving for money is primarily goal-oriented—that is, that we regard it as a means to achieve our individual, primarily biological goals. He views the magic of money instead as a socially established, learned ritual through which we transcend our biological motivations. In his view, therefore, money is in fact one of the most important factors of civilization. Money is a metaphor for possibility; it liberates and stimulates our imagination. (Why does the earlier discussion of the interrelationship between civilization and war immediately come to mind?)

We could say, however, that it is precisely this virtual hedonism that leads us toward a consumer culture. Instead of the truth embodied in the phrase “*In God We Trust!*” found on American banknotes, by using and accumulating money we are actually expressing our belief in the government and the stability of the given social system—in money printing, in lending and savings transactions, in the stock market, in insurance companies, and in the pension system. The rituals performed by these institutions with our active participation actually embody our shared, peaceful intentions to cooperate, without which our lives would be lonely, poor, filthy, brutal, and, of course, short. (Belk 2006: 180) We note

here that Belk phrases this almost word for word like Polányi, whom we will quote in slightly greater detail in Chapter 10 (Polányi 2004: 75).

(*social capital*) According to the concept of social capital in economics, a country's wealth is determined not only by the natural capital (still) at its disposal and other forms of capital typically taken into account—such as productive and financial capital, people's knowledge and ability to work (human capital), but also by people's capacity and willingness to cooperate—that is, by social capital (Fukuyama 2000, Claridge 2004). Social capital fundamentally depends on the extent to which actors are willing to cooperate—that is, primarily on the degree to which they trust one another.

It should be noted that among forms of capital that are not directly economic in nature, symbolic and political capital are also mentioned (Eric 2023: 1), which can establish a connection between social capital and civilization in the political sense. Social capital is also linked to the institution of property discussed above; furthermore, as we will see below, it is closely related to the written and unwritten, fair and unfair rules of competition among members of society.

In Adam Smith's famous "invisible hand" model—which he published in 1776 in his book **The Wealth of Nations**—he writes that the dinner served to us is not the result of the butcher, the baker, or the brewer's benevolence, since these people produced these goods for us solely in pursuit of their own interests. They work hard every day to outcompete their rivals and remain viable in the market. This automatically keeps prices low and quality high. This idea may have proved so influential precisely because it derived the opposite from competition: the well-oiled cooperation of individual parts within the complex machinery of society.

Marvin Brown, however, poses the question nearly 250 years later: where was Mr. Smith when he formulated his fundamental principle about the free market? Perhaps in some backwater village somewhere in Scotland or on a colonial plantation? No, Mr. Smith was spending his time in Glasgow among the philosophizing elite, who, incidentally, had amassed fortunes through transatlantic trade, primarily in the tobacco market. It was indeed these merchants who brought Scotland's economy to prosperity, operating within the triangle formed by the African slave markets, the plantations of Virginia, and the mother country.

Brown sees little difference between Adam Smith and today's economists, who assume, advocate for, and idolize the free market. They are just as prone to overlooking the sources of wealth, migrant workers, developing countries crippled by trade agreements and unequal terms, and the exploited natural world (Newton 2012: 598–600). From this perspective, the economy is in fact a bitter struggle between individual members of society or between different societies, where cooperation can proceed in an orderly manner only under coercion—not least through social and state control.

Brown, however, also draws on Aristotle's conception of the natural formation of human communities—specifically, communities of people gathered in cities and, moreover, united in a common bond. These communities are committed to governing themselves on the basis of law and reason and to achieving the full realization of human existence. Citizenship implies inclusion and freedom, discussion, and shared decision-making. Brown does not believe that we have a fundamental, natural right to property. It is merely one way of allocating limited resources—and not even the most efficient one. Certainly not under the current system, which proclaims complete freedom of property but in reality also entails the exploitation and dispossession of others. In the process, we lose human relationships based on reciprocity and our connection to nature. The Enlightenment and industrialization have, in fact, brought about the dominance of the commercial

sphere over the civic sphere, rather than allowing the community of citizens to determine the scope of commerce and the economy in general. (Brown 2010: 601)

(*freedom of grassroots initiatives*) The ideal of a nonviolent, cooperative society must be complemented by a series of further ideas—and, consequently, by living social practices—in a civilized society. At the end of the 18th century, in the early, nascent (experimental?) republic of the United States, the central question in the post-War of Independence period was what civic status actually meant. It certainly meant active participation in public life—parades, celebrations, substantive debates on legislative issues and the most important public policy decisions, and meaningful control over the press and communication—rather than merely passive participation in elections. From this perspective, the definition of politics referred to the relationships among different groups in society and the patterns of generally accepted values, assumptions, and behaviors (Freeman 2004: 141–2).

Freedom of innovation also played a decisive role in the English bourgeois transformation. In many absolutist societies (China, Russia, France, Germany, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire) rulers openly expressed their aversion to technological innovations or the modernization of transportation, arguing that these would pave the way for change and social upheaval (of course, they did not stop there; they also banned or otherwise thwarted such innovations). At the same time, technological innovations flourished freely in 18th-century England, bringing about “*creative destruction*”—to borrow a term from Schumpeter—which soon led to significant social changes. The Nobel Prize-winning authors Acemoglu and Robertson therefore argue that the prosperity, stable well-being, and development of any society are possible only if the level of exploitation is low enough to allow new economic actors to test their ideas and invest their energy in the hope of success. (Acemoglu 2012, pp. 201–4, 222–232.) In fact, they outline the idea of a society fundamentally based on cooperation, in which competition takes place within fair boundaries; moreover, it allows new competitors to enter the market from time to time, thereby benefiting everyone.

Corporate globalization—or, in other words, neoliberal market fundamentalism—serves only the interests of the economic elite and subordinates social goals to those interests. Unchecked freedom leads to new forms of oppression. In the anthology with the telling title **Civilizing Globalization: A Guide to Survival*), edited by Sandbrook and Güven, the authors also argue that the emergence of the global market was inevitable, and that the problem lies not in the market itself but in the politicization of the issue—that is, the fact that even the most important social goals are subordinated to the profit interests of multinational corporations in the name of an all-powerful ideology. This is, of course, possible because profits in the global market can grow to such an extent that they are more than sufficient to buy off any number of politicians, reshape governments, and even transform entire political systems. This study also does not fail to mention that the global economy grew out of the slave trade in its early days (Sandbrook–Güven 2017).

The book’s reviewers see the solution in the diversification of economies—in allowing the development of economic solutions that have emerged in various societies and are rooted in social goals and people’s needs. These include bottom-up globalization and solutions developed and implemented by *grassroots* groups. Critics of the original study also pointed out that in certain countries in East Asia, India, and Latin America, the economy was placed within the appropriate cultural context; in Korea, for example, the state took charge of addressing social inequalities, which ultimately resulted in significant economic benefits for the country. In India, starting in the 1970s, some 30 million people became members of self-help groups—and this in an extremely liberalized economy. Bangladeshi community banking became famous, not least because of the Nobel Prize in

Economics (2006), for reforming financial services that had previously served only the elite. We cannot overlook the fact that the network of companies behind this initiative contracted exclusively with older mothers to operate low-cost local solar-powered electricity solutions, to act as intermediaries between the locals and the company, and even to carry out minor repairs (Dipal Chandra Barua, World Future Council, personal communication). The special role of women in the development of civilizations and civilization will be discussed several more times later on.

The Spanish Mondragón Cooperative was founded to combat social exclusion and has since become a successful global business enterprise. The Brazilian MST landless workers' cooperatives resist social exclusion by occupying fallow land and farming it, even in a harsh neoliberal economic environment. Today, it is estimated that a total of about 1 billion people belong to some form of grassroots economic community (Hosseini 2016: 185).

To summarize this chapter, we can at any rate conclude that “civilized society and civilized behavior are synonymous with nonviolence” is an inadequate statement in several respects (Braun 2019: 290). On the one hand, in an increasingly complex division of labor, the functioning of a successful society—or even just a group—requires more than simply ensuring that members do not kill one another and do not devote most of their energy to fighting one another. Clearly, trust, empathy, solidarity, and the ability and willingness to cooperate (social capital) are also necessary. On the other hand, it is not true that a civilized society is entirely free of violence. When Elias pushes all his chips onto a square labeled “Freud,” he is playing this game incorrectly. The incorporation of external coercion and constraints into a kind of superego—a rigid moral order embedded in the personality—is only one aspect of this issue. As we have seen above, behavioral psychology, social psychology, and many other disciplines (such as game theory or even jurisprudence) can, when considered together, provide a more in-depth and multifaceted understanding of the close interconnection and dynamics of cooperation and competition.

7. Manifestations of Barbarism, Deviance, Aggressors, and Free Riders

As in many similar cases, it is actually the absence of civilization that best illustrates its meaning and significance. In this chapter, I will attempt to categorize the extremely wide-ranging analyses of low levels of behavioral culture according to descriptions and explanations at the biological-personal, group, and societal levels.

(*boor, lout*) As we shall see, the literature on uncivilized behavior focuses primarily on aggression and violence, even though numerous other forms of it are also flourishing in our society. We cannot state with absolute certainty that Hungary leads the way in cultivating these forms of uncivilized behavior, although based on scientific surveys regarding distrust, for example, the willingness of agricultural producers in our country to form cooperatives is among the lowest in Europe, a fact fundamentally attributable to distrust (Zoltán G. Szabó 2018, p. 51). Linguistic evidence also supports the idea that we may be among the leaders in the field of uncivilized behavior—we are an ambitious people striving for greatness, and perhaps this is part of the deal. I’ve heard this secondhand, but the story is quite convincing: a native English-speaking teacher working in Hungary says her favorite Hungarian word is

“bunkó.” Quite simply because there is no direct English equivalent... Whereas in Hungarian, anyone can immediately come up with a dozen synonyms.

The evolution of the word “*paraszt*” is a unique linguistic phenomenon. According to Attila Takács-Sánta, the word “*paraszt*” has unfortunately become a slur, especially in cities. We, of course, use this term without any negative connotations—so says the distinguished sociologist and anthropologist. In fact, he firmly believes that in our society, the people who produce our daily sustenance should be held in the highest regard. Restoring the farmer’s honor is therefore a task of paramount importance. (Takács-Sánta 2017, p. 19.) For my part—and I’m sure many others feel the same way—I find it difficult to shake off the connotations of the word “peasant”: someone stubborn, headstrong, and distrustful, who looks suspiciously at every new initiative—and indeed at anything even slightly unfamiliar—with narrowed eyes. So, if I didn’t want to offend anyone, I’d rather use the terms “landowner,” “farmer,” or even “farmer” instead.

(The biological basis of violence) Let us now return to the dichotomy between the concepts of “civilized” and “uncivilized.” It is likely that the distinction between good and evil is a general law of the living world. Even among single-celled organisms, the tendency to approach pleasant stimuli and avoid unpleasant ones is evident; at a higher, more complex level, the living world has developed numerous strategies for positive (support, attachment, etc.) and negative (rejection, avoidance, etc.) behaviors, as well as various forms of coping. Even passive coping—withdrawing from a situation or fleeing—can be included in this category; however, if more means are at its disposal, a living being will obviously resort to force as well. At the same time, of course, the display of force—or, in some cases, abilities and talents—does not necessarily imply violence. But generally speaking, it does.

Elias’s followers, who examine violence primarily from a natural science perspective (biological, anatomical, physiological, neurological), distinguish between aggression and violence. They posit aggression as a fundamentally biologically driven force, whereas violence is more of a group-level, learned social behavior. With this approach, these authors ward off accusations of biological reductionism, since they do not seek to replace or exclusively explain our violent behaviors with the aggressive impulses that undoubtedly exist in humans (how could our biological makeup have changed in the span of a few tens of thousands of years—a period barely noticeable in evolutionary terms?), but rather seek to explain the biological and sociological aspects of these phenomena side by side, taking each into account. Thus, by avoiding reductionism, they put forward a very compelling multidisciplinary, systems-oriented theory. As Braun writes: “...it is possible to frame an explanation of violence in such a way that, on the one hand, it has biological roots, and on the other hand, it is situated within a social context and networks of interpersonal relationships, which justifies a neurosociological approach.” In this context, we can examine both neural, emotional, and impulsive processes on the one hand, and social processes on the other; thus, we cannot limit ourselves solely to, say, the functioning of certain neurotransmitters or genetic determinism. This is all the more true regarding the latter, since no research to date has found a statistically significant correlation regarding the heritability of the degree or level of aggressive behavior (Braun 2019: 297).

At the same time, the lesser significance of heredity in the case of human aggression may also point to a smaller role played by biological determinism. Braun’s recent review, which is richly illustrated with literary references, is not particularly convincing on its own; in fact, it ultimately reverts to a form of biological reductionism, only now attempting to identify the brain structures responsible for social behavior. He discusses the role of the orbitofrontal cortex—which is “responsible” for long-term memory and thus “contains” stored social learning—as well as the role of the prefrontal cortex—which

is “responsible” for the *top-down* and *bottom-up* processing (understanding and formulating action plans?) of external stimuli—in connection with the motor system and the frontal visual fields—as well as the connections between the prefrontal cortex and the lower-level emotional structures— —and the “reptilian brain regions” that produce approach-and-avoidance responses (Braun 2019: 298–9). Let there be no misunderstanding: it is obvious that we are fundamentally biological beings, but individual brain structures cannot be directly equated with complex functions such as aggression. Although these anatomical structures are certainly involved, it is far from clear how these neural connections—which, in a fraction of a second, trace hundreds of unpredictable circuits and various patterns—ultimately lead to aggressive or non-aggressive responses in a given organism in a given situation. Braun and the countless other researchers following similar lines of inquiry can only conclude that the biological mechanisms of aggressive impulses may or may not lead to violence, depending on the individual’s level of aggression, upbringing, and assessment of the situation. But we already knew that.

According to⁹, Konrad Lorenz’s theory of aggression—which he first elaborated in his 1966 book on aggression—holds that aggression is an innate, evolutionary, and instinctive drive in both the animal kingdom and among humans, one that is indeed essential for their survival. In his theory, aggression is not merely a response to an external stimulus, but can also be an outburst of energy accumulated based on internal drives, among other things, to protect an individual’s social status, territory, prey, etc., or to help them find a suitable mate. Aggression is, accordingly, an instinctive impulse similar to hunger or reproduction.

The role of aggression in the survival of individuals and species is therefore evident. Even seemingly destructive behavior—such as when animals become visibly aggressive simply because there are many of them in a relatively small space—clearly has evolutionary value, as it contributes to and regulates their appropriate spatial distribution. At the same time, in nature, aggression is limited by certain inhibitory mechanisms—well known, for example, in wolves and dogs—which prevent them from causing serious harm to their conspecifics. According to Lorenz, however, these natural inhibitions have unfortunately been lost in humans, which can be very dangerous for our species—equipped as we are with the appropriate technological tools—not only in the event of a war, for example, but also in everyday life. In any case, Lorenz believed that, in general, it is sometimes absolutely necessary to vent or release aggression; however, there are numerous socially positive solutions available to people for this purpose, such as competitive sports or anything Freud referred to as sublimation—ranging from creativity to the pursuit of various achievements and peak experiences, all the way to sexual behavior. (Lorenz, 2013)

Although Lorenz’s approach has faced criticism for failing to take into account that human aggression—and indeed the aggressive behavior of many species—depends far more on elements of learned behavior and specific environmental stimuli (particularly frustration) than on fixed biological instincts. In my opinion, however, the fact that he investigated the ethological aspects of a complex phenomenon and made significant findings in that area does not negate the validity of other relevant scientific approaches.

(*aggression from external and internal causes*) Braun, who also approaches the issue of aggression primarily from a natural science, anatomical-physiological perspective, suggests that the neural background in the brain and the intensity of social responses are interrelated. On the one hand, this

⁹ Gábor Trombitás drew my attention to Konrad Lorenz’s work on aggression.

occurs in a bottom-up relationship, when the personality must somehow manage the accumulating vegetative aggressive impulses in the name of socialization; on the other hand, it occurs in a top-down process, when the unmanageability of the social situation (unjust conditions, selfish or dishonest behavior, etc.) leads the brain to generate some kind of visceral (instinctive) aggressive impulse (Braun 2019: 303).

It is clear that, in order to continue to avoid the suspicion of biological reductionism, we must emphasize that none of these processes is linear; rather, they unfold in an extremely complex manner, with biological and learned-social influences interacting with one another and with themselves in multiple cycles. It may also be argued that social-learned and biological-inherited factors are not entirely unidirectional; an internal impulse may be fundamentally socially motivated, and external influences may be mechanical or biological in nature. In this context, Braun contrasts external biological causes—such as physical pain and direct physical threats—with internally experienced social rejection, exclusion, and subjectively perceived injustice, which occur in the absence of actual, direct external causes in a given case (Braun 2019: 304). Of course, either side can play a predominant role in triggering an aggressive reaction. If a violent decision formed within a person's psyche was driven almost exclusively by social considerations—especially if it arose without any direct external causes—we can quite simply call it malice, whereas an unbridled outburst of visceral impulses, with no external social stimulus behind it, is better described as primitiveness. There can be no doubt that the latter is much easier to manage, even if its intensity and ferocity may be significantly greater and more extreme.

(Violence in Society) Nevertheless, by “violence” we generally mean only those manifestations of aggression that actually cause injury, physical harm, or damage, or that pose an immediate threat of such harm. At the societal level, the law and law enforcement agencies focus primarily on preventing and limiting this. Even though psychological injuries are sometimes far more painful (Chong 2017: 637). The definition offered by Braun, the psychiatrist cited several times above, serves to supplement the more general concept of aggression discussed earlier: it refers primarily to face-to-face, personal interactions carried out either in a sudden fit of rage or in a more deliberate, intentional manner, excluding institutionalized, state-sanctioned violence. Braun classifies violent acts committed against women and children—which are tolerated in certain cultures—as forms of “accepted” violence sanctioned by the state or society, including violence that once arose almost naturally from patriarchal relationships within the family. Other obvious examples include so-called “violent sports,” such as most combat sports, as well as both the American and European versions of soccer (in the latter case, protective gear is rather lacking, which is regrettable).

Braun cites Pinker's view that we all carry within us a propensity for violence, even though in all likelihood we will refrain from using it in most cases throughout our entire lives, since there are countless ways to resolve personal conflicts—whether bilaterally, through third parties, or institutions. Yet even in modern liberal democracies, violence is accepted at the societal or international level—one need only think of law enforcement or international peacekeeping. Furthermore, violence is an everyday experience even for those living on the margins of such societies, and if a social crisis arises, violence can immediately appear in all of our lives (Braun 2019: 284–7).

(Violence as part of civilization) Braun devotes considerable space to the nature of violent solutions and their certain integration into systems of civilized coexistence. He refers to several of Elias's observations, including the fact that even the raw form of violence has not disappeared from

civilizations—it has merely been pushed to the margins of society—and that violence cannot be regarded as the polar opposite of civilization, but rather as part of it. Braun views violence as a secondary phenomenon (*epiphenomenon*) of modern society. It is very instructive that—again, drawing on Elias’s non-linear model of civilizational development—he describes the presence of violence in civilized societies as a continuously fluctuating sine curve, both at the macro level of society and at the micro levels. We will return to this in a later chapter (Chapter 10). This fluctuation is, of course, primarily observable at the international level; violent conflicts do not arise out of nowhere, but rather from a “double-blind” situation in which the conflict gradually escalates and intensifies until it reaches the level of an armed conflict, and then, as the parties grow weary, settles into a more or less peaceful—and in any case, more civilized—state. As an example, the author cites the rise and subsequent decline of Nazism (Braun 2019: 293–4).

At the micro level, too, the reciprocal shift from physical violence to psychological warfare—such as intrigues or *bullying*—can be observed in modern societies. These are generally not spontaneous outbursts, but rather take the form of a premeditated effort to destroy or at least weaken the victim’s prestige and social status in order to secure some advantage for the schemer or bully. These strategies, just like systematic sexual violence or certain forms of domestic violence, as Braun points out, require significant, long-term planning and strategic thinking on the part of the perpetrators, primarily to maintain the appearance of civility in the eyes of those around them. She adds that a cyclical pattern can be observed here as well: at a certain point—when the perpetrator deems the time right or feels they can get away with it—psychological terror can escalate into physical abuse. She emphasizes that it is important to highlight this gradual progression (Braun 2019: 294).

(free riders) A certain level of deviance is inevitable even in a society where standards of good behavior are high and violent, aggressive behavior is successfully curbed. There are always those who fall behind or drop out—who, whether due to their circumstances or internal impulses, violate the community’s fundamental norms. Communities can coexist with this to a certain extent, though they draw a line between themselves and those who violate the norms. From the latter’s perspective, this is ostracism; from the community’s perspective, however, it is a kind of warning: look, this is what happens to those who cannot rein in their evil impulses.

In every community, there are also individuals who are intelligent enough to realize that openly and directly violating norms does not serve their own best interests. Yet they are still unwilling to cooperate, play by the rules fairly, or respect others on the playing field. So they seek out ways to take advantage of others and gain one-sided benefits. They may not be the most respected members of the community, but society’s “immune system” somehow cannot identify and neutralize such individuals as effectively as it can its openly aggressive members.

In a rising civilization at the height of its power, the number of deviants tends to decline, and the number of free-riders is negligible, but in declining civilizations—when social bonds weaken and new gaps and ambiguities arise in society’s system of norms—the number of freeloaders and brazen intruders skyrockets.

(Positive Developments) These days, many in Western societies believe that morals are in constant decline and that decency has been consigned to the dustbin of history. Yet it is possible that moral standards have actually become stricter over the past 50 years. We may witness more loud outbursts on the streets and more rudeness in stores, but we condemn acts of actual violence more strongly,

whether at home, at school, in the workplace, or in public spaces. And this applies not only to violence but to any behavior through which certain individuals seek to place themselves above others. “These days, people try not only to control their violent impulses but also vigorously strive to suppress any behavior that would place them above others: the mocking of people with disabilities, mocking ugly or poor people, the perceptible condescension toward those in subordinate positions or belonging to minorities, the smug display of superior knowledge or wealth, higher social status or rank—in short, all those impulses to rise above others” (Swaan 2007: 406). It is not that these impulses have disappeared; rather, within an increasingly dense social network, they are met with growing disapproval, so people generally try to hide them from others—and not infrequently from themselves as well. It is very difficult to interpret these literary data in light of the steadily worsening statistics on violent crime and the unbroken decline in social trust indices. That said, just as we sought in the previous paragraph to distinguish rude, ill-mannered behavior from aggression and the strategic, lifestyle-based use of deviance, it may be that a certain aspect of behavioral culture exhibits an independent trend. We will examine the relationship between civility and cultural refinement, as well as their trends over time, in later chapters; based on that analysis, I would not rule out this possibility at this stage.

(The dynamics of violence within and between groups in collectivist and individualist groups) So far, we have examined uncivilized behavior in terms of individual upbringing, motivations, and strategies. Let us now turn to the group-level determinants of civilized or uncivilized behavior. Here, too, we can discover the decisive significance of the broader, more comprehensive concept of culture.

There are four fundamental areas of comparison among cultures, particularly regarding their social aspects (1) the distribution of power: the extent to which it is considered acceptable in a given culture for different people to have different levels of power; (2) the degree of masculinity: a male-centered value system in key areas of society, such as the worlds of success and money, and overly rigid gender roles; (3) tolerance of uncertainty: the extent to which members of a given culture view uncertainty as a threat, and the beliefs and institutions they develop to guard against it; and, what is important to us in many aspects of behavioral culture and civility (4) individualism and collectivism. Most people consider the balance between these two to be the most defining element of a culture in the realm of social relationships. Communication in collectivist cultures, for example, is more context-dependent, whereas communication in individualist cultures can be understood on its own. Differences between countries and cultures are not homogeneous across the four variables. The United States and Japan differ considerably on the individualism-collectivism variable, yet power differences are well tolerated in both countries.

On the collectivism-individualism continuum, individuals who belong to society and its various groups either identify with a group that offers security through loyalty or act primarily in the interests of themselves and their immediate families. Collectivism and individualism thus fundamentally differ in how they define the ego, goals, and duties (superego). The collectivist defines himself based on group identities (Christian family man, etc.), while the individualist tends to use only his name for this purpose. The former acts in the interest of the group, while the latter acts in their own interest; the former gladly makes sacrifices for the group and seeks out such activities, while the latter tends to look for activities that are personally rewarding and, if possible, entertaining.

Approximately two-thirds of humanity lives in collectivist cultures, but this proportion is declining. Collectivists assume that every individual decision they make has an impact on the life of the community; their behavior is determined by group norms. It follows from all this that, for those with

a strong group identity, determining the group background of *outsiders* is much more important than the attitudes or feelings of the individual in question; differences between individuals are of lesser significance to them. (Fülöp 2016)

It is very important to refrain from assigning unambiguous value judgments to any particular cultural type.

One of the earliest studies of collectivist-individualist behavior stems from Philipsen, who sought to objectively document, without bias, the behavioral characteristics of two communities that differ markedly in this regard. He found that the *speech code*—as a socially constructed system of communication consisting of symbols, premises, and rules (“when and with whom you speak, when you remain silent”)—is exceptionally well-suited to describing and analyzing the fundamental elements of behavioral patterns in the two communities. Philipsen studied the speech patterns of a completely different subculture in a Chicago working-class neighborhood (Teamsterville) and compared that community to a typical middle-class group.¹⁰ The two groups were distinguished not by ethnicity or geographical boundaries, but by their speech patterns. Although, as I noted, Philipsen takes an inductive approach to the issue, he does not reduce the differences to a single variable, such as individualistic/somewhat context-dependent versus collectivist/highly context-dependent. That said, the culture of the working-class neighborhood is quite collectivist and, as a result, hierarchical; it employs an “*authority code*,” and male dominance is unquestionable—in contrast to the Nacirema subculture, which is individualistic and, as such, strives for equality, employs a “*dignity code*,” and could even be described as a “women’s world.”

During fieldwork conducted among truck drivers in Teamsterville, it became clear that members of the community, above all, look out for one another. Nationality, ethnicity, social status, and place of residence (which primarily refers to the former, but also implies subtle differences in taste, luck, family circle, social embeddedness, etc.). The most important thing is that they be from the neighborhood—not an *outsider*.

The collectivist/individualist behavioral culture is, of course, passed down; children find it difficult to break free from their parents’ attitudes. In a Teamsterville family, family members—especially children—often have to remain silent in social settings (“people prefer to see them rather than hear them”), whereas in Nacirema communities, family members can contribute to the conversation; everyone’s thoughts are regarded as having unique value, and their positive self-image develops through speech. (Philipsen 1975)

Without passing any particular value judgment on either, we can therefore conclude that the collectivist value system demands unconditional loyalty and submission from its members in exchange for security and support. At the same time, group cohesion is strengthened not only by highlighting deviance but also by pointing out and emphasizing the distinctive traits of other groups. It is significant for our topic that the system of rules governing violence within the group (state, federal system, etc.) generally does not prohibit—and in some cases even encourages—violence directed at those outside the group. This holds true to a greater or lesser extent for the dynamics of every group, regardless of whether they live in a fundamentally collectivist or individualist society (Fülöp 2016: 25).

¹⁰ He referred to the latter as “Nacirema,” which, as one of my sharp-witted students discovered (after about 5–6 years of unsuspecting instruction...), is nothing other than “American” spelled backward. Based on this, however, anyone can now decipher the assertion that the Nacirema are a wild American urban tribe that follows the Elibomotua cult.

(*state monopoly on the use of force*) As a requirement of civilization, people learn to live together with their fellow human beings under the voluntarily regulated conditions of peaceful communities. Nevertheless, conflicts cannot be completely ruled out. The violence that arises during such conflicts, however, must be kept within appropriate limits. In national and international politics, the extension of this concept is “ ”—systematic and rule-based governance, economic functioning, and the best possible satisfaction of all human needs through a form of contractual management.

In civilized countries, only the state may use force to maintain social order. This state monopoly on violence can indeed result in peaceful and secure societies, but the state—especially a totalitarian state—can also abuse it; indeed, even in so-called democratic states, there are countless instances in which the civil liberties of certain citizens are unjustifiably curtailed (Linklater 2005: 142).

Some level of state violence is exercised—or at least lurks in the background—during the enforcement and observance of the provisions of all branches of law. Most notably, the state may use violence against its own citizens under criminal law. Even in these cases, this is surrounded by a series of safeguards to ensure that the specific circumstances of each case are taken into account as fully as possible and that the message to society is as effective as possible. A specific aspect of this issue is the criminal law assessment of loss of control, that is, a *strong (sudden) outburst of emotion*. It may constitute a mitigating circumstance or even result in a lesser classification if the perpetrator committed the aggressive crime under the influence of such a strong outburst that they temporarily lost control over their aggressive impulses, and this was caused by factors beyond their control that are socially justifiable. The latter condition means that the offender demonstrated a normal level of self-restraint and self-control expected given their gender and age; however, the emotional outburst overpowered these and could have overpowered them based on general life experience if another person with similar characteristics had been placed in the same situation.

However, when determining mitigating circumstances or a more lenient classification, courts must also consider the message their judgment sends to the affected and interested members of society. Clearly, the goal is for judicial practice to have a *civilizing effect*, shifting society’s attitude toward greater tolerance among its members and preventing them from losing control too easily. If a judge finds a violation of moral, social, or civilizational values, the defendant will be deemed unworthy of a more lenient criminal sentence. Juries and lay judges can make an important contribution with regard to civilizational values. Based on a thorough evaluation of English legal practice over the past 15 years, for example, it can be concluded that the protection of women against exploitation and violence by men plays an increasingly significant role in decisions establishing mitigating circumstances. On the other hand, judgments in which the offender would have had other lawful, nonviolent means of handling the situation—and these means were clearly available to him—carry equally important social value judgments and civilizational implications; therefore, the strong emotional outburst could not be viewed as a mitigating factor¹¹ (Carline et al. 2024: 612, 614, 625, 628).

(*foreigners, migrants, “newcomers”*) Migration can also lead to group-level civilizational and cultural conflicts, but this is by no means inevitable; peaceful cooperation and the integration of immigrant groups to some degree depend on a range of factors.

¹¹ This British *common law* approach is not easily reconciled with the continental and Hungarian legal perspectives, where one of the conceptual elements of “strong emotion” is that the perpetrator, in his or her narrowed state of consciousness, did not consider alternatives (Ágnes Fülöp).

Since the early 2000s, there has been a proliferation of articles in British sociological, criminological, and other academic literature on segregation, conflict, and parallel lifestyles—phenomena observed when different cultures come into close proximity, despite the fact that governments generally strive to promote greater social cohesion. Griffiths classifies the overwhelming majority of these articles as “*gloomy tales*.” Members of the host society automatically assume that immigrants “always have a knife in their pocket” (), and that they are prone to crime, morally underdeveloped, and indifferent to the community. Tense, disintegrating local communities emerge because of the outsiders; their mere presence stirs up unease, foreboding, and confusion, and the host community expects—and fears—that the newcomers will transgress and blur social boundaries, undermining community efforts and the sense of solidarity. The native population responds to this with, at the very least, withdrawal. Based on Putnam’s renowned works, in such situations in these places, the level of altruistic (selfless) behavior declines, and the general moral fabric of communities begins to unravel.

Mass immigration can have a destructive effect—at least in the short term—on trust among people. Essentially, competition for economic and social resources (jobs, real estate prices, the devaluation of regions—which in turn leads to further ethnic shifts, etc., on the one hand, and community services, education, healthcare, etc., on the other) is seen as the driving force behind these sentiments, but the phenomenon can clearly be attributed to multiple causes. The status insecurity of social strata that have already lost their roots and been declassed cries out for a scapegoat. In this context, Elias observed in 1965 that long-time residents consider themselves more civilized, while they view newcomers as inferior in this regard. Elias referred to this as the “civilizational quotient” (Griffiths 2014: 1109–10).

Habermas’s concept of the politics of dialogue raises the dilemma of whether the emancipatory potential of ethical universalism is greater than the threat that fundamentally non-liberal conceptions of non-Western cultures will become embedded within Western cultural frameworks. (Habermas 2006) To put it somewhat bluntly, but certainly more simply: can we, and should we, be tolerant of intolerance? Does this kind of discursive ethics contribute to the civilizational process posited by Elias? According to Elias, all civilizations are alike in that they strive, through certain civilizational processes, to resolve the central problem of satisfying our basic needs in society without, in the process, harming, frustrating, or belittling others in the satisfaction of their own needs. (Linklater 2005: 141)

However, some studies—including Griffiths’s work, which is based on fieldwork and questionnaires—suggest that in a diverse, multicultural environment, levels of tolerance do not necessarily decline; under certain circumstances, they may even increase. If the host community recognizes its interdependence with newcomers, it evaluates this relationship differently, adapts to it differently, and shapes it differently. In such cases, civility prevails over conflict, as Griffiths’s case study in a small town in northwest England confirmed. In the working-class town of Crewe, approximately 4,000 Polish immigrants joined the roughly 100,000 local residents within a short time following the accession of Central and Eastern European countries to the EU. On the one hand, according to the questionnaires, a significant number of locals did indeed fear that immigration would put pressure on public services—such as schools, healthcare, and access to municipal housing—and this was even acknowledged in the survey of the immigrants themselves. At the same time, however, no disruptive or uncivilized behavior was essentially observed among Polish immigrants; only minor infractions and crimes (such as drunkenness, disorderly conduct, and making excessive noise, etc.) were committed. Quite a few people even shared the Poles’ view that their arrival would stimulate the economy, increase commercial activity, and bring real estate development and urban revitalization to the forefront.

Thus, negative expectations (prejudices) toward immigrants were not unshakable. It is important to distinguish between the deeply held belief that mass immigration is generally harmful to society and

the phenomenon whereby, in specific cases, those affected may overall view the effects of particular immigration-related events more positively. In everyday coexistence—on the street, in the neighborhood, and at shopping venues—experiencing the positive behavioral traits and politeness characteristic of both communities (though not entirely identical) has a favorable effect. Examples include letting the other person go first at an entrance, a friendly smile, a greeting, or even small acts of kindness, such as lending an umbrella during a sudden downpour or helping to restart a stalled car. Nevertheless, researchers also found that members of both communities experienced these as surprises—obviously pleasant ones (Griffiths 2014: 1114–8).

What determines the attitude of a host community toward an immigrant community? Fundamentally, acceptance and peaceful coexistence should have a greater chance of prevailing if we believe Allport's observation (or creed?) from 1958: "Human nature, on the whole, seems to prefer kindness and friendship rather than having to experience cruelty. Normal people everywhere reject the path of war and destruction, quite simply on principle and supported by firm preferences. They prefer peace and good relations with their neighbors; they would rather love others and enjoy the love of others than live amid hatred." On this basis, many therefore reject Elias's so-called "civilizational quotient," formulated in 1965, which regards hostility between host and migrant groups as inevitable. The results of the Crewe field study also show that, despite economic hardships and cultural differences, people may be willing to find common ground—social norms accepted by all—and would prefer to integrate newcomers rather than constantly single them out. Consequently, widespread prejudices fueled by various political and economic considerations may recede in the course of daily coexistence and cooperation with immigrants.

Griffiths also notes that, in the case he examined, integration and acceptance were facilitated not only by ethnic and cultural differences but also by social-class identity, which had a stronger influence, since both sides consisted of workers and employees. It is also true that there was no significant unemployment in Creweb; rather, there was a labor shortage. Moreover, ethnic differences were not significant, and a shared European culture played a major role, while religious (Protestant Christian) differences did not manifest themselves in a conspicuous way¹². The Crewe example, therefore, may not be applicable under different circumstances—such as when ethnic and religious differences are very significant and the divide between economic interests is deep. Immigrants can easily be criminalized, and the conflict is more likely to deepen (Griffiths 2014: 1123–5). In any case, it is worth taking these variables into account in every such case and applying a systems approach to the prevention and management of conflicts.

Viewed from the perspective of immigrants, who find themselves caught between two cultures, they generally strive with all their might to integrate. While under normal circumstances, socialization—adaptation to a certain set of societal norms—is a slow, organic communal process, for migrants it is more of a solitary, desperate struggle, a race against time to avoid being cast aside by society in their new environment (Fatehi 2026, p. 9). We will also examine the role of humor as a tool and measure of integration later on.

Examining the issue on a slightly larger scale—at least by looking at the differing situations across continents—Laitin and his co-authors found an interesting way to determine what fundamentally determines the degree of ethnic and cultural diversity in the countries of a given continent. By turning

¹² At the same time, however, it will be more difficult to achieve tolerance in the case of other religions, particularly Islam. In light of this, some authors—such as Miklós Hargitay—argue that no matter how many refugees arrive in Europe, they should simply be baptized. Because that guarantees they will accept the values that will prevent them from tearing the continent apart (comment by Csaba Kiss).

Jared Diamond's thesis on developmental inequalities (which we will also discuss later) on its head and taking it a step further, they concluded that the continents on Earth fall into two categories: there are continents where, due to their broad east-west extent (Eurasia), the relative stability of the climate allows for the migration of peoples, tribes, and individuals even over extremely long distances—and thus, of course, their inter —while on continents extending from north to south (the Americas, Africa), peoples have been much more isolated from one another. Diamond considers this a factor hindering economic development, whereas according to Laitinen et al., the resulting linguistic and cultural diversity can be a significant driving force behind economic and cultural development in the long run, especially it should be added, if our societies learn to live with diversity and even come to recognize its value and potential. Until that happens, of course, diversity can also be a breeding ground for mistrust and conflict (Laitin 2012, p. 10,263). In any case, Laitin and his co-authors have introduced a new, fruitful perspective on migration and, more generally, on the existence and tolerance of cultural and civilizational differences within a given country.

8. Responses to “uncivilized” Behavior

We can distinguish three very different levels of response: active and passive forms of coping, tolerance, and secondary civilization. I believe that at the level of society, communities, and individuals alike, it matters greatly whether someone is capable of responding appropriately to incivility. Unfortunately, this isn't taught in school, and it's rarely taught in various communities or families either; and when it is, it's unfortunately most often presented in a rather distorted, regressive, and antisocial manner. This isn't justified by concern for our children, since failing to properly address aggression and other social wrongs can, in fact, put them in trouble as well.

(defense, escalation, de-escalation) When we discuss violent, aggressive behavior—the most glaring form of uncivilized conduct and the one with the most destructive impact on community life—it is important to consider how the community in question and the individual involved can emerge from this situation in the best possible way. What options for self-defense are available to the attacked party? Obviously, they can take up the gauntlet and at least hold out the prospect that they, too, will resort to similar violence. They can opt for gradual de-escalation (mitigation, winding down) using various tools of reconciliation, persuasion, and compromise; or, if they lack such means, they can surrender and, of course, withdraw from the situation as soon as possible. According to Braun's example, someone (say, a drunk vagrant on the No. 50 tram in Budapest) first rudely invades our personal space (for instance, shoving his unshaven face, reeking of alcohol, right in our face and trying to mesmerize us with his wide-open, bloodshot eyes). If they do this less intensely and from a greater distance—say, we might try to pretend not to notice, then walk away slowly, as if we'd run into a bear in the woods. If that's not enough, we can try to calm him down with words or even threaten to call the police (a security guard, doorman, tram conductor, bear, etc.) immediately. At this point, the rowdy guy might get even more enraged and start shoving us. It's clear that our options are quite limited at this point; we can choose between fighting and fleeing. In any case, in such situations, the mental state

of the person under attack is also important—that is, the extent to which they can manage their fear or, closely related to this, the aggression that has built up within them (Braun 2019: 295)¹³.

Contrary to Braun's view, the escalation and intensification of violence do not always occur in a gradually increasing manner; sometimes—and perhaps more often than not—there are tipping points involved. In this regard, Naipaul's pinpoint observation is instructive: it concerns the occasional aggressive behavior exhibited by the otherwise extremely peaceful inhabitants of a Central African tribe upon their first encounter with "civilization" (and bars). When drunk, they usually just shove each other in front of the bar. Unless one of them sustains a bleeding wound—which completely sets off their tempers—the wounded person very rarely escapes such incidents alive or without serious injury. (Naipaul 1980)

Communication theory, in relation to violent media content, describes numerous instances of the spread of violence rooted in socialization and based on social information channels (TV, online games, etc.). These situations are complicated by the fact that it is quite easy to identify with violent characters (avengers, ruthless warriors, etc.), since violent behavior sometimes has psychological rewards in and of itself. In addition, examples seen or read in the media can serve as models when confronted with aggression, but they may also simply heighten people's biological readiness to fight (arousal theory) or increase their mental preparedness, suggesting that in such a dangerous world, the one who strikes first comes out ahead (Fülöp 2016-25). Another contribution from communication theory regarding violence and reactions to it is the narrowing and reclaiming of personal space (Hall 1969). In any case, if someone is able to maintain their personal space, step back in time, and not let the attacker intrude into it, they can assess the situation more calmly and are more likely to handle it successfully—that is, without anyone getting hurt.

(tolerance) Vakulenko provides a very detailed analysis of the work of Professor Wendy Brown, for whom tolerance is a central theme. In Vakulenko's view, at the beginning of the 21st century, tolerance is the primary guiding principle toward multicultural justice and civil peace. At the same time, however, we can easily sacrifice the ideals of substantive equality and genuine freedom in the interest of governability. In any case, tolerance—though rarely subject to direct legal regulation—is a self-evident, unquestionable reality (*"ontological naturalness or essentialism"*) for all political sides. It should be noted that this is only natural when the tolerated behavior belongs to the private sphere. As long as and wherever homosexuality was considered such a deviation from religious morality that it was made a criminal offense, tolerance did not extend to it; however, in many countries it has been reclassified as a private matter, and thus others must tolerate it. On the other hand, an example is the "upbringing" of children through physical abuse, which in most places has been reclassified as a public matter and is therefore no longer tolerable under any circumstances.

By definition, tolerance implies an unbalanced relationship in which one party must exercise generosity. It is not aimed at resolving or transforming problems arising from differences, but rather at coping with the situation and achieving conflict-free coexistence. Nor is it about a balanced community where differences are, in fact, the very conditions for success and mutual respect (such as religious tolerance in the dawn of liberalism), but rather a situation that at least one of the participants would prefer not to exist. In any case, such fundamental, essential characteristics as race (human type), ethnicity (ethnic group), or skin color cannot be matters of tolerance, since they are entirely

¹³ In this case, criminal law clearly recognizes the legality of the violent behavior of the accused (i.e., the absence of a danger to society), meaning it does not require control over aggression. In any case, the legislature is thereby conveying a message regarding behavioral norms (Ágnes Fülöp).

independent of individual choice; therefore, their acceptance cannot be called into question. The traits that are tolerated are, rather, those that deviate from a more or less dominant norm, and they are obviously tolerated only as long as they do not threaten the dominant status of that norm.

It is the duty and one of the most important goals of governments (especially before elections...) to represent the broadest possible range of citizens within their jurisdiction. This demand for universalism is well served by tolerance—that is, the acceptance of differing characteristics, aspirations, etc., and the ability to adapt to them. However, this can naturally only extend as long as the group in question remains loyal to the state in question and not to some other international network—this, for example, raises a significant problem regarding tolerance toward Islam. This is clearly related to the French legislation that, while general in nature, strictly prohibits the use of religious symbols in public institutions, including schools. According to Brown, today's Manichaean (dichotomous, based on the opposition of good and evil) worldview divides the world into enemies and friends of civilization based on whether or not one accepts mutual tolerance. This, of course, is difficult to reconcile with the ideals of individual freedom and responsibility, as it precludes any kind of deliberation from the outset (Vakulenko 2008: 327–8).

(secondary civility) Tolerance generally arises in connection with non-deviant, uncivilized behavior (although it may extend to some instances of such behavior as well); thus, it is generally not an appropriate means of addressing uncivilized behavior. However, a society's level of organization and internal harmony can be gauged by its reaction to uncivilized behavior, since this determines whether antisocial behavior escalates or subsides. We have not yet found any references to this in the literature, since secondary civility is not synonymous with tolerance, nor does this reaction involve accepting things with which one disagrees; it is merely the maintenance of peace and calm, generally following overtly violent behavior. The closest conceptual parallel to "secondary civilization" may be the paradox of tolerance in the face of intolerance, as articulated by Wendy Brown, who, citing Habermas and others, asserts that tolerance has certain limits; indeed, the very existence of tolerance can make it even more evident that certain differences are completely irreconcilable. According to this author, the limits of tolerance also delineate the boundaries of civilization (that is, of a given civilization) (Vakulenko 2008: 330). Anything that goes beyond these limits is uncivilized and must be dealt with in some way.

Perhaps Linklater's remark can also be included here—albeit from a more negative perspective, in terms of delineating the boundary between the two concepts—namely, that "openness to non-liberal worldviews is what discursive ethics demands." Linklater himself adds that this view, derived from Habermas's principles, is indeed criticized by many on the grounds that there must be a universally valid system of values, regardless of the very different ways of life existing in individual societies and the specific moral rules arising from them. (Linklater 2017) In my opinion, therefore, the term "openness" is an exaggeration here; I believe the concept of "secondary civilization" would more accurately capture the strategies to be followed and pursued. We do not oppose it, but we clearly distance ourselves from it.

More outspoken Third World analysts, however, go further: in their view, even discursive ethics privileges a liberal orientation, which regards itself as the highest form of governance and looks down on those who remain stuck in conventional and pre-conventional moral relationships. In any case, Linklater cautions against this, pointing out that advancing the process of civilization in the world cannot involve assimilationist, exclusionary policies (Linklater 2005: 148). Indeed: secondary civilization can set an example to follow: I do not tolerate your views, but I will not take up arms against

you because of them—that is, I will not try to force you to change your views, which I find unacceptable. This means that liberal democracies refrain from both direct and indirect intervention, yet consistently uphold the culture of conduct in which they believe. However, this cannot go so far as to accept—for the sake of peace—a social order based on explicit, formal inequality and a dictatorial leadership style, thereby effectively legitimizing it. At the same time, this strategy can have far-reaching economic consequences. Unfortunately, there is usually money involved that causes Western states to take a favorable view of certain, specifically selected authoritarian regimes, while persecuting others. In my opinion, none of these strategies meets the standard for secondary civilization.

But why should we—or are we even allowed to—be tolerant of intolerance? Don't our fundamental human and social relationships give rise to general, indispensable, and basic rules for coexistence and moral standards? How can a civilization—which, for whatever reason, denies human freedom and systematically excludes and humiliates certain members of its own communities—dare to call a liberal society, founded on human freedom, arrogant and hateful simply because it differs from these practices? At the same time, I would like to draw attention once again to the balancing nature of secondary civilization: in this spirit, these societies must be left in peace as consistently as possible, strictly adhering to the narrowest sense of the term “leaving in peace.”

9. The Process of Civilization

So far, we have addressed why human communities must be civilized, as well as what can be done if someone or some people do not behave in a sufficiently civilized manner, but we have not yet asked how civilization can develop within a society, a community, and specific individuals, or how it can be sustained over the long term. According to Norbert Elias's *process sociology*, the essence and purpose of human evolution (and, of course, individual development) is the process of civilization. To civilize, or more precisely, to become civilized (*civilizing*), primarily means that people (and their communities, including even states) increasingly come to realize that they must limit the use of violence against other people, and must do the same between communities and countries. We can add to this by noting that, of course, there is also a great need to curb forms of uncivilized behavior that are milder than violence (but not necessarily less harmful) in order for a society or group to function properly.

(*The subconscious levels of the civilizational process*) In a broader sense, not only behavioral culture but the development of culture as a whole can be understood as a kind of *evolutionary* process: from the mass of cultural information socially produced and transmitted, those cultural variations are selected that will survive and, in turn, generate certain variants of their own. Accordingly, culture exhibits all the essential features of evolutionary processes: a wealth of variants, selection processes, and transmission. The question of whether this cultural evolution is related to—or influences—the biological and genetic information transmitted between generations opens the door to interesting eugenic speculations (reflections on racial improvement) (Aunger 2006: 347). Nevertheless, regarding so-called *archetypes*—that is, deep subconscious concepts that are essentially shared by specific communities, societies, or even the entire human species (e.g., house-home, forest-dangers, river-food/travel)—many also believe that we do not learn these; rather, we are born with them.

The indirect effect, however, is obvious; there is nothing mysterious about the fact that the cultural and behavioral patterns that develop within communities decisively shape the personalities of the

individuals growing up in them. Culture is passed down—within society, within groups, and within families alike. Have you ever heard a baby on the subway or tram crying loudly and acting up? Just like his father.

Authors who draw on a psychoanalytic framework (such as Elias) link the social constraints on instinctual drives to the *superego*. The superego is established on the basis of externally derived power or authority, but even in this case, it is possible that, with the help of an innate, internal moral code, it neutralizes and suppresses the motivations of *the id*—that is, the instinctual self—and strives to root the cultural (civilizational) elements of the collective unconscious as effectively as possible in the individual unconscious (Ming 2023: 52). External influences, therefore, build upon strong internal capacities, motivations, and receptivity—which we might even call *civilizational archetypes*.

Culture and civilization are also built upon highly complex processes at the societal level, he continues. According to Williams, there is no community, no culture, that can ever be fully aware of itself or fully know itself. Part of lived culture is therefore unconscious; moreover, the part that exists in the unconscious is not fully realized in actual behavior or in social and communal processes. According to Ming, the *cultural unconscious* largely overlaps with the superego posited by psychoanalysts, only at the communal level (Ming 2023: 53).

(History of Civilization) If we consider the historical development of the social level of the civilizational process, we have abundant data at our disposal. As early as the dawn of the modern era, states, societies, and cultures sought to disseminate certain rules of *politeness* and make them the norm. French and English etiquette manuals from the 17th and 18th centuries sought first and foremost to codify the rules of polite conversation, based on the principle that everyone has the right to speak and to be heard; however, it is improper to speak at a time or in a manner when one can no longer reasonably expect the attention of others. These rules reflect the fundamental elements of civilized behavior: respect for the dignity of others, as well as—as an essential complement—the preservation of the speaker's own dignity.

These etiquette manuals considered it important to replace aggressive debate with a friendly exchange of ideas. Of course, at that time, all of this could only function among those on the same social level. At the same time, this was unquestionably driven by the same civilizing aspiration that generally drives the process of civilization: the exclusion of primary impulses (raw instincts) from social interactions that were becoming ever more frequent and intense.

The same process could be observed at the international level as well; the language of diplomacy also became increasingly refined, and efforts were made to curb arrogant behavior, the belittling of the other party, and threats of violence (Linklater 2005: 141–2).

(modern liberal-democratic educational principles) The civilizational process posited by Elias—which originated in absolutism and was based on the rather rigid Freudian model of family and education—naturally gave rise to very strong opposition in the West as well, as a sort of counter-reaction or backlash against authoritarian educational methods. There is growing debate over what is more important in education: strengthening national identity and instilling certain values—those favored by the given political system—or rather promoting cultural diversity and facilitating better adaptation to the ongoing process of globalization.

Liberal public education is often accused of undermining parental authority and threatening children's cultural integrity (their sense of belonging and their homogeneous, unambiguous worldview). It is not difficult to recognize in this the difference between collectivist and individualist cultures mentioned earlier. As a sort of compromise, Walter Feinberg and others have proposed implementing a form of *"affiliation liberalism"* in educational systems—a liberalism rooted in place and community—which incorporates the recognition that individuals are shaped by their own networks of cultural and religious connections, yet remain committed to personal autonomy (), while ensuring that individuals' social embeddedness does not preclude their freedom of choice regarding their way of life, their relationships, and alternative lifestyles. Closely related to this is the need to foster the development of critical self-reflection (self-examination) and respect for diversity. This also acknowledges that our collective heritage defines who we will become—or rather, who we can become—and that no one should be excluded from any important part of this heritage. This idea of a complex, autonomous personality—which is by no means new—is based on the principles of Aristotle and Kant. A liberal-democratic public education system must also provide students with this perspective and network of relationships that foster personality development (Feinberg 2003). This, of course, applies not only to the content of the curriculum but also to ensuring that children acquire the skills and perspectives that enable them to understand their own community and situate it within the world, as well as to see themselves through the eyes of others, specifically not just through the eyes of others who are exactly like them, because, of course, they cannot benefit much from that.

Among the studies in a volume reviewed by Karen Zivi on this topic, there is one that goes so far as to argue that the practice of cosmopolitan citizenship teaches us to understand and evaluate other legal, economic, and cultural practices—which also means that we can only be good, valuable citizens of our nation if we are, at the same time, good global citizens. Note that Iván Vitányi also wrote about this earlier; once again, we are dealing with the paradox of individualization.

However, it is precisely the introduction to other beliefs and lifestyles that many parents vehemently oppose, arguing that these undermine their children's group identity. Some authors in the cited volume tend to argue that education of sufficient depth, even within a narrower cultural context, can help children understand the world, enable them to decide what is right and what is wrong, and allow them to make autonomous decisions within these frameworks, based on adequate self-knowledge and self-assessment (Zivi 2004: 827–8). Regarding the latter argument, the depth of educational experience requires further elaboration: clearly, it makes a difference whether someone merely hears about things or actually experiences them; it makes a difference whether someone merely reads about certain ideas and communities or is a member of such groups and comes to know (though not necessarily fully embrace) their values.

As far as diversity is concerned, it is, of course, highly relative. In a predominantly Latino or Black community, these racial characteristics do not mean much; in fact, it may even happen that in a workplace community or even in a given area, people with a homosexual orientation become the majority, which means that they are no longer considered different (Sawyer 2012: 347). The question naturally arises as to what these communities will do with these newly emerging differences, but obviously nothing, once they have contentedly acknowledged that the stigmas attached to their skin color and sexual orientation are not, in fact, immutable, and that they, too, have an excellent opportunity to practice tolerance.

(Norbert Elias's concept of civilization) Elias came from a German-Jewish family and, in the fascist Germany of the 1930s, was confronted with a previously unimaginable low point in human civilization

and civilized behavior. According to Van Krieke, this is why the concept developed by Elias includes both processes of civilization and decivilization, in a dynamic equilibrium. Elias also pointed out that genuine civilizing processes were much weaker among nations than within them. This thesis was supported by his observations in Ghana in the 1960s, since after gaining independence, the country's greatest challenge and aspiration was to create a unified national identity out of the myriad tribal and ethnic communities (which until then had been, in effect, small, autonomous nations). (Van Krieke 2026, p. 4.)

In any case, we know of only one researcher who, beginning in the 1930s, sought to synthesize our knowledge regarding the transmission and development of civilization using insights from multiple disciplines. Based on detailed historical and ethnographic descriptions, Elias concludes that in every human community known to us, every member of the community undergoes a lifelong process of civilization. In the social sciences, this is assessed from multiple perspectives: sociology and cultural anthropology refer to it as socialization *and enculturation*, while social psychology and psychology (specifically developmental and educational psychology, as well as personality psychology) refer to it as personality development. At least since Freud, Piaget, and Kohlberg, it has been undisputed that this process can be divided into different developmental stages and that the ratio of adaptation to external influences to one's own internal development varies across these stages. Elias's contribution to this from a civilizational perspective was to place psychological insights within a historical and social context and to highlight how, in a person's life, the constraints imposed by others and self-restraint come into balance. These processes may vary from society to society, and even within a single society, they are not expected to remain constant. In any case, the system of civilizational processes at a given time is closely linked to its historical antecedents (Elias 1939, Mennell 1997: 730–1).

In this regard, Lebow confirms Elias's concept of the civilizational process; he, too, takes Freud's concept of personality as his starting point, only to place it within broader socio-historical contexts. According to Lebow, history and politics are determined, on the one hand, by *structures* (the network of cultural norms, including the law) and, on the other hand, by the actions and behavior (*agency*) of specific individuals. The latter is determined by the motivations and impulses of specific individuals, primarily members of political and military elites, which Lebow conceptualizes on three levels: desire (*appetite*, or rather inclination), rationality, and spirituality (Welch 2010: 447). It is not difficult to recognize in this (as well) the Freudian psychoanalytic tripartite division of the personality into *id*, *ego*, and *superego*. According to Lebow, in every historical era, every specific society, and every single event, one of these three elements presents a dominant picture; they are never in perfect balance, and their patterns change dynamically. At the same time, those who attempt to absolutize the role of any one level or component are mistaken: realists overemphasize the role of rationality, caution, and even fear, while liberals focus on self-interest—that is, appetite and primary motivations. They do not, however, attribute any significance to spirituality, even though Lebow points out that throughout history, from ancient Greece to the Iraq War, enthusiasm (ideals) and ambition (referred to in the original text as "*spirit*" and "*honor*") have determined many things; for Lebow, this means the search for self-worth through the recognition of others. (Welch 2010: 448)

The question of humanity's status-seeking nature—the pursuit of an appropriate social position, acceptance (and, if possible, dominance)—often arises in philosophical discussions of civilization. According to Francis Fukuyama, a fundamental part of the human soul is *thumos*¹⁴, the desire to be recognized by others. (In Plato, this term refers to the part of the soul where pride and shame reside.)

¹⁴ Csaba Kiss drew my attention to this important concept of Fukuyama's.

Hobbes writes about pride in a similar vein, while Rousseau writes about vanity. People expect to be treated with respect, and if they do not receive it, they are capable of wreaking havoc. (Sagar, 2017)

Konrad Lorenz's work **The Eight Deadly Sins of Civilized Humanity** (Lorenz 1973), in which he draws attention to the dangers of absolutizing socialization, can also be seen as a critique of Elias's views. The positivist schools of psychology at the beginning of the last century (including behaviorism and psychoanalysis) strongly believed that human personality is determined by environmental stimuli. This approach certainly led to many important insights and was, moreover, democratic and egalitarian, since according to this view, all we need to do is shape circumstances appropriately, and everyone can immediately become a useful and good person. Lorenz, however, points out a good half-century later that this worldview subsequently played a significant role—as he writes—in the moral and cultural collapse of Western civilization. Lorenz considered the disregard for individual differences to be downright inhumane (Wynne-Edwards 2009: 86). It would indeed be a mistake to underestimate or simply ignore the role of human freedom and autonomy (similar to the elements of *"spirit"* and *"honor"* discussed in the previous paragraph regarding Lebow). Furthermore, while it is true that we are all born with different dispositions (abilities, impulses, etc.), socialization—as we have already noted in several contexts above, for example in connection with Piaget and his colleagues—is always a two-way process: there are educational influences to which we respond well, and others to which we respond poorly or not at all. Humans are therefore responsible for the people they become, even if it is not realistically expected that they will become the ideal, self-perfecting human (*Übermensch*) in the Nietzschean sense.

But let us return to the father of the concept of civilization. Compared to other elements of his theory, Goody considers Elias's concept of sociogenesis to be noteworthy—namely, that social changes and conditions, as well as personality development, are two sides of the same coin (Goody 2003: 62). However, as we saw with Lorenz, this excessive sociopsychological determinism can also be viewed as calling human freedom and autonomy into question. That said, Elias's concept of sociogenesis can be a useful abstraction and is not incompatible with the criticism leveled against it, since external social and family influences (e.g., the role of a strict father or—why not?—a mother) undergo continuous internal processing, and self-reflection always complements the external influence on personality. Elias's later views were reinforced by his stay in Ghana and his acquaintance with the local civilization. In his view, much like in ancient Greece, polytheism may have fundamentally led to the development of a plural or divided superego that differs from that of our culture. In any case, he acknowledged that his European experiences and his knowledge of history and philosophy were of very little value in an African context (van Krieken 2026, p. 7).

(The Afterlife of Elias's Work, Western Civilization) In his opening remarks at a conference in Heidelberg in 2014, Dietmar Schloss set the ambitious goal of reviving the concept of civilization discussed by Elias—which is now considered somewhat outdated—and subjecting it to a critical reinterpretation. In doing so, he sought to lay the foundations for a new cultural sociology, in which this branch of culture (i.e., behavioral culture) is posited as a *coercive social construct*. Good manners and behavior are both the individual's own and one of society's constitutive (cohesive) forces: a dynamic tool through which consensus can be reached and conflicts avoided, yet which also holds the potential to bring about change (Schloss 2009). The reviewer analyzing the opening address, however, seeks to temper this enthusiasm; in his view, "civilization" is a concept that is too difficult to define and has an uncertain theoretical foundation to serve as a comprehensive explanation of social processes (Izzo 2012: 495–6). This criticism must, of course, be taken seriously, since we have seen that behavioral culture is an extremely complex concept. At the same time—although behavioral culture is part of cultural

sophistication, which is indeed difficult to define—we have, as we can see, fairly concrete ideas about civilization.

Elias Kant took as his starting point the statement that “we are civilized to the extent that we are imbued with every form of social propriety and decency.” At the same time, Elias is indeed open to some criticism—or at least to a detailed, nuanced assessment—due to his formulation of civilization, which is in many respects one-sided and open to misinterpretation. In his analysis, he begins with the sociogenesis of civilization and culture—quite simply, with how these definitions became established in the broad public consciousness in his home country, Germany. Unfortunately, the general acceptance of these concepts was almost inevitably accompanied by a rather strict distinction: namely, that “we” are civilized, while “they” are savage—with the “nuance” that they placed their own lumpenproletariat (the degraded poor) somewhere in between. It is important to note that Elias himself acknowledged that these concepts are difficult to define. Nevertheless, he saw the essence and general function of the concept in its expression of the West’s self-consciousness, in a way that encompasses everything in which the West *considers* itself superior to other societies along the path of modernization. To put it slightly differently: civilization is everything the West believes it has achieved, and the concept also encompasses the totality of attitudes related to this (Goody 2003: 61). Here, once again, Nietzsche’s influence is evident—an influence that would obviously have been difficult to avoid. Unfortunately, this influence makes people prone to becoming overly self-assured and looking down on others. This can by no means be the goal of studying and understanding civilization. These arguments serve as important supplements to what was said in the previous chapter regarding tolerable and intolerable behavior. We must not limit our search for completely unacceptable elements to foreign cultures alone.

Regardless, Goody finds Elias’s basic concept interesting, though he also considers it somewhat contradictory in its own right. It is fine that he places civilization and culture in a historical context and acknowledges that these concepts are inextricably intertwined with one another and with the given social context. At the same time, although he pays great respect to Elias’s work—thanks to having had the opportunity to meet the elderly scholar in person and spend an extended period of time in his company in Ghana—he is not so biased as to fail to see its limitations. Unlike Marx and Weber, Elias focused solely on Europe—and even there, primarily on the second half of the Middle Ages—while the former possessed in-depth knowledge of the Asian mode of production and were well-versed in the modern era and industrial societies. It may also raise eyebrows that Elias overestimated the impact of the European absolutist system on the development of civilization, since it exerted the strongest coercion on human behavior. What is certain, however, is that without social-level coercion and centralized power, a society will disintegrate into its constituent parts prematurely. In their book on the failure of nations, Acemoglu and Robinson cite numerous examples, primarily from Africa, where anarchy and incessant warfare between opposing armed groups make any kind of development impossible. In contrast, using England as a model of social development, they demonstrate how steps to strengthen central authority—such as Cromwell’s measures in the 1530s to build a state bureaucracy and curtail the power of the church—played a significant role in the rise of the English. Centralization clarifies the rules of the game and, under favorable conditions, fosters the emergence of social strata that are willing and able to influence central decisions; at the same time, it strengthens the protection and security of property rights. In this way, paradoxically, it also contributes to the emergence of pluralism and inclusive social and economic institutions (Acemoglu 2012, pp. 186–7).

Individuals incorporate social, external constraints into their personalities through the superego. This is consistent with Freud’s assertion that guilt is the price we pay for the development of civilization. Elias, too, understands “civilization” in this sense: as that which the *ruling minority* imposes on the

reluctant majority, through which the minority acquires and retains the means of power and wealth—which, of course, can serve as a further means of material and, through this, mental coercion. In line with this, Freud argues that *the masses* are lazy and unintelligent until they internalize control through education. Afterward, people will no longer hate their civilization but will accept the benefits it offers, even if these entail sacrifices in the realm of instinctual life.

Absolutism generally does not have such a good reputation. According to Acemoglu and Robertson, for example, this form of government is a textbook example of what they call an “extractive” social arrangement, one that stifles the economy and is the enemy of all forms of progress and creativity. So much so that certain illustrious rulers have not infrequently stated outright that they have no need for international trade (China) or even railroads (the Habsburgs), since these threaten “social order and tranquility.” Yet we have seen that it is precisely these forms of communication that can lead to a flow of ideas and innovations from which, ultimately, everyone can benefit (Acemoglu 2012, p. 117).

At the same time, Elias’s critics accuse him not only of relying on historical examples that are not entirely well-founded, but also of viewing violence as something entirely alien to civilization. They consider this Freudian-derived social theory to be flawed, since violence has been with us from the dawn of history to the present day. If we consider only the unprecedented scale of organized, violent crime and terrorism (or counterterrorism), or the fact that a total of 1.6 million people worldwide die violent deaths each year (excluding wars), the claim that civilization is progressing toward a reduction in violence appears unfounded. While it is conceivable to argue that institutionalized, organized violence was far more commonplace in earlier historical periods—and, above all, that society’s cultural perception of violence has changed significantly today—no one can claim that it will disappear in the near future or become completely insignificant. A psychiatrist who is also an author points out that, generally speaking, it can be said that essentially all agents of civilization ultimately resort to violence or at least threaten to use it (Braun 2019: 283–4).

It is true, however, that our current human culture—our culture of upbringing and behavior—is increasingly lacking the tools of strict prohibition and unconditional self-restraint (Cohen 1990: 4). This, in turn, can easily lead to a situation where, if we are able to do something, we often do it. The human psyche—and likely the behavior of other mammalian species as well (certainly that of dogs, as we know from direct experience)—functions in such a way that opposing drives are closely intertwined and sometimes spontaneously alternate, or the discharge of one activates the other. On the other hand, it is also difficult to arrive at a definitive answer regarding this fundamental issue of upbringing and socialization, since strict prohibitions, iron discipline, and drill can likewise lead to transgressions and unexpected violations of norms. It is also a well-known fact in experimental psychology that the sudden suppression of a drive can result in its opposite gaining great momentum (the rebound effect).

A detailed discussion of these issues would take us far afield from our original topics; however, we can mention that they likely have much to do with creativity, and quite certainly with various forms of deviance.

(*On humility*) As for strict educational principles, in their centuries-old educational practices and doctrines—which were strongly influenced by the historical churches—great emphasis was placed on fostering and reinforcing humility. An extreme form of this is unconditional self-surrender, which is obviously related to the collectivist group processes discussed above. If we strip the term of its negative connotations, we would say “humility” rather than “submission,” which, in my opinion, has very little to do with a strict educational environment that sometimes resorts to humiliation, nor with the pressure exerted on members by collectivist groups. Humility is much more than an unconditional

and enduring commitment to an existing or even merely virtual group or idea. Perhaps humility can be interpreted, from a holistic perspective, as the profound experience that the individual—no matter how small a speck in the universe—can still experience unity with it. In this context, humility is also accompanied by a specific mechanism of perception and stimulus processing; it is typically characterized by convictions and internal judgments that develop slowly due to rigorous and consistent self-reflection (self-questioning), alongside a tendency to question quick and instinctive decisions.

In addition to all this, humility is closely related to the concept of dignity discussed in detail above, since those who deeply experience a sense of belonging to a higher unity also experience a sense of acceptance and belonging. This may be close to what Zsuzsa Kulcsár, referring to Teilhard de Chardin, called a state of grace, although it is possible that it is more enduring than that and becomes more deeply integrated into the personality. (Kulcsár 1994-7).

In line with what has been discussed above, Lili Gesler states in her literature review from a clinical psychology perspective that the word “humility” has nothing to do with humiliation, even though most people mistakenly interpret it that way (which, of course, is likely no coincidence). She associates at least twelve key characteristics with humility: (1) openness, (2) the “I don’t know” attitude, (3) curiosity, (4) innocence, (5) childlikeness, (6) spontaneity, (7) spirituality, (8) tolerance, (9) patience, (10) integrity, (11) non-attachment, and (12) letting go (Whitfield, Whitfield, and Park, 2006, cited in Gesler 2025). Clearly, this extremely broad and diverse list of personality traits stems from the fact that humility has been examined from a wide variety of religious and secular perspectives. What is relevant to our topic are the specific perceptual and information-processing traits of a personality capable of identifying with multiple cultural branches and behaving civilly under all circumstances—traits that can be identified to some extent in most of the cited points.

Gesler also cites the work of Tongeren, Davis, and Hook (2014), who examined the role of humility in romantic relationships. According to them, humility has several components that increase the likelihood that an individual will seek to cooperate with others. People who are humble have been shown in experiments to be more attractive than those who behave more selfishly, and others are more willing to initiate friendships or romantic relationships with them. Furthermore, in long-term relationships, humility protects against the otherwise typical escalation of problems.

Finally, according to Chancellor and Lyubomirsky (2013), humility can be examined not only as a personality trait or characteristic, but also as a state. People can generally determine whether someone’s behavior in a given situation is humble or not. Similarly, they may find themselves in a situation where they experience a sense of humility and modesty (cited in Gesler 2025). This approach, therefore, focuses on the momentary experience, which is similar to situations where someone feels grateful for something—such as the birth of a child, or when we receive significant help from a friend or even, unexpectedly, from a stranger when we were in great trouble.

(alternative civilizational process) Although Elias and the authors who share his perspective did not devote much attention to it, there are also models of the acquisition of norms of social coexistence outside Western civilization that exhibit significant differences from it. The civilizational process in Southeast Asia—at least prior to colonization—involved civilizational aspirations, perspectives, and influences *(civilizing causation)* that were entirely different from those of the West. People and communities became more civilized through cultural assimilation and adaptation; this was what they sought, and they followed examples and familiar patterns *(familiarity)*. Here, “culture” refers to the totality of patterns driven by the desire to improve *(aspirational standard)* (Chong 2017: 644). This

pattern points to the organic connection between culture and civilization (behavioral culture), which we will revisit in detail in the next chapter.

Professor Yong Wook Lee's general observation also addresses this alternative process of civilization, noting that Asian politics seeks to demonstrate values that prove there are multiple paths leading to modernity. He laments that, at the beginning of the modern era, the great imperialist conquests divided the world into civilized and uncivilized (to be civilized) parts, and, in particular, that China was placed in the wrong category in the process. He also seeks to support his argument by drawing on Japan— which, on the one hand, is understandable given the two countries' shared history spanning thousands of years; on the other hand, however, the differences between the two countries and their systems seem quite significant from this perspective to justify such a grouping. In any case, these East Asian cultural references are primarily based on *Confucian values*, which many associate with Max Weber's Protestant ethic—at least insofar as they embody behavioral and moral patterns that can lead to economic prosperity. This value system offers an alternative to neoliberal ideas that strive for universalism (Lee 2020: 456–7). From this perspective, these *values* appear to be an overarching concept that defines both culture and civilization. They correspond, as it were, to the concept of a "*leverage point*" or "*tool*" known from systems science, through which a system can be changed if its fundamental objectives are successfully recalibrated (Meadows, D. 1999), since culture and civilization, with their own historical context, geographical connections, and complex patterns, undoubtedly constitute a system and, as such, naturally exhibit the characteristics identified by systems science.

(the civilizing of less developed countries) According to the original, one-sided, exclusionary definition of civilization, as we have seen, modern democratic societies can claim not only that they are "civilized," but also that those societies which do not share the "teleological qualities" on the basis of which we call ourselves civilized are not civilized. In doing so, we endow ourselves with a sense of moral and practical superiority, on the basis of which we pass judgment on those who cannot measure up to the standards we have set for ourselves. It is difficult to find impartial truth within this intellectual trap. In any case, a functioning democracy can indeed be characterized by a high standard of healthcare and a comprehensive and effective educational system, as reflected in such stark indicators as low rates of infant mortality and illiteracy. Also included here are a general and strict prohibition on child labor and the fact that civilized states consider cruelty to animals repugnant, while being relatively tolerant of sexual preferences and identities (Pratt 2016, p. 2).

Throughout history, beginning in the 1500s, Western countries have gained economic, political, and military supremacy in the world. They subsequently enforced and reinforced this dominance through, among other things, the ideology of attempting to "civilize" non-Western countries. This has hardly changed to this day; currently, the export of civilization essentially takes place through the pressures of globalization, by imposing the requirements of international law (human rights, the rule of law, good governance, etc.) on Third World states, as well as through the capitalist rationalization of the economy (note that the moral acceptability of these two factors is quite different). The ideological backdrop to this expansion is precisely the tautological concept of "civilization" that Pagden formulated following Elias—that is, retrospectively, in a descriptive manner, and not as a norm to be followed: "the concept of civilization encompasses those state, social, political, cultural, aesthetic—and indeed moral and physical—conditions that we regard as the optimal conditions for the survival and effective development of humanity —and this, since we have no better starting point, also implies the assertion that only civilized nations can be aware of this set of conditions and the means of achieving them." A reflection of this ethnological and anthropological conception prevalent in the nineteenth century in

the emerging field of modern international law was the definition of governments recognized by the community of states. For a civilized country to be a full-fledged member of the international community, it was required that (1) it possess sufficiently effective institutions of government and bureaucracy—without these, it is indeed difficult for a state to be a subject of international diplomatic relations; (2) it must have the organizational infrastructure necessary for self-defense—without it, not only is the country unable to maintain order within its borders, rendering its relations worthless, but it is also too weak to defend itself, a weakness that many “civilized” countries are quick to exploit; (3) its publicly accessible laws must meet the requirements of the rule of law—on the other hand, this condition can easily be met even by states that do not meet the first two conditions, or at most fail to enforce them; (4) they must be capable of respecting international treaties and ensuring free trade and the free flow of capital; —it would be difficult to find any selfless goodwill in this condition as well, and (5) recognize the validity of the norms of international law, including the rules governing war—many “civilized” countries acknowledge this, at least until war breaks out or their interests otherwise dictate otherwise. By the second half of the 20th century, the concept of a “civilized state” had come to include human rights, democratic governance, economic liberalism, and the ability to adapt to a globalized economic and political order—it would be difficult, for the time being, to make similarly cynical remarks about these conditions, especially the first two. (Bowden 2016, pp. 4–6.)

Non-Western states, therefore, are not entirely without grounds in asking whether this is truly the viable path—or indeed the only viable path—toward the establishment of a peaceful, cooperative world order. The Russo-Japanese War of 1905 was highly significant from this perspective because it demonstrated that an Asian political system operating according to its own rules could successfully harness science and technology and defeat a Western (?) country. For their part, especially by the standards of the time, they were justified in viewing this as proof of their civilized state structure.

According to sociological definitions of *globalization*, it is a social process in which geographical boundaries (and, of course, the possibility of state control) recede in the face of economic, social, and cultural ties, and people—but especially large multinational corporations (multinational corporations, though this term is extremely imprecise) exploit this situation with great awareness and efficiency (Malcolm Waters, cited by Rocchi). According to another definition, globalization is the intensification of global social processes to such an extent that distant places become interconnected in a way that events in one place determine those in another (Anthony Giddens, cited by Rocchi).

However, we must not forget the underlying principles that when peoples whose customs, laws, and legal practices differ considerably, the temptation—or psychological predisposition—to cause harm to the other increases in tandem with the diminishing distance between them in multiple senses. It is then all too easy to forge hypocritical ideologies around this. A research study with a rather specialized focus offers an interesting approach to this issue. The author examined the impact of the globalized consumer society on traditional Latin American societies, and how foreign economic and cultural influence clashes with the power of local customs. Is the establishment of the international consumer society a malevolent force or does it have a positive influence on these societies? (Of course, the author does not pose the question as whether these societies can actually choose between a consumer society and something else.) To put it more bluntly: is international predatory capital preying on the traditional values of these countries, or can developing local markets actually benefit from connecting to globalized networks? According to the author, the truth lies somewhere in between, and this is referred to as successful (or unsuccessful) adaptation (Rocchi 2016, p. 15).

In any case, in international relations, we must find a way to increase mutual understanding and reduce hostility among countries at different stages of development, with different religions and cultures, and with varying degrees of integration into the globalized market. Most likely, there is no better way to

do this than by deepening cultural and economic ties. Not through some modernized version of the old solution—in a manner reminiscent of how the representatives of the New World “civilized” the Native Americans, that is, by massacring them or enslaving them. Many people, however— —in developing, Third World, or simply non-Western countries today believe that, in essence, current globalization is not all that far removed from this approach, with its airport customs procedures, abusive food safety regulations, restrictions on exports and imports, or even the high degree of standardization in university education. Most of these globalization processes are typically overseen by some powerful global organization, which is usually based in Western countries or under their supervision (Chong 2017: 639–640).

Europeans viewed indigenous peoples as existing in a state of naturalness, prior to society and—most importantly—culture. Yet, according to Muthu, one of the most universal and, from a moral standpoint, fundamental human capacities is precisely the *creation of culture*; accordingly, every culture is unique, incomparable, and equally valuable. This is the basis for the ideology of resistance against oppressive and exploitative imperialist endeavors: in this regard, he cites anti-imperialist thinkers such as Edmund Burke, Immanuel Kant, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Denis Diderot, and Johann Gottfried von Herder. In the case of the latter two, Muthu specifically addresses *moral universalism* and humanity’s cultural vocation in opposition to the ideologies of paternalism and interventionism. Kant emphasized that no society has the right to rule over another, and in particular, Europeans are unworthy of taking the fate of other peoples into their own hands. He also pointed out that while certain cultural achievements may be comparable in specific cases, entire cultures are never comparable in any way. Muthu underscores that property rights, the administration of justice, and civil governance cannot be strictly tied only to (at least) settled agricultural societies. According to imperialist reasoning, societies lacking such characteristics were—or, in some form, still are to this day—free to be plundered and subjugated. (Muthu 2003, Levy 2004: 829–30).

The question naturally arises: Can civilization truly be achieved only through coercion or some form of violence, or can it also be achieved—following the ancient Aristotelian model—by recognizing and applying the necessity and benefits of cooperation? Some of the examples cited by Chong regarding the “violence of globalization” seem quite rational in and of themselves; a certain degree of harmonization of customs duties, food security, and a certain degree of harmonization in the standards and outlooks of universities may not necessarily be the work of the devil (even if, in their practical implementation, the aforementioned “lord” certainly has a significant say...). We cannot deny that in contemporary international relations, much depends on power dynamics; if an individual, a community, or a state holds a significant advantage in power (and believes this will always be the case), it can be difficult to deter them from resorting to some form of violence or coercion.

We will return to this in greater detail later, but we can already state that in Islamic countries, globalization is met with a kind of “*purification*”—the exclusive pursuit of religious and historical values and a withdrawal from all kinds of harmful external influences, which they identify precisely with globalization. Of course, some ask whether, if proponents of globalization were to come to power in such countries, they would not eradicate opposing views with fire and sword, or seek to impose total thought control “for the sake of the greater good”? (Alt 1992). Perhaps they would not—or at least they would change their methods—and that, too, is important.

(“*Civilizing*” *ethnic groups*) With no small amount of political and ethnic ulterior motives, it happens even within a single country that the ruling elites seek to “civilize” certain ethnic groups. This is exactly what happened in pre-World War I Germany and in the Hungarian half of the Austro-Hungarian

Monarchy with regard to the Roma (*Zigeuner*), who were classified as primitive, nature-bound peoples in both countries and treated accordingly. Nevertheless, based on their level of civilization, other peoples were also classified in both countries —naturally, with Germans, Austrians, and Hungarians, respectively, at the top of the hierarchy of civilization. Accordingly, modernization reforms were implemented on the basis of specific territorial, economic, religious, and ethnic criteria. In post-Compromise Hungary, this endeavor was intertwined with a forced campaign of Magyarization and assimilation (Davis 2017: 6–7, 9).

In post-Compromise Hungary, therefore, the intensification of state coercion was seen as the primary means necessary for the assimilation (integration) and regulation of the Romani population. During the 1867–1868 session of parliament, begging in marketplaces was declared a criminal offense, and the issuance of travel documents to itinerant Roma was revoked. In addition, sanctions were introduced against Roma who failed to perform military service or pay taxes. All of these measures, along with a series of other coercive measures applicable to the Romani community, were primarily enforced by local magistrates, who possessed very broad discretionary and procedural powers in civil-administrative, criminal, and misdemeanor cases. Nevertheless, in the following decades, the magistrate system was frequently criticized by the majority society for imposing penalties that were too lenient and for applying them inconsistently.

One important background measure of administrative coercion was the organization of censuses specifically targeting the Romani population in 1873, 1893, and 1907. This facilitated—and indeed necessitated—the state’s use of ethnographic descriptions of the Romani people, which in turn made it possible to implement ethnic-based control and restrictive measures. Nevertheless, this prioritized, segregated, and targeted “treatment” of an ethnic group offered, to a certain extent, alternatives to the variously coercive or—rather—administrative and cultural means of assimilation and modernization (Davis 2017: 14–5).

I do not know to what extent the discrimination and persecution of the Roma differed from the oppression and forced assimilation of other minorities in our region. One thing is certain: these medieval and modern state policies continue to have a significant impact on the fate of the Roma to this day, unlike with other minorities, where this impact is now barely noticeable.

In 1772, King Frederick II of Prussia annexed a large part of the Pomeranian region of Poland. Contemporary German authors described Pomerania as a neglected region lacking rules and oversight; subsequently, the authorities set about “civilizing” the territory and its population. The new elite had a completely different vision of the economic and social order, and, confident in the righteousness (and, of course, the power) of their cause, they implemented their reforms with strict consistency—ranging from the education system and the regulation of the churches to the transformation of agriculture and, in particular, forestry, as an important element of agricultural culture (Wilson 2008: 27–8).

A similar analysis was published by Helmut Kuzmics and Roland Axtmann, this time focusing on the centuries-long, consistent civilizational aspirations of the rising English and Austrian empires toward the subjugated peoples. These authors highlight behavioral culture—specifically, the effort to spread English “*gentlemanliness*” and Austrian “*politeness*” as widely as possible—as long-term programs aimed at consolidating and unifying the *national character*. Clearly, these studies also draw on Elias’s concept of the civilizing process, though naturally with an appropriate degree of distance in terms of content. (O’Reilly 2009: 318–20)

Then, once they attain a dominant position, the very countries that were previously considered in need of “civilization” themselves seek to “civilize” others, although they may still distinguish themselves to

some extent in the strategies they pursue. A typical example of this is China's "*smile diplomacy*." The commonly used translation of the term does not perfectly capture the meaning of the original "*charm offense strategy*," which includes the word " "; thus, in certain cases, a smile itself can be threatening or serve to disguise a threatening strategy.

Emerging nations strive to reshape the public discourse, vocabulary, and interpretive frameworks (discourses and narratives) related to development and civilization in such a way that their own dominance can prevail—or at least ensure they are not at a disadvantage—and that their previous disadvantages can be nullified. In doing so, they are reshaping their world—that is, what is possible, what is natural, and what is normal. China and the Asian "little tigers" are aided in this by their rapid economic development, which must surely have some underlying cause, since, in theory, they operate within the same global market arena as Western countries. In contrast, the term "civilizational standard" must encompass a course of events that is customary in their societies and also explains why the ruling classes are where they are—because they are effective. Of course, this requires that they be able to control the interpretation of key terms and, even before that, understand and grasp the importance of this—namely, that the identity and interests of their country and culture are at stake (Lee 2020: 457 and 459).

In this context, a historical perspective—valid from the standpoint of social psychology and group psychology—may be relevant: namely, that the Western imperialist powers' colonial practices, or their later, less brutal but still quite oppressive and exploitative practices, did not regard developing countries and their populations (the overwhelming majority of their populations) as "on the same level" in terms of tolerance, compassion, and civilized behavior. The treatment of these nations and their populations (the overwhelming majority of their populations) was not considered "inside the circle." This treatment was not incompatible with the principles of liberal democracy; rather, the issue was viewed as irrelevant (Vakulenko 2008: 334).

Lebow points out that although this does not yet apply to international processes, he remains optimistic about the possibility of conducting the competition inherent in civilization in an increasingly peaceful and cooperative manner. Unfortunately, the power and influence of states have thus far been determined by a single hierarchy—the degree of global political power (military and economic power intertwined)—and this outdated perspective does not allow even countries that are secondary within this system to find *their national pride* (which is clearly the social-level counterpart of human dignity as discussed in the concept of civilization) and be content with their situation. After all, not even the most powerful are satisfied with their own lot. Lebow nevertheless hopes that the thirst for glory—driven by *leaders who are clearly hypermasculine* and which motivates and shapes conflicts—will soon be a thing of the past, just as patriarchy is gradually weakening at the levels of states and families, though not to the same extent everywhere, of course. For the world is becoming increasingly complex, and perhaps it will not be possible to speak in it forever only in the primitive language of power (Welch 2010: 450–1).

(*Humor as an agent and measure of civilization*) Immigrants, refugees, and migrants constitute a unique minority, as we described in the previous chapters on civilization. Humor serves as a tool in their socialization—one that is by no means violent, yet, as it turns out, possesses considerable coercive power—namely, the understanding of the host country's humor and, at a higher level, its application for the sake of rapid acceptance and integration. Erfan Fatehi, at the University of Helsinki, examined how humor functions among Iranian migrants and their host communities in Finland and Estonia. He found that humor can serve as a test of acceptability, can be a source of awkward

misunderstandings, and can function as a tactical means of retreat in uncomfortable situations. It is a well-known tenet of intercultural communication that humor can bridge cultural gaps, ease tension, and pave the way for friendship and collaboration. However, an important distinction must be made here: while smiles and laughter are entirely universal, humor by no means speaks the same language across different cultures (Fülöp 2018). Fatehi delved deeply into this and discovered some interesting insights, which he summarized as follows: humor can thus be (1) a ticket to acceptance and a sense of belonging, but if it backfires, (2) it can also be an embarrassing source of stigmatization and self-censorship, (3) in any case, humor's socializing function develops rapidly, becoming a distinct component of the migrant's superego with astonishing speed and efficiency, (4) and finally, in the context of the inevitable pursuit of status (since, for men, jokes are closely linked to the attainment and maintenance of social status—or at least a certain kind of communal role), according to Fatehi, humor can also be used as a "low-risk tool of resistance and, if the situation calls for it, allows for compliance with the norms of the new community without any significant loss of face." (Fatehi 2026, p. 1.)

If an immigrant can join a workplace community's gatherings outside of work (even if it's just not sitting apart while having lunch in the cafeteria—not feeling like they have to sit apart) and can laugh freely along with the group's jokes, that already represents a fairly high level of inclusion. As Fatehi puts it: humor is a valuable social currency, and it's not at all easy to acquire. Everyone knows exactly when someone is laughing artificially, and if a newcomer tries to become the center of attention for a while with their own jokes, it can be very embarrassing if they fail—with social consequences that reach far and last quite a long time. Humor, in Elias's terminology, is an excellent indicator of the process of civilization: self-restraint, emotional regulation, a raised threshold for shame, and the increasingly easy production of sensible—that is, behavior and reactions deemed reasonable by that particular community. A relatively high degree of civilization is reached when self-reflection is so developed that a person is capable of laughing at themselves—though this can also backfire socially. If successful, however, the host society can also be enriched with new knowledge and insights (Fatehi 2026, pp. 11, 16).

Finally, it is worth noting that it has long been observed that humor flourishes in a nation's life when it is going through a crisis. Fatehi lists the following examples: Iranian wit reportedly did not fail them even during the Mongol invasion and flourished particularly during the Allied invasion of 1941, later during the repressive periods of the Islamic Republic, during the COVID-19 pandemic, and even during the 12-day war with Israel (Fatehi 2026, p. 6). From this perspective, humor is a tool for survival and for preserving the culture of communities; just think of the medieval and early modern Jewish ghettos, the discrimination and persecution they endured, against which a significant means of self-defense was characteristic Jewish humor, which subsequently set out on its path to global prominence through authors such as Ferenc Kishont (Efraim Kishon). They did not seek to be funny for the sake of the majority society; they did not aspire to the role of the clown, but rather used humor to strengthen their own community ties and culture. And they did so quite successfully.

10. The Relationship Between Culture and Civilization

Now that we have thoroughly explored the two concepts and the most important related factors, we can turn to examining the relationship between culture and civilization. The relationship between the two concepts within "Civilization" (with a capital "C"), as characteristic of a given era and social system, is illustrated in the following schematic diagram:

CIVILIZATION

culture—culturalness

economy, science, technologies, arts . . . behavioral culture – **civility**, law, morality

I have highlighted the role of civility as a cultural element that plays a key role in the survival and normal functioning of Civilization. Based on this, I see the value in a more detailed examination of the relationship between culture and civilization.

(the struggle between the good and the evil within us) Although both civilization and culture are fundamentally about the cooperation and well-being of communities and people within the framework of a given Civilization, there are some significant differences between them. Perhaps we are not making too great a mistake if, as a first step in distinguishing between them, we present the two concepts in stark contrast.

Civilization certainly involves the suppression and containment of the destructive energies within us—aggression, selfishness, and the instinct to destroy. This idea appears in the work of Freud, who emphasized the restriction of instincts in his theories. Following Freud, Elias described this same instinctual restraint—considering it a defining factor not only in the regulation of individual behavior but also in “social cohesion”—as a process of civilization (Rostoványi 2004).

Culture, by contrast, is fundamentally built upon the positive values within us—primarily inexhaustible love, the desire for harmony, and the joy of creation¹⁵. As we will attempt to illustrate in the next chapter by depicting the temporal relationship between culture and civilization, in the case of civilization, repressed destructiveness can at times break through its barriers and bring destruction and suffering to the world, which can only slowly coalesce into a new civilization; In culture, however, development and progress move steadily forward; achievements accumulate and represent ever-greater strength, value, and true wealth.

In light of this fundamental difference, I will endeavor in the following to carefully examine the various positions in the literature so that we may discover this distinction—if not in this sharp form, then at least in some form. We have found indications of this in quite a number of cases, which we might even regard as confirmation of our ideas.

(the difference in measurability) In our discussion of these concepts, we have seen that game theory, with its rich mathematical framework, is capable of describing and analyzing situations that offer the possibility of mutual control over one’s fate in terms of civilization. In my opinion, the degree of civilization can generally be described quantitatively and expressed statistically; the performance of multiple communities in the realm of civilization can be compared quite objectively. However, when

¹⁵ There are many branches of thought stemming from this. Csaba Kiss suggests taking into account the concept of humanity, but a vast body of related literature also deals with the Marxist philosophical concept of “gender essence.” A thorough examination and deeper understanding of these concepts currently exceeds the scope of this Note and, of course, the author’s capabilities, although we will briefly touch on both concepts later on.

we consider the values of culture, it is evident that they do not lend themselves to this type of objective evaluation.

(Differences in Organizational Structure) Due to their fundamental differences, very different institutions are responsible for the structure, development, and protection of civilization and culture. The peaceful cooperation of citizens is ensured, when necessary, by law enforcement and judicial bodies responsible for upholding the law and overseeing its application. Fortunately, state violence is not present everywhere, so there is room for moral imperatives to ensure mutual esteem and respect among people, and thereby safeguard the fundamental survival interests of communities. The communities themselves are responsible for teaching these values and, if necessary, enforcing them.

In contrast, *cultural institutions* are quite diverse. Note that this compound term has a much narrower meaning than how we would like to use it. Thus, we should not think only of the Opera House, theaters, and exhibition halls, but also of the myriad organizational units of technical, productive, consumer, and community culture—whether they be schools, universities, scientific, engineering, research, development, manufacturing, and commercial enterprises; public utilities and other institutions responsible for services; civil society organizations and spontaneous communities; and, last but not least, networks formed on the internet.

(scholarly sources that do not distinguish between culture and civilization) Due to the obvious kinship between the two concepts (where civilization is simply described as the culture of behavior), many believe that in today's professional discourse, the terms "civilization" and "culture" are largely used interchangeably and even appear as synonymous expressions (Vitányi 2002, Pető 2022, Papp 2013, Rostoványi 2004, Unacademy 2021–22). The vast majority of authors do not attach excessive importance to this distinction; nevertheless, in many cases, they point out fundamental connections precisely between culture as a whole and the maintenance of civilization within it. In Polányi's much-cited remark, for example, the term "cultural institutions" actually refers to institutions aimed at maintaining civilization and is not limited to state organizations belonging to any branch of culture in the narrower sense; yet the statement remains important even so: "Deprived of the protective umbrella of cultural institutions, people would perish in social desolation: they would die as victims of acute social upheaval, as a result of immorality, perversion, crime, and starvation." (Polányi 2004: 75). Hobbes said the same thing in **Leviathan** regarding the absence of civilization, as we quoted earlier: people thus live in constant fear and under the threat of violent death; their lives are solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short. (Bowden 2016, p. 6.)

Hans Peter Duerr, one of Elias's most famous critics, contrasts Elias's psychologizing approach to social history with a one-sided, macro-level concept—into which, however, he crams everything. For him, the "process of civilization" refers to the development of civilization in technical and material terms, profound changes in the areas of innovation and state governance, as well as in the police and military, the organization of labor, traffic and transportation, the production of goods and waste management, and so on (Mennell 1997: 731). This conception, therefore, proceeds from a relatively unified, comprehensive concept of culture, in which, at the same time, a specific level of civilization is of paramount importance.

Gordon Childe, like almost everyone else, linked civilization to urbanization based on the etymology of the word, but he used it in the sense of general culture. The Bronze Age urban revolution spurred the development of plow farming, irrigation, and animal husbandry, the use of writing to a certain extent,

and, most importantly, a more differentiated *division of labor*, which also gave rise to craftsmanship (Goody 2003: 61). In this context, therefore, urbanization appears as the flourishing of various branches of culture, and this leads to a higher level of civilization, since the division of labor now pertains more to cooperation and the resolution of conflicts—that is, to the conceptual realm of civilization.

One of Freud's works is available in English under the title **Civilization and Its Discontents**, even though the title page of the original German edition featured "culture" instead of "civilization": **Das Unbehagen in der Kultur** (published in Hungarian as **Malaise in Culture** and¹⁶). This hesitation may have been justified, since in these discussions—which are fundamentally about civilization—the recognition and appreciation of beauty, purity, and order were included among the hallmarks of civilization as fundamental cultural traits; indeed, for Freud, the use of soap was considered a milestone of civilization (Freud 1961, Goody 2003: 62).

Just as with culture, definitions of civilization began to be churned out in large numbers very early on, and there are some compelling examples even from the second half of the 19th century. Some of these, in fact, do not distinguish civilization—as a culture of behavior (tolerance, cooperation, respect, etc.)—from other branches of culture. According to Arthur Mitchell, civilization (though here he uses the term explicitly in the sense of culture) is, generally speaking, synonymous with humanity's mental faculties. Culture/civilization is the complex outcome of a war waged by humanity—organized into society—against Nature, in order to prevent humanity from being condemned to extinction under the Laws of Natural Selection. He then returns to the concept of civilization (using the plural form—*civilizations*—that is, the macro-level concept), specifically highlighting its cyclical nature. He sees a pattern in the fact that while some civilizations develop to a high level, others decline at the same time, as if the seat of culture (...) were constantly shifting. Furthermore, technical culture as a whole (as we would say today: organized into a system) possesses capabilities that far exceed those of its individual components. However, the totality of people will only organize itself into a higher-order unity if the participants themselves feel the need for this and possess the capacity to do so (today we would say that the elements of social systems are self-reflective; they examine themselves, which is why their behavior becomes distinctive). Here, then, Mitchell is clearly speaking of civilization. However, he does not view these elements—that is, individuals and their humanity—as more advanced in his own time than they were in prehistoric times, since people today wage war just as they did then, only with more advanced weapons, and show no greater compassion toward one another. Some view the level of civilization in modern Western societies as more advanced than, say, that of ancient Egypt; however, according to Mitchell, in the event of major social upheaval or the outbreak of panic, even these "modern" people could commit atrocities against one another (Mitchell 1880: 80–6).

This text also excellently highlights the close connection between the ebb and flow of civilization and civilized behavior. These micro- and macro-level concepts actually share the characteristic of cyclicity, which Mitchell so aptly describes. When a society is in decline, people's inclination toward cooperation decreases while deviant behavior increases; in rising civilizations, these phenomena occur in reverse but still proceed in parallel. Of course, Mitchell was right nearly 150 years ago in observing that human nature fundamentally changes very little; it is prone to both progressive and destructive tendencies, and it depends on circumstances which of these tends to come to the surface. He was certainly not the first to make this observation, nor will he be the last.

Mohammed Khatami, former president of Iran, considered dialogue between cultures and civilizations and deep understanding to be the prerequisites for true peace, emphasizing that one cannot be

¹⁶ The English and German titles were suggested for consideration by Gábor Trombitás.

addressed without the other. If we focus on the group rather than the individual as the center of cultural and civilizational studies, we can reevaluate the ethical “underdevelopment” of non-Western societies. This does not require a complete abandonment of the interest-based, individualistic approach, but merely a perspective that integrates it with collectivist approaches. It is also a universal truth that a civilization can truly come to know itself only in the mirror of another civilization. Here, from the perspective of our topic, we must first and foremost highlight a distinctive feature of Khatami’s use of terminology: namely, that civilization, culture, tradition, and modernity all appear in a single sequence for him as manifestations of the aspirations of human societies (i.e., civilizations) (Holliday 2025: 170–2, 174).

(*Sources where the distinction between culture and civilization is clearly evident*) Edward Tylor, a 19th-century Oxford professor of anthropology (essentially the founder of this discipline), originally shared the view of many of his successors, who regarded civilization and culture as identical or very closely related concepts. According to his definition in the book **Primitive Culture**, published in 1871, “culture or civilization, in the broad ethnographic sense, is a complex whole that includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, and any other abilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (Wikipedia).

However, a decade later, he began to distinguish between the two concepts, although their connection remained close, given that the author was a cultural evolutionist—that is, he believed in the continuous evolution of human society. During *the “stage of savagery,”* human culture was at a low level; people had not yet cultivated the land or domesticated animals. At the same time, since they lived only in small groups during this period, their level of civilization was also low—a state the author defined as one in which people are bound together by the necessity of mutual survival. During the middle stage of human development—the age of barbarism—when agriculture and animal husbandry were already well established, people’s cultural level, and with it their level of civilization, was higher. According to Tylor, the main reason for this was that they were already living in villages or towns, bound by closer ties for the sake of the common good and the community (*civitas*). This more developed communal life then led to the further development of culture in the fields of the arts, knowledge, proper conduct, and governance. To put it another way: culture is the result of the development of civilization.

Tylor’s thinking on the relationship between the two concepts follows not the logic of simple linear causality, but that of circular determinism. In this spirit, he also asserts that literacy, as one of the most important cultural developments—by recording history, the laws of a given era, as well as the knowledge acquired by people and religion, so that future generations may benefit from them—links the past and the future in “an unbroken chain of intellectual and moral progress.” For Tylor, however, this is also a fundamental prerequisite for civilized life (Tylor 1881: 592).

For the purposes of the present study, we have analyzed an anonymous review of Tylor’s 1881 book **Anthropology**, published in 1882—most likely in **The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland**—which in many respects surpasses and further develops the author’s original ideas in a constructive direction. Tylor’s anonymous critic also keenly identifies the potential contradiction inherent in the two concepts: “This can hardly mean that an Englishman, who is completely indifferent to art and literature, does not live in a state of high civilization and enjoy its benefits. After all, all English people live in the same civilization, even if no two people have exactly the same culture. Accordingly, civilization is the collective achievement of the community, while

culture is always tied to the individual, who derives the opportunity to acquire culture from the civilization in which he or she lives.” (Tylor 1881: 592–3).

With regard to economic competition (which, for our part, we would place more in the realm of civilization due to its defining elements of rivalry and cooperation), Herman Daly writes the following about Keynes: “He sympathized more with those who would minimize, rather than those who would maximize, the intertwining of national economies. Ideas, knowledge, art, tourism, and travel—these are the things that are international by their very nature.” (Lányi 2020: 47). We can therefore interpret this distinction as treating civilization(s) and culture separately, and it indeed says a great deal about the retreat and inward turn of a declining global civilization, in which, at the same time, certain cultural elements—most notably science—still retain, to some extent, their role in fostering relations among nations. (Daly 1997)

The study of culture has taken on a prominent role in so-called American studies, the distinctive, self-reflective discipline of American historians. At the same time, even the earliest publications tended to use the term “civilization.” This was not merely a terminological confusion but rather an attempt to express an awareness of the political significance of culture—that is, “the practice of American studies is itself a political activity” (Lowry 2009: 314). It is another matter entirely which side of the political spectrum we place politics on, since “political culture” is itself a well-established term; at the same time—given that it refers to the relatively peaceful competition and cooperation among various interests and ideas—we, for our part, would prefer to use the term “civilization” here as well.

Culture can also embody rebellion; it was perhaps no coincidence that Dmitri Shostakovich was accused of “bourgeois formalism” by Stalin’s cultural ideologues, since his consistent artistic creed and conduct were indeed a form of quiet rebellion. In Chile, demonstrators protesting against the regime of Augusto Pinochet sang melodies by Bach and Chopin and recited poems by Schiller—it is difficult to counter this with police measures, yet these pure cultural values must have sounded like serious accusations to the ears of soldiers who trampled on humanity (Appiah 2017: 518). And when we speak of rebellion and sharp conflicts of interest, we are in fact operating within the realm of civilization, not culture.

As Goody points out, while the Nazis were brutally exterminating Jews and other groups across Europe, they took great care to always carry a clean, fragrant handkerchief and blow their noses into it (Goody 2003: 66). This example sharply illustrates both the intertwining of these two concepts and, at the same time, their stark contrast. Can someone be a cultured person if they are so uncivilized?

Prott spoke out very forcefully and argued at length against the notion of cultural heritage as property. In doing so, he effectively revealed the civilizational nature of property: the exclusion of others, control over the object, which can even extend to the destruction of the object itself (the author illustrates this with a somewhat extreme but very vivid example: a billionaire purchases a priceless painting so that, when he dies, his body can be wrapped in it). Property, therefore, primarily reflects the owner’s social status and power, and as such, it is incompatible with the objects of our shared, inalienable heritage, knowledge, and culture (Prott–O’Keefe 1992: 309). This means that, within the concept of property, civilization and culture can come into conflict with one another.

At the same time, Prott formulated a very detailed definition of culture, supported by numerous examples, which—like many other definitions of culture—essentially encompasses all of our noteworthy human achievements, including, of course, various behavioral patterns, moral norms, expressions of respect, and historically established forms of granting precedence. In this approach, therefore, culture encompasses everything, and civilization is a subset of it; it would indeed be difficult to dispute this logic. Their harmonious duality, however, can break down when a civilization—usually

at an accelerating pace—begins to decline or collapse, and culture, or rather the absence of it, takes on a life of its own. “*Inter arma silent Musae*” (the Muses are silent amid weapons), as the Latins said (presumably following the idea expressed by Cicero in “*inter arma silent leges*”—the laws are silent amid weapons—¹⁷).

Although he generally treated them as a single category, the social scientist Khatami considered it important to define these concepts separately. According to him, culture refers to a society’s deeply rooted beliefs, customs, ideas, and emotions, while civilization refers to the material aspects of social life—that is, all the institutions and organizations that have developed in the realms of politics, economics, industry, and other social formations. He regards civilization as the foundation and starting point of culture. Tradition, as the third concept, refers to the past of culture, which took shape in an earlier phase of civilization and continues to exert an influence to this day. Within the framework of modernity, these concepts permeate and dynamically influence one another, as described by Khatami (Holliday 2025: 175).

(*Technology and Civilization*) In what follows, we will examine some specific areas of the relationship between culture and civilization. As we noted in the introductory chapter of this lecture, one might think that if our technological culture is sufficiently advanced, it could save us from civilizational crises. However, the complex relationship between these two concepts applies here as well: while, on the one hand, behavioral culture is indeed an integral part of general culture, on the other hand, civilization serves as a foundation for cultural development, which is hardly conceivable without it. A given technological achievement that leads one civilization to success may take a different form—or fail to take hold at all—in another. Even in ancient times, inventions spread surprisingly freely from one end of the world to the other. That is true, but if the level of civilization—and within that, particularly the level of *governance*—was inadequate, the society in question was largely unable to make use of the incoming technological knowledge. If, on the other hand, the level of civilization and governance is higher, then that society can easily adopt and integrate foreign inventions. This is what happened, for example, with the technologies of silk and wool production, which were developed in Asia; however, thanks to the significantly higher level of organization among European weavers at the time, these technologies soon gave rise to thriving industries. Shipbuilding technology also advanced in tropical waters, but it was European commercial and military circles that were able to capitalize on it, not the locals or the Chinese, who were also somewhat interested in it. The same occurred with military technologies of Asian origin, particularly gunpowder (Chong 2017: 644).

As early as the beginning of the 1990s, it was suggested that the Earth’s natural systems had undergone irreversible changes, putting the lives of future generations at risk; as a result, many people—especially young people—experience a sense of hopelessness, feel at a loss, and live only for the present. It was concluded that our civilization has deprived itself of the means to take effective action to protect ourselves and our environment, since international economic culture no longer provides an adequate response to this situation, yet it increasingly shapes not only our economic and political lives but also our private lives. Our technological culture was useful as long as we needed to conquer and exploit nature, but it is not particularly effective at protecting us from the consequences of our own destruction. On the other hand, it provides us with ever-increasing comfort; it has become ingrained in our way of thinking, our habits, our educational system, and almost everything through which we

¹⁷ Gábor Trombitás researched the etymology of the key Latin phrase.

can develop our talents. Thus, technological culture has also increased our vulnerability and, in many respects, left us defenseless against change (Cohen 1990: 3).

(The values of culture and their impact on civilization) According to systems science, in order to transform a system—or even to bring about a radical change—one must identify what are known as “leverage points.” The effectiveness of these leverage points varies; in the final chapter of her seminal work, Donella Meadows summarizes them in a total of 12 points, and among these, she considers changing the system’s goals or values to be the most effective (Meadows, D. 1999). In societies, however, regardless of era or cultural context, certain core values are always present everywhere. For example, in the theories of rhetoric and persuasive communication, these values include truth, goodness, beauty, health, wisdom, courage, moderation, justice, harmony, order, spiritual community and friendship, as well as unity with the cosmos—that is, the acceptance of a form of transcendence. However, shifting or altering the balance among these values can have a very significant impact on given social systems (Fülöp 2016: 25). Since these values are generally present in human cultures without interruption, regardless of time and place, this may explain why culture typically develops much more evenly than civilization and the civilizations that largely depend on it.

It appears, however, that cultural values can spill over into the realm of civilization, where they can have a significant constructive—and at times even destructive—impact. Romantic literature, for example, played a major role in the emergence of nationalism. From that point on, *borders*—which had previously merely reflected the balance of power and ad hoc agreements among rulers and landowners—came to possess a serious and socially widespread emotional significance. At the same time, literature—which largely brought this separation to life—also unites nations through the universal human values and humanity (humanity) expressed within it.

Nevertheless, nationalism and humanism are both in crisis today, and according to Appiah, it is inevitable that the same will happen to literature. The dialogue between literary studies and other branches of culture now revolves almost exclusively around borders. Each distinct unit enters into its own “Schengen Agreement” with its preferred neighbors, but imposes high tariffs on the rest and vigilantly guards its borders against them (Appiah 2017: 514–6). It should be noted that borders also have great psychological significance at the individual level in understanding the world and finding one’s bearings (cognitive map); at the same time, nationalism has elevated this phenomenon to the communal, national level, but it must not stop there. Appiah succinctly expressed this by stating that “literature is national only insofar as it pushes the boundaries of the nation” (Appiah 2017: 519). In my view, this should be understood to mean that literature must stand up for precisely those progressive human values that are shared across the entire globe. This, in turn, appears to be a restatement of the paradox of individualization at the social and national levels.

(the protection of those in the minority as a fundamental requirement of civilization) Humanity refers to the free expression of human capacities within the framework provided by the world; it is closely associated with the concept of civilization, is a concept closely related to human dignity, and is perhaps not too far removed even from the Marxist concept of “species-being.” Humanity is due in equal measure to individuals and nations alike—and not only to the powerful (Appiah 2017: 515). The use of violence can face significant cultural constraints at both levels; at this point, therefore, the cultures of conduct, philosophy, and law once again converge with civilization (Sheppele 2023: 364). Legal professionals—whether judges, prosecutors, or attorneys—make serious efforts to uncover the specific, unique characteristics of each individual case, in contrast to other social scientists, who tend

to focus on statistical aggregates and general patterns. In my view, this individualized, casuistic (case-centered) nature of law is closely linked to the protection of *minorities* (i.e., people and communities that differ significantly from the norm and exhibit specific characteristics), and thus also falls within the realm of humanity¹⁸.

According to Habermas's conception, the protection of minorities in a society can be ensured through *discourse*. The most important issues must be decided through debate conducted on equal terms; therefore, hidden, tacit restrictions—which are not actually vital to the survival of society—must be eliminated. There can be no preconceptions at the outset of the debate; either side may be right if its arguments are more compelling. By “more compelling, high-quality arguments,” we mean which solutions best serve the community's interests both here and now and in the longer term, as well as within its broader context (system). Pre-established general *principles* play a key role in reconciling opposing—or at least inconsistent—views formulated within different systems. (Habermas 2008)

Liberal democratic societies are committed to expanding *personal autonomy*. Obviously, this concept also provokes a great deal of opposition, primarily from collectivist communities and intellectual movements; therefore, it is indeed important to strive to implement it in a balanced manner. For example, in the discourses mentioned, the concept of participants' stake must be taken strictly; otherwise, people might have a say in matters with which they have neither a connection nor expertise, and might even unwittingly cause harm to interests that benefit no one (Linklater 2005: 142–4). These ideas are very closely linked to the concepts of respect and dignity—cultural elements that are fundamentally about civility. The assertion of personal autonomy, as a fundamental condition of discourse (the culture of debate), must not extend to selfishness or the exploitation and oppression of others; thus, it must not violate the requirements of civilization. People are undoubtedly not all the same; their abilities and opportunities may differ. However, it is in the fundamental interest of society and communities that these differences not lead to the exclusion of the less fortunate or to domination over them. This is true, if for no other reason, because of the community's long-term interests: what seems worthless today may be very important tomorrow; this is a general rule of *diversity* that extends beyond human societies.

(*Culture as a means of managing barbarism*) So far, we have highlighted the fundamental differences between the two concepts; on the other hand, we have also seen that the manifestations of civilization and culture are mutually dependent, overlap, and form transitions. For example, we have sports, the practice of certain art forms, or simply the experience of them at our disposal for the purpose of channeling violent instincts and impulses. Our upbringing helps transform destructive energies and crude sexual impulses into creativity and into achievements that are beneficial both to society and, of course, to the individual (sublimation). According to Lányi, the view that individual selfishness is the driving force behind economic development is as old as the market economy itself. Bernard Mandeville was the first to state, in the early 18th century, that general economic growth is best served by lust, envy, avarice, and greed (Mandeville 1977, Lányi 2020: 39). Clearly, socially recognized achievements can arise from such “uncivilized” motivations in other areas of life and culture as well.

¹⁸ Individualization in criminal law aims to achieve individual goals. In this sense, humanity manifests itself more in certain procedural institutions, such as those for individuals requiring special treatment, in the use of language, or in the legal capacity of persons with limited mental capacity in civil law (Ágnes Fülöp). It would also be a major digression to elaborate on the parallels with the principles of equality and fairness (equity), which appear in various branches of law.

Elias uses the example of soccer to illustrate the civilizational process modified and supplemented by culture (physical culture, sports). When this team sport first appeared at the end of the 19th century, it was an exceptionally rough game, resulting in numerous serious injuries. Although many still consider it one of the most aggressive sports today—one that best brings negative, sometimes base impulses to the surface—we must acknowledge the truth of Elias’s argument: the development of rules, strategies, and techniques have curbed violence—or at least made it far less acceptable to everyone involved, from spectators to players. Elias attributes this to greater social organization and the resulting increase in self-restraint and safety (in a circular causality, a positive spiral) (Braun 2019: 288–9).

Archaeological sources indicate that even in the flourishing Mayan civilizations of several thousand years before our era, there was a type of ball game that researchers have interpreted as a metaphor for war. While this may indeed have served, on the one hand, as a way to practice various strategic maneuvers, it was certainly also a suitable outlet for the energy and aggression of tens of thousands of soldiers who were otherwise idling away their time (Hammond 2025: 243).

It should be noted that, in the context of interaction, the level of civilization can also be a determining factor for culture. Interestingly, the impact of urbanization on the shaping of society arises in entirely different contexts as well. In her analysis of a collection of essays by a Nigerian cultural analyst, Trish Lorenz observes that in cities, artists from a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds come into contact with one another, thereby abandoning their previously homogeneous folk music and creating entirely new, strange, interesting, and quite popular musical sounds. They also incorporate global influences, of course, as exemplified by the so-called *Afrofusion* movement. “Rather than simply adopting global trends, they use them to capture and deepen their African identity.” They make no “concessions” and do not abandon their own culture, even when they are able to enter the global music market (Lorenz 2022: 33–4). According to this view, greater compatibility and cooperation among individual communities and nations, as well as a higher level of mutual respect—that is, a global rise in the level of civilization in the realm of culture—can be wonderfully fostered.

(borderline cases and processes of mutual transformation) Today, how often and when a person brushes their teeth, and how thoroughly they maintain personal hygiene, are part of personal hygiene and health culture. However, when these issues first arose, they had fundamental civilizational significance: physical culture trickled down from the refined manners of the ruling houses (cf. the terms “courtesy” and “*court society*”) at the end of the Middle Ages into the circles of wealthy citizens, officials, and soldiers—that is, the new social elite. Among other things, subordinates could show the old and new elites the proper respect by presenting themselves before them clean and dressed in neat clothing. Etiquette manuals and descriptions of personal hygiene guided the lower classes until these practices became an integral part of their upbringing and socialization. In the Middle Ages, urinating or defecating in public was, in fact, considered natural; however, by the early modern period, it had become a matter of shame, and people carried out such acts in seclusion, in private spaces, and were still very embarrassed even when these topics came up in conversation.

The social driving force behind the institution of *shame* is immense. We describe it in terms of cultural traits, but in reality it is most closely linked to our social status and our fears of losing it. Elias made the astute observation that, in terms of the degree of civilization, these changes could only have occurred after the social division of labor in cities had become so tight that people, interdependent in a thousand ways, were forced to spend more and more time in each other’s company—or at least in close proximity. In the meantime, they had the opportunity to keep a closer eye on one another (or rather,

they had no choice but to do so). Thus, indecent—and therefore offensive, and hence uncivilized—behavior could in no way escape the attention of others, and those who exhibited such behavior could be excluded from “respectable society,” with all the consequences that such exclusion entailed (Braun 2019: 291–2). Later, the author refers to shame as the “master key” to the human emotional system, which he also regards as one of the most important triggers of violent (uncivilized) behavior (Braun 2019: 300). Thus, if the sense of exclusion is too strong in a given situation or in general, the person affected may abandon that particular network of relationships, and the shame may erupt into rage. Conflicting drives—in this case, adaptation, compliance, and outburst, defiance (with numerous synonyms such as desire, reward, stimulation, and motivation on the one hand, and avoidance, aversion, punishment, and reactions to threats), as we have already noted in connection with the analysis of aggression, can easily shift into one another, and such shifts can have considerable power due to *the rebound effect*.

11. The History of Culture and Civilization

(civilization and civilizations) Thus far, we have primarily examined behavioral culture—that is, civility—from an individual or, at most, group-level perspective, including, among other things, psychological and social-psychological approaches, and I continue to maintain that this may be the key to understanding (and solving?) a number of pressing social problems. Nevertheless, as indicated in the figure at the beginning of the previous chapter, the term “civilization” is frequently used at both the national and international levels; the term is therefore an important element of interstate relations as well as the historical sciences. In this approach, civilization is defined as a macro-cultural, macro-social, and historical unit or context that can rise and fall and interact with other civilizations across time and space. Accordingly, this term—used in the plural in English—serves to define and compare civilizations, aiming to delineate the conceptual and actual boundaries between them. In contrast, our original subject—civilization (also referred to as “civilization” in the singular in English)—is generally regarded as a process or standard in the realm of social, political, and cultural achievements. Interestingly, this concept of “civilization” (used in the singular) is actually of great general interest, even to those who, for example, examine the origins, achievements, and prospects of civilization and assess whether a person or persons (primarily peoples and states) are civilized or uncivilized. Unfortunately, it has become—and continues to become—quite evident throughout history, right up to the present day, that this latter application of the concept of “civilization” can lead to the abuse of power and cause much trouble and suffering (Bettiza 2015: 576).

The term “civilization”—or, as is often the case in Hungarian, “civilizations” in the plural—is thus also used to refer to entire social systems. Citing Hobson, Katzenstein, and Bettiza, Professor Yong Wook Lee defines “civilization” as the broadest, loosely cohesive, internally differentiated cultural and social construct that enables political actors to define their identities and interests within their network of relationships (Hobson 2004, Lee 2020: 456).

(Culture and Civilization in Antiquity and the Middle Ages) In antiquity, due to the scarcity of resources, the development of culture naturally fell to the royal courts, where the limited surplus produced by society was concentrated. These were the administrative centers of the entire empire, but they also served as venues for the cultivation of various artistic disciplines, particularly those with greater utilitarian value, such as the creation of pottery, stone carvings, and textiles. Culture, including music

and architecture, also had significant communicative value, through which the ruler could demonstrate his power by holding grand ceremonies, receiving visitors, offering gifts, and making other gestures toward friends and rivals, both domestic and foreign (Hammond 2025: 243). Once again, we see that power, as one of the most important agents of civilization, is very closely and reciprocally intertwined with culture; without mutual support, they might not even exist.

Some historians point out that while urban bourgeois culture valued primarily utilitarian skills and professional expertise, royal courts fostered creativity and ingenious solutions. In any case, it was evident at both levels that the arts were entrusted with a great responsibility, one that can be measured on a historical scale—that is, significant works endure over time and influence people's thinking and behavior (Dixon 1997: 830–1).

Alongside these two elite cultures, of course, a third level—folk culture, in the original sense of the term—also existed and flourished. Henrik Wlislöcki, a Hungarian scholar of Saxon (German) and Polish descent, represented the Romantic branch of Transylvanian ethnographic research that emerged a century and a half ago. In his view, “in order to see the true spirit of the people, we must stray from the busy main roads and diligently seek out the hidden, secluded side roads, far from the hustle and bustle of the world, where the brotherhood of people is merely a deceptive imitation, and where the flavors and nuances of authentic folk life have not yet been completely eradicated, nor have the characteristic features of the ancient tribal world been obliterated to make way for some sort of social-democratic project that, in reality, serves only the pursuit of easy profit” (Davis 2017: 23). According to Wlislöcki, then, the slowly flowing current of folk culture dates back to ancient times, and as it has gradually taken shape and been refined, it may be more resistant to passing fads (of which they may not even be aware) and represents more enduring values. Furthermore, in our interpretation, this elaborately phrased text also addresses the fact that the level of civilization—which the author here refers to as the brotherhood of humankind—is distinct from cultural development, that is, from the mastery of the most modern “achievements” of technology, economics, and politics.

(Is there progress in culture and civilization?) This question is unavoidable when examining the history of culture and civilization. Both Duerr and Elias address whether any progressive qualitative change can be observed in the civilization-culture complex they postulate—or, in Elias's case, in purely civilizational processes. On this point, their starting positions appear to be close, as they both perceive some form of development; however, their conclusions differ. According to Duerr, social control in small communities or tribal groups was strict, tight, and inescapable. In contrast, today's societies are undoubtedly much more differentiated, allowing for a much wider range of behaviors, and as a result, social control has loosened. It may be that in one or more areas of life, a person pays the price of losing face for violating norms, but since they have many faces, they can still live happily in other areas (herein lies the dark side of the paradox of individualization).

Elias also emphasized that social drive-control can take many forms and changes over time; however, in his view, in modern times—when the division of social functions is far more complex—people must adapt to a much greater variety of others, and therefore, overall, the level of social control has increased (Mennell 1997: 732–3). It would be difficult to determine which of the two conclusions is correct; it is also possible that there is a great deal of truth in both.

According to Elias, we undoubtedly live in greater safety in Europe today than we did 500 years ago; nevertheless, unlike many of his predecessors and followers, he sought to resist ranking individual societies *in a hierarchical order* based on where they stood in the historical development of civilization (Linklater 2005: 142). Here, however, we encounter almost unavoidable pitfalls.

Obviously, by accepting the concept of progress, we would also have to accept that, according to this view, there are more and less developed civilizations—which truly takes us into dangerous waters, as we have seen (and continue to see) in the West’s “civilizing” campaigns. In any case, Elias’s views allowed for such conclusions, and for this reason he has been criticized by many. This criticism intensified particularly after, as we have already noted, Elias spent a few years during the later part of his career, beginning in 1962, teaching at a university in Ghana and striving to gain broader experiences related to social and everyday life. Based on these observations, he concluded that, judging by their religious practices (such as animal sacrifices), their family relationships (a son standing behind his father’s chair and behaving like a servant), and other criteria, Ghanaians were at a lower level of civilization. He made a distinctive observation regarding “primitive” African art: he attributed its less realistic, passionate style of representation to a lack of internal control. The question naturally arises: following the lifelike paintings and sculptures of the Renaissance and Baroque periods, as well as strictly formal musical compositions, etc., did the abstract, non-figurative, dodecaphonic, and other artistic achievements that emerged at the end of the 19th century signify a decline in civilization? It is even possible—though there are hardly many who drew such a conclusion—despite the fact, of course, that many people neither understood nor liked these unconventional works.

For Elias, however, his experiences in Ghana also meant that life there was less secure, since one could rely less on people’s *internally driven* self-control (Goody 2003: 69–71). It is possible that this observation, made specifically from a civilizational perspective, was not adequately substantiated. Elias essentially characterized civilization—as a social-level achievement—through cultural elements: technological advancement, scientific achievements, religious practices, worldview, and, alongside these, an element closely related to civilization but not entirely identical to it: the general level of good manners. On a historical and global political level, as we have already noted, according to Elias, civilization is nothing other than the self-consciousness of the West. This concept of civilization encompasses everything that Western societies have achieved over the past two to three centuries and through which they have been able to view themselves as superior to their “more primitive” contemporaries (Chong 2017: 644). However, as we have pointed out earlier, this appears to be a circular argument: civilization is everything in which we are better, and therefore Western civilization is superior. Obviously, if we more consistently distinguish between general culture—and indeed, here, a part of behavioral culture on the one hand, and civilization on the other, strictly in terms of cooperation, trust, and respect—then we can safely conclude that Ghanaian culture has certainly accumulated less knowledge and fewer values to date than Western cultures, yet the level of civilization among Ghanaians may be equal to, or even greater than, that of the modern West.

Other authors have made observations regarding the civilizational influences associated with cultural development in the context of Central America. At the beginning of the last century, the Porfirian (strictly hierarchical) government celebrated the large-scale Mexican railroad construction project as a fundamental prerequisite for progress. The opposition, however, raised its voice because of the price paid for it—namely, the debt and the suffering of the workers. The Catholic Church also opposed the project because it shortened distances, which the Church found troubling, as, for example, rural people flooded into the city, unable to cope with this change and falling victim to the dissolute urban lifestyle (Schell 2013: 353). Cultural progress (in the realm of technical culture) may thus have actually resulted in a decline in the level of civilization, which reinforces our view that the accumulation—or, to put it plainly, the development—of culture does not necessarily go hand in hand with the advancement of civilization; indeed, in some cases, it may even work against it.

In the Western narrative, however, the concept of civilization has long been closely linked to the assumption of progress, which in turn led to the conclusion that some civilizations are more advanced

while others lag behind, thus giving rise to a hierarchy based on these ideas (Lee 2020: 462). Today, this concept has been largely debunked and has lost its credibility. The assumption of linear historical progress is considered unscientific in the postmodern world.

It should be noted that even in the realm of culture—where there appears to be no insurmountable obstacle to the accumulation of knowledge, acquired insights, and skills—there are those, at least in certain cultural sectors, who likewise question the possibility of progress. Thorsten Botz-Bornstein, drawing on the intrinsic value of the arts, denies that we can speak of any kind of progress in the realm of culture (Botz-Bornstein 2012).

It is hard not to agree with these doubts about progress. However, the concept of progress is so deeply ingrained in our thinking that it is difficult to sidestep or avoid it. Suffice it to say that in this Note alone I use the term at least 80 times—which is surely a gross exaggeration, even if, in our case, the majority of these instances occurred in the phrase “sustainable development” (itself highly questionable). Bowden is not quite so scrupulous: “In theory, as time passes and we move further and further away from the Big Bang and the time of the Primordial Soup, humanity as a species—and its individual members—evolve, and as they evolve, they become increasingly civilized, both collectively and individually. And as civilization advances, we move further away from the age of savagery and barbarism. In fact, for most members of Western civilization, civilization, progress, and modernity are, by definition, good things.” And here he has already arrived at Samuel Huntington, which cannot be a coincidence, although here he is not (yet) quoting from a 1998 work in connection with the “Clash of Civilizations”: “Huntington summed up the debate quite succinctly: being civilized is good, and being uncivilized is bad.” He does, however, acknowledge that things aren’t black and white in this regard either, since the idealized image of civilization and modernity is severely marred by, say, the reign of terror of fascism—which cannot be dismissed by simply claiming that civilization’s usual influence on human behavior was merely suspended for a time. No, clearly this, too, is part of civilization—its dark side (Bowden 2016, pp. 3–4).

(Culture and History) Culture exerts a relative, indirect influence on the development (or at least the chronological progression) of history—as “Civilization” with a capital “C”—by shaping the perception and interpretation of historically significant events and, consequently, of actions of historical significance. Most cultural historians fundamentally question the notion that such history-shaping influences were exerted exclusively through the white male elite. Numerous researchers are working to uncover the significance of various social practices and to demonstrate the impact on history of workers, women, immigrants, indigenous peoples, LGBTQ+ individuals, and other social groups defined by race, gender, class, and so on. They redefine the established meanings of things and are thereby capable of bringing about significant intellectual and cultural shifts; the role of these influences in fundamental changes—such as the transition from modernism to postmodernism, or, as Wang puts it, the transition to “postmodern consumerism”—cannot be underestimated (Wang 2003: 184). This resonates with Hewitt’s early analysis from the 1960s regarding commercial, popular culture. This culture overturns the traditions and the canonized, established rules of traditional aristocratic, bourgeois culture. This could even be viewed as the emergence of postmodernism, but in reality it is merely a negation of modernism, which, for its part, follows patterns that are just as—if not more—conservative, insofar as market or consumer interests dictate (Hewitt 1999: 356).

To put it another way: the course of history is determined by how people attribute meaning to things—that is, by how meaning is produced and how it creates history (*“how meaning is produced and how it produces history”*). This is contrasted with such solid, tangible, fundamentally civilizational *phenomena*

(“*hard phenomena*”) as diplomacy, wars, and trade. Interpreted from a different, peculiar (strange) perspective: history, as the development of civilization, may be masculine, but the cultural formulation, in comparison, appears to be more feminine. (Lowry 2009: 303–4) In my view, Lowry and the studies in *American studies* he cites are themselves good examples of culture’s influence on the development of civilizations. But the reverse is also true: individual civilizations also seek to use culture—specifically mass culture—for their own purposes. Accordingly, the task of historians, literary scholars, sociologists, and anthropologists is to demonstrate, on the one hand, the impact of the dissemination, practice, and consumption of culture on the formation of nations, and, on the other hand, the cultural imprint of macro-level changes in civilization (Lowry 2009: 305).

In the American context, this connection has also been used to demonstrate the extent to which the culture of *sentimental domesticity* provided the backdrop for U.S. imperialist expansion (Lowry 2009: 307). We are also familiar with the renowned Canadian communication scholar McLuhan’s idea that the stage of literacy—when perfected book printing was already capable of supplying large markets—influenced the formation of nations, among other things, through the standardization of language (McLuhan 2001). Today, we are witnessing precisely how the ruling parties—not only the populists, of course, but them in particular—are using culture to reshape and control the consciousness of the masses in pursuit of their own political and economic goals. This may also be related to what Lowry referred to as the “*disastrous hubris of contemporary American nation-building*” (Lowry 2009: 306). Indeed: when a civilization is in a state of disintegration, it is unlikely to be as easily malleable to various “soft” cultural influences as it is in peacetime. The culture of crisis is typically destructive, for example, by bringing addictions and dependencies to the forefront (Lowry 2009: 310).

Political culture can also reshape society, but a situation may also arise in which a particular political culture merely creates the conditions for such a transformation, even unintentionally. Wendy Brown has extensively documented that liberalism’s ideological neutrality, its set-in-stone correctness, and the complete eradication of social prejudices have, in any case, left a distinct void in their wake. As we have already noted, we were once taught that what a person believes is entirely outside the realm of politics and public affairs, and therefore must be tolerated at all costs. Because of this, liberal ideologies stood defenseless against the onslaught of fundamentalist, populist, and other anti-hegemonic social movements. In that case, it might be better to speak openly about prejudices and debate the pros and cons in public forums rather than pretending they do not exist at all (Vakulenko 2008: 333).

It also happens that the “culture war” is two-pronged: on the surface, it appears to take place only on the international stage, but fundamentally, it arises from the demand to alter internal power relations—including the balance of power among ethnic groups. Czechoslovakia, which was established between the two world wars, was culturally—in terms of its economy, political culture, traditions, education, art, etc.—deeply divided between the Western-oriented Czech regions and the much more underdeveloped Slovak and Ruthenian regions. The world’s fairs held regularly during this period provided an excellent opportunity for the country to showcase this duality and, by “speaking from the outside in,” to reconcile the two in some way. They wanted to present Czechoslovakia as a unified nation where the “folk” and the “modern” were united in harmony.

This approach was particularly evident in the design of the Czechoslovak pavilions at world’s fairs: modern forms adorned with folk motifs. Several ministries were generally responsible for organizing the pavilions—the Ministry of Industry, the Ministry of Public Education, and the Ministry of Culture in the narrower sense—thus representing a general, “aggregated” national culture and, of course, commercial and business interests as well. The exhibits were richly adorned with symbols—flags, emblems, and maps illustrating Czechoslovakia’s central location and its diverse connections via

waterways and land routes. They also showcased tourist attractions, folk art objects, clothing, and even songs, folktales, and folk traditions, as well as, of course, typical Czechoslovak products such as Pilsner beer or Koh-i-Noor merchandise. At the same time, they avoided any German, Austrian, or possibly Hungarian cultural references. That said, the majority of these companies were still founded well into the 19th century; for example, the Moser glassworks was established by German-speaking Jews, and the Thonet furniture factory by Germans.

All of this served as an excellent demonstration of the positive and negative aspects of the search for—and indeed, the shaping of—identity for social scientists. The authors add that this kind of presentation of national identity did not elicit unanimous enthusiasm on the Slovak side either. It was likely precisely this oversimplified division between the highly developed Czech side and the “rather simple” Slovak side that was one of the reasons why no lasting unity developed between the two nations, and when the opportunity arose, they went their separate ways (Filipová 2021: 146–9, 162). In this case, therefore, forced and one-sided cultural interactions had serious repercussions for the development of trust and political cooperation between the two nations—that is, for their civilizational relationship.

Incidentally, the idea of the World’s Fair also played a significant role in the reconstruction of British identity after World War II. Grand commemorations were held for the 1851 World’s Fair of Arts, Architecture, Science, Technology, and Industrial Design, to highlight the great service the British had rendered in strengthening civilization and peace even after the turbulent years of the first half of the nineteenth century (Hewitt 1999: 352). In this case, therefore, the civilizational impacts of cultural achievements were articulated even more directly, primarily for a foreign audience.

(environmental pollution and the depletion of resources) One of the chapters—perhaps the very last—in the history of modern civilization may be the rapid deterioration of the environmental conditions of human societies. The destruction of our environment can ultimately be attributed to civilization, since we are destroying our fundamental conditions of existence, and we can safely add to the definition of civilization that it is a prerequisite not only for peaceful coexistence but, more generally, for the survival of communities and societies. Furthermore, it is also a matter of civilization that capitalist or state-capitalist entrepreneurs, in their race to outdo one another, are striving to devour the resources still at our disposal—resources that are either not renewable at all or only barely so. Paradoxically, this is the crudest manifestation of raw competitive spirit, one that appears at the highest level among the most highly educated corporate managers. Victory or death. Onward until the complete annihilation of business rivals.

This competition cannot last much longer; within a few decades, the raw materials necessary for industrial and agricultural production will be depleted. And this is a textbook example of the decline and eventual collapse of civilizations. At first glance, the collapse of civilizations is usually explained by the depletion of available resources, but we can see that this is merely a consequence; our accumulated scientific, technical, and other cultural capabilities would amply allow for the proper (sustainable) use of resources; however, the lack of civilization makes the decline of this civilization inevitable from this perspective as well.

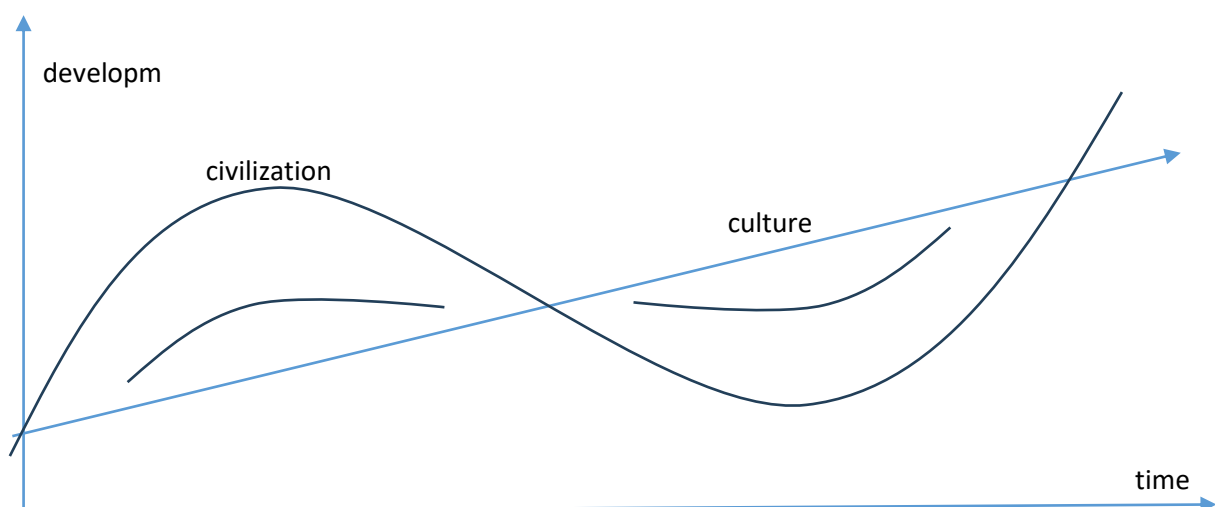
Taking into account environmental protection and the interests of future generations is, of course, also a cultural issue. Scientists, public figures, global networks of environmental organizations, their national centers, and even local, so-called *grassroots* groups are constantly working to change our production and consumption habits. Universities have introduced courses on sustainable development, but this issue also carries significant weight in lower levels of education, even in preschools, where the most impressionable children can be shaped—and it is not impossible that they,

in turn, will persuade their parents to see things more clearly on many issues. Selective waste collection, walking, cycling, and using trams and subways: these are behavioral and cultural elements that can somewhat improve our situation and, above all, serve as harbingers of radical shifts in mindset that could have serious economic and political consequences.

The big question is how long this inherently slow cultural transformation would take to overcome our fundamental civilizational distortions, which, in turn, are accelerating and taking effect in a chain-reaction-like manner. The impact on morality and the law is barely perceptible today; so-called environmental law, for example, is little more than a series of hypocritical token measures, where governments and their agencies are actually competing to see which of them can create more favorable conditions for environmentally destructive industry and agriculture. This can also be called environmental protectionism (Fülöp, 2016).

(The Rise and Fall of Civilizations) The history of humanity consists of the rise and fall of civilizations; according to the prevailing view, the latter generally occurs because a given civilization has exhausted its resources. It is less frequently mentioned that among these resources, social capital—that is, civilization itself, along with people’s ability and willingness to cooperate—is increasingly one of the most important. The fall of civilizations and increasingly uncivilized behavior are closely linked, as Lányi points out: “Violent expansion, the pursuit of homogenization, and a lack of flexibility characterize every declining civilization’s desperate struggle for survival.” He later quotes Lasch, who argues that globalization gives elites the opportunity to become independent of their local social environment, and as a result, “they represent no one and feel no solidarity with anyone else,” and then draws the conclusion that “the paradox of globalization is that the civilizational models gaining dominance worldwide originate from Western democracies, yet the changed political conditions are precisely what place seemingly insurmountable obstacles in the path of democratic governance. In economic terms, democracy has become a veritable comparative disadvantage.” (Lányi 2020: 43, 50, 51). These are clear signs of crisis, pointing to the decline of civilization and civilized values.

(the temporal dimension of the progress of civilization and culture) We can summarize our discussions so far regarding the history of culture and civilization, as well as our review of the literature, in a simple diagram.



Civilizations—and thus the level of civilization—historically rise and then fall, as we have seen; according to the prevailing view, this is primarily because resources begin to run out and only become available again in sufficient quantities once the population has collapsed and its needs have fallen to a fraction of what they once were. This would elegantly explain the almost automatic resurgence, but I believe that would be too simplistic.

However, cultural achievements are not completely destroyed during the fall of a civilization. At the same time, it is in any case obvious that culture also suffers to some extent from the fall, while a rising civilization undoubtedly propels cultural development upward as well. Nevertheless, the two factors are largely independent of one another. According to John Stuart Mill, culture can flourish equally during both the ascendant and declining phases of a civilization, even if its social context and motivational basis differ (Mill 1848, cited in Lányi 2020: 18). However, we currently consider it overly optimistic to claim that “civilizations can be saved from collapse or helped through a period of decline if they possess a strong culture” (Unacademy 2021–22). Even if Rupert Hall is clearly correct in arguing that scientific truths transcend eras—as illustrates, for example, with how ancient Greek atomism may have influenced the modern discovery of subatomic particles (Dixon 1997: 853).

In contrast to the ebb and flow of civilization, however, the other trend depicted in the figure—culture (culture in general, in the broadest sense)—essentially presents a slower, more tranquil, and steadily growing pattern. The selective, evolution-like transmission of the cultural achievements of individual eras and generations is cumulative in nature. There exists a vast repository—primarily in the fields of information and communication (literacy, storage facilities, servers, etc.)—that makes this accumulation possible (Aunger 2006: 348). In this context, we may mention Khatami’s concept, who pointed out that culture persists long after the civilization that produced it has long since vanished. Civilizations must therefore adopt tradition, as well as the successful practices of other civilizations, when building a new, significant civilization. Consequently, dialogue among civilizations will be an important element in building a new civilization and renewing the system of social and political institutions, while preserving its originality and legitimacy by maintaining its traditions. As an Iranian leader, Khatami’s program paid tribute to the achievements of Western civilization, modern science and technology, freedom of thought, and democracy; at the same time, he naturally harbored hostile feelings toward the lingering effects of colonization, the plundering of other peoples’ cultural and economic values, the pollution of its environment, and the spread of half-truths, lies, and compromise. It also blames the West—which undeniably profits from this—for the dictatorships that have been inherited and perpetuated (Holliday 2025: 175).

Edward Tylor, the father of anthropology, also recognized that civilizations are not always in a state of progress; sometimes they stagnate or begin to decline. According to his views, however, this also sweeps away the vast majority of a culture’s achievements; for the members of a fallen civilization, the culture of its heyday would be useless—they can only make use of what suits their circumstances (Tylor 1881: 593). In my opinion, this is an inconsistent position, since Tylor himself had previously pointed out not only the parallelism between culture and civilization but also that they can influence one another: new cultural achievements can lead to the emergence of a new level of civilization, while a more advanced civilization provides greater opportunities for the development of all branches of culture. And if this is the case, the available cultural achievements will sooner or later be put to use (even if they are currently unusable due to specific circumstances). It is true that it was not, say, the “Dark Ages,” but rather the scholars, artists, and thinkers of the Enlightenment who drew upon the surviving values of ancient culture—but they did draw upon them and were able to make use of them.

One might argue that, at the time of a civilization’s collapse, behavioral culture breaks away from the fabric of culture and becomes autonomous, while particularistic interests tear apart the existing

system, since they find themselves in a position where they can and indeed want to do so. Rising civilizations, on the other hand, are perhaps characterized by a specific cultural “driving force,” such as agricultural culture in prehistory, or—in the early Middle Ages—religious culture, which dominated every sphere of life and was capable of establishing order and discipline without direct physical violence, thanks to the increasingly devoted support of a growing segment of the population. Today, we believe in the leading role of technological culture—and, more recently, information culture—but it remains a major question whether we will be disappointed in this belief.

Regarding the parallel development of culture and civilization, Hewitt’s detailed analysis examined conditions in Western Europe after World War II. He describes the world war as a kind of cultural crisis (or, according to our conceptual framework, more accurately a crisis of civilization), which, alongside an almost total economic collapse, led to the moral and political disorientation of the population. During the rapid reconstruction—which was, of course, facilitated by the Marshall Plan—the countries of Europe experienced a sort of renaissance: a complete renewal of political life, rapid urban growth, and extensive, uninterrupted development across many sectors of culture that lasted for several decades. Prosperity and democracy went hand in hand, which restored trust in institutions and a willingness to act and ambition within society, and even raised these to levels not seen in a long time. Quite rightly, then, this author is not content with merely the 4–7% economic growth that persisted for at least a decade and a half—the Western European “economic miracle”—but instead reports on the unbroken, enthusiastic rise of culture, and within that, behavioral culture. At the international level, the signing of the Treaty of Rome in 1957 was the best example of this, one of its high points. By no means independent of all these developments, the baby boom of the 1950s led, by the end of the 1960s, to the emergence of a new, one might say revolutionary, youth culture (Hewitt 1999: 351–2).

Brazil’s history is very similar, as the country went through a dark period of military dictatorships in the 1960s and 1970s. Then, in 1978, a talented and courageous labor union leader, Luiz Inácio Lula de Silva, organized a series of strikes that drew the support of the entire civil society—including churches, student organizations, and some 100 other social groups. Within a year, the movement gave rise to the Workers’ Party, which, after a long and persistent struggle, eventually came to power (Acemoglu 2012, pp. 456–7). We can only describe this collaboration as a revolution in civilization.

Social anthropologist Jack Goody, in his analysis of Elias’s work, also points out that the progress of civilization is not uniform and does not show continuous improvement. “While we take pride in raising our children better and better, respecting women, and adhering to international conventions regarding prisoners of war (...), and do not mistreat animals (provided we do not count their extermination here), why is it that we are hearing more and more reports of child abuse, whether within the family or at the hands of others? Indeed, why are there so many broken families today?” (Goody 2003: 67). The progress of civilization is thus conditional and fragile; it is by no means inevitable or predetermined. It can be interrupted or suspended at any time during wars, disasters, or other dramatic social upheavals. These are generally (hopefully) temporary and often localized; in any case, civilization can peel away from individuals, groups, and even entire societies in the blink of an eye. In such cases, state power and faith in rationality typically weaken, as does mutual self-definition among different groups, and people’s self-restraint generally diminishes. At the same time, according to Pratt, a fully developed, complex state bureaucracy is capable of maintaining a minimal level of civilization relatively persistently (Pratt 2016, pp. 3 and 6).

We can see, therefore, that the historical periodicity depicted in the figure above is only one of the possible temporal variations of civilization. However, I do not entirely agree with Pratt’s latest remark; I believe that it holds true only for minor, temporary crises. In the event of a serious, comprehensive cataclysm of civilization, the state bureaucracy first begins to function dysfunctionally, then collapses,

and yields its place to spontaneous, anarchic formations. This is all the more true because, as Pratt himself points out, bureaucracy generally represents the value system of the urban middle class rather than, say, that of rural populations; yet in the event of cataclysms, it is precisely the urban middle class that is perhaps the most vulnerable.

(Historical examples of the rise and fall of civilizations) The fall of the Western Roman Empire in 476 was followed by a partial social decline lasting several centuries. Urban life declined, literacy was pushed into the background, and *self-sufficient village communities* took the place of the complex economic system. Social organization declined radically—the system reverted to a simpler, decentralized structure. This collapse can be compared in many ways to the downfall of Late Bronze Age civilizations: climate change, environmental degradation, resource depletion, epidemics, and migration—all reinforcing one another—led to the disintegration of a civilizational system (Cline 2021).

The consequences of the collapse of civilization were particularly dramatic in Greece, where a “Dark Age” lasting nearly four hundred years began. Writing ceased to exist, urban life disappeared, the population scattered, the arts regressed to a primitive level, and a significant portion of knowledge was lost. The complexity of social relationships declined radically—just as the later example of the Romans demonstrated: with the collapse of centralized systems, society reverted to a lower, simpler level of functioning (Tainter 1990).

Archaeologists and historians have now relatively well mapped out the complex, multifactorial causes of the Late Bronze Age civilizational collapse. One of the most important contributing factors was climate change: the period was characterized by severe drought lasting several decades, which significantly reduced agricultural productivity in Egypt, the Levant, and Anatolia. Pollen analyses and studies of lake sediment layers show that the prolonged drought severely affected crop yields, leading to famine, social tensions, and internal uprisings.

Environmental degradation also contributed to this: due to the growing population, arable land was depleted, and forests were cut down on a massive scale—primarily for shipbuilding and construction. This short-sighted, selfish (uncivilized) strategy had tragic consequences, since at that time agriculture and logging provided society with virtually all of its vital energy resources. When the supply of these resources began to dwindle, they could no longer sustain the complex systems of the past. The elite, however, continued to cling to a *lifestyle of luxury consumption*, which further destabilized the system. It is no coincidence that in many cities, it was precisely the neighborhoods inhabited by the elite that were the first to fall into ruin.

The collapse of international trade also played a key role in the crisis. The functioning of Bronze Age civilizations depended critically on raw materials from external sources—such as the exchange of tin, copper, food, and textiles. However, trade routes gradually ground to a halt due to political instability and maritime piracy. As a result, the flow of energy and materials—essential to the functioning of these complex societies—began to falter and eventually collapsed.

The final, symbolic act of the collapse was the wave of invasions by the “Sea Peoples.” These groups of people, whose origins are unknown, were likely fleeing famine and ravaged coastal cities. The invasion is described in detail in the victory inscriptions of the Egyptian pharaohs Ramses II and Ramses III—not coincidentally, since Egypt was the only major civilization in the region to survive the collapse, albeit significantly weakened (Tainter 1990).

The fall of the Maya Empire, however, is not linked to any specific event—such as a war, famine, or epidemic—but rather is characterized by a downward trend lasting from the 9th–10th centuries all the way to the 16th century, during which periods of decline and growth, the fading of signs of life, and visible activity alternated in response to external circumstances—sometimes with more successful, sometimes with less successful internal responses—until the rise of the Aztec Empire pushed the Maya to the periphery in both political and cultural terms (Hammond 2025: 244).

Epidemics sometimes contribute significantly to the decline of a civilization; for example, in 430 B.C., a plague decimated Athens, causing it to lose the Peloponnesian War against Sparta. Rome was also brought to its knees in large part by the Black Death (plague) in 542. The 1918 Spanish flu (influenza) claimed the lives of tens of millions of people in some countries who were already exhausted by the war. We cannot yet say definitively what the effects of COVID-19 will be, but it is certain that it has not been good for our current civilization. As Oxford researcher Matthew Eric puts it: during the raging of pandemics, “civilization comes to a standstill.” After all, in the case of COVID-19, we are undoubtedly talking about the most widespread and impactful pandemic in history, which, according to WHO data, had caused more than 6.5 million recorded deaths by the end of 2022, with the number of officially confirmed cases being a hundred times that figure. It is clear that the actual numbers were far higher than those officially recorded, and it would still be premature to draw a complete assessment. Although there were only 30,500 deaths in China—a figure dwarfed, for example, by India’s more than half a million cases— the pandemic and its “zero-COVID” approach have contributed to a decline in the ruling party’s popularity, given the low vaccination rate, the less effective vaccine, and, in general, the poor quality of public health measures and their communication (Eric 2023: 1, 4, 6). There are no tangible signs of this yet, but even if there were, the outside world would hardly be aware of them. In any case, this is a tenuous thread that reinforces Acemoglu and Robinson’s rather contrived argument that, due to inadequate political and governance structures and a lack of incentives for freedom and creativity, the Chinese economic and political miracle has come to an end (Acemoglu 2012, p. 437).

I do not know to what extent the theories of Jared Diamond and Stephen Hawking (which were not developed jointly but are complementary) regarding alien civilizations existing in the universe can be considered historical. To give his arguments some weight, Diamond quotes Metrodorus from 400 BCE: “To regard the Earth as the only inhabited world in the infinite universe is just as absurd as claiming that only a single seed will sprout in a field sown with millet,” and then warns us against longing too much for their appearance: based on our earthly experience, an encounter between an advanced and an underdeveloped civilization would almost certainly end with the former subjugating the latter. Hawking, however, reassures us: in his view, the reason we do not receive radio signals from alien beings is that, once they reached this level of technological advancement, they inevitably brought about their own destruction. (Horváth 2020, p. 481.)

(Culture and Civilization in U.S. History) Lowry outlines the three phases of American civilization based on the works of various authors, primarily historians. In the first phase, when everyone was an immigrant, people learned to live together; although groups representing different national, religious, professional, and other cultures remained separate, this mosaic very quickly coalesced into a unified and strong society. This unified society, however, while continuing to proclaim itself as inclusive and tolerant, increasingly built a cultural totalitarianism centered on consumerism, (Christian) family values, and corporate orthodoxy (conservatism, traditionalism). This phase peaked during the Cold War, as it became so intense that it was no longer acceptable to that segment of society that maintained a sense of reality and sound morality. It was then that so-called *American Studies* flourished, fueled by generous government and private (business) funding. But this field, which dealt

with the self-definition of American culture and the systematization of its most important elements, soon broke free from the constraints dictated by politics and the economy. As early as 1950, Charles Seymour, president of Yale University (speaking at a ceremony marking a large-scale private capital contribution), considered it important to note the following: “In our society, the most important defense against totalitarian developments lies in an understanding of our own cultural heritage and the proper functioning of institutions that guarantee freedom, entrepreneurship, and individual liberty.” At a regional meeting of the Association for American Studies (ASA) held in 1967, Robert Sklar argued that this discipline must be composed of various forms of dissent (Lowry 2009: 220). The most prominent representatives of the discipline thus recognized the first signs of the decline of American civilization quite early on and continued to warn of it later, yet they remained fairly optimistic regarding the anticipated beneficial effects of democratic American values and the autonomous sciences.

(The Decline of Western Civilization) As early as 1939, in his multi-volume historical overview, Arnold J. Toynbee envisioned the downfall of Western civilization, quite simply due to humanity’s deeply ingrained destructive tendencies (*inherent destructive ethos*). He saw that, as a result of growth, civilization creates its own environment, complete with its own challenges and sphere of action. From this point on, humanity itself dictates the rules. Humanity, standing on the brink of catastrophe, can be saved only by the establishment of a new civilization. Eighty years later, in his popular book **Homo Deus**, Yuval Noah Harari essentially says the same thing, with the difference that he no longer considers unification through religion—or some form of shared monotheism—a viable path; on the contrary, in his view, the increasingly *mechanized universe* that humanity has built condemns it to desperate loneliness. (Harari 2020)

Artists attuned to the spirit of the times—primarily writers and filmmakers—as well as enthusiastic audiences are equally sensitive to these issues and present us with the most vivid post-apocalyptic scenarios and screenplays, in which algorithms created to make our lives easier or even to ensure our survival, primarily artificial intelligence, turn against us (**The Matrix**, **The Walking Dead**, **The Hunger Games**, **Waterland**, **The Book of Eli**, **Mad Max**, **12 Monkeys**, **The Maze Runner**, **The Initiate**, **Greenland: The Last Refuge**, etc.¹⁹). It’s interesting that these nightmares very often distract viewers—and even divert their attention—from the most realistic threats, such as global climate change. It seems that Harari, too, tends to follow this path. He writes: “As computers paint more beautifully, compose more skillfully, and analyze better, humanity’s emotions will become useless and then fade away.” (Andersson 2018: 429)

In his 2012 work, Ophuls quotes numerous historians, philosophers, and artists who essentially agree that the decline of past civilizations has always been linked to the moral decay of people. Gábor Vida (2012) also points out that everything our ancestors considered a virtue—such as moderation, charity, kindness, and humility—is today viewed more as a weakness, or even a sin. Our modern civilization tends to value gluttony, greed, arrogance, materialism, competition, self-importance, and conceit. In his 1990 address (Message on the Occasion of the World Day of Peace), Pope John Paul II emphasized that the ecological crisis is, in fact, a moral problem. In line with this, we might also mention Layard’s series of secular experiments published in 2005, based on the well-known moral dilemma of returning lost wallets. While in 1952, 51% of finders turned in the wallet, in 1965 the figure was only 43%, in 1976 only 32%, and finally, in 1998, only 27%. Also from Layard’s article is the data set regarding violent crime. (Unfortunately, the series of experiments was almost certainly discontinued for financial

¹⁹ Gábor Troimbitás rounded out the list.

reasons: they ran out of wallets.) In Great Britain, violent crime increased severalfold between 1950 and 1983, and although the data “stagnated” for a decade and a half afterward, the numbers have been rising again in the 2010s. (Horváth 2020, pp. 104, 109–110.) The halt and subsequent resumption of this trend were likely due to demographic factors: first, the aging of the baby boomers led to a decline in the supply of new workers in the profession, a trend that was later offset by immigration.

Pratt attributes the general decline in the civilization of modern Western societies since the 1970s to the neoliberal turn; at the state, institutional-economic, group, and family levels (using Elias’s term: in the figuration), the process of civilization has definitely weakened. The central state apparatus underwent a transformation, withdrawing from a range of tasks it had gradually assumed during the development of the welfare state. In Great Britain, this was particularly evident under the Thatcher government, but New Labor Prime Minister Tony Blair was no different. In 2002, five years before his resignation, he stated: “We must leave behind the ‘big government’ built after 1945, which was based on the misconception that it could solve every social problem; instead, we must create a government aimed at unleashing individual potential.” At the same time, perhaps the silver lining— —is that the state, lacking in resources and having lost its prestige, increasingly relied on the help of social organizations, civilians, and others. Philip Shabekoff writes similarly in his excellent work on the history of the American environmental movement: environmental activists were at their most active and enjoyed the greatest public support precisely when, under the Reagan administration, they were virtually persecuted—or at the very least, their very existence was strongly opposed (Shabekoff 1983).

The shrinking of the state went hand in hand with a plunge in confidence in its institutions and governance. By 2009, according to a *Eurobarometer* report, only 21% of Britons trusted their government. Along with this, of course, trust among people also declined. Citing Fukuyama and other authors, Pratt noted that these profound social changes have buried many long-standing institutions and cultural traditions (expectations and norms). We are also witnessing radical changes in family relationships: family size has declined dramatically, divorce is considered completely normal, and a range of transitional, unstable relationship forms have emerged. Solidarity both between and within social classes is also on the wane, along with the stability and reliability it once provided. Union membership is disappearing, voter behavior has become unpredictable, and migration appears to threaten both national and personal identity.

Pratt concludes that British society and its constituent communities have largely lost their cohesion, and that the interdependencies between individuals and the state—as well as among individuals themselves—have weakened. Today, for example, we must purchase security for ourselves, just like any other commodity or service, even though it was once taken for granted that various levels of government would guarantee it for us. Meanwhile, we have become heavily dependent on media messages to provide us with some sense of direction—something that used to be provided by our families or circles of friends. This situation, however, once again leads to a series of irrational decisions and behaviors in today’s societies.

Under these circumstances, it was also ill-timed for the media to have been almost completely freed from any form of government control. A specific manifestation of the decline in social solidarity is the shift in attitudes toward criminals. Our penal systems, which had gradually become more lenient and liberal over the centuries, have reverted to a culture of revenge, isolation, and stigmatization under slogans such as “zero tolerance,” “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth,” “three strikes,” and the like. (Pratt 2016, pp. 10–11.)

Carvalho shares this view: political rhetoric, the media, and, evidently, the overwhelming majority of the public demand severe punishment for offenders in the name of justice. This generally translates

into extremely harsh prison sentences and inhumane prison conditions, including the dehumanization of prisoners. Those segments of society from which a disproportionately high number of criminals are believed to come bear a stigma and must endure a series of disadvantages. On the other hand, however, victims play an increasingly significant role in criminal cases, as this makes the struggle between good and evil more emotionally palatable for society (Carvalho 2016, pp. 2 and 5). A whole host of politicians are building their platforms around this, within the framework of a kind of punitive populism.

(*Why do nations fail?*) In their famous work of the same title (*Why Nations Fail*), Nobel laureates Acemoglu and Robinson identify the primary cause of the failure of nations—and often entire civilizations—as the extractive institutional system established, maintained, and passed down by ruling elites, and the resulting extractive economic system, which lacks incentives and creativity. The authors use the neutral adjective “extractive,” which, if we were to translate it faithfully, would require us to use only the terms “extraction” or, at most, “ ” rather than the Hungarian terms “kiszípolozás,” “kizsigerelés,” or “kizsákmányolás,” which convey the same meaning. However, since these terms are also available in English—and the word denoting the key concept was clearly chosen intentionally—we, too, will stick with the term “extractive” in this instance. Its opposite—an inclusive political institutional system and economic practice—already sounds better in Hungarian, so here, too, we will not use words like “open,” “permissive,” or “free” in its place.

Individual nations may break free from the vicious cycle of poverty and oppression during critical junctures in their history by making way for “creative destruction” (as defined by Joseph Schumpeter, cited in Acemoglu 2012, p. 84), replacing outdated institutions and economic practices with new ones that enable innovation and development. Such historical turning points are not always positive; Acemoglu and Robinson cite three key examples from medieval and modern history: the Black Death pandemic, which wiped out half of Europe’s population (forcing landlords to value the remaining labor force much more highly); the discovery of the New World and the resulting transatlantic economic relations, which proved highly profitable for Europe; and, finally, the Industrial Revolution (Acemoglu 2012, p. 431). They raise the question of why, at this second critical juncture, it was precisely England—which had until then been on the periphery of European political and economic development—that was able to benefit the most, in terms of the opening up of its institutional and economic systems and the subsequent leap in development. It is not simply a matter of their relatively favorable geographical position, since the Spanish, Portuguese, French, and several other nations were similarly well-positioned to reach the American continents. In these latter countries, however, the old elite exploited the new situation for their own benefit; the acquisition of the American continent’s treasures through various exclusive monopolies enriched the old ruling class. Of course, the English kings and their circles also attempted to get their hands on transatlantic trade; however, as Acemoglu et al. themselves note, they were unable to succeed. Hopefully, we are not undermining the authors’ logic by pointing out some reasonably plausible underlying factors behind this. England is an island with, relative to its size, an exceptionally long coastline and countless ports, which could not easily be kept under constant and effective control. Inevitably, a relatively independent and very wealthy merchant class emerged, which soon demanded political representation, an institutional system more favorable to them, and open economic opportunities. The rest is history: the Glorious Revolution, struggles with the monarchy, Parliament, an ever-expanding suffrage, and so on. England also benefited from the fact that, during the Roman Empire and consequently in the early Middle Ages, it was located on the periphery; it seems to have been good for their civilization that all the great powers of the time left them relatively in peace. In any case, Acemoglu et al. emphasize that the development of the English countryside may

have diverged from the European mainstream; the feudal order was weaker, but peasants had easy access to trade, which was also linked to the strengthening of the free towns (Acemoglu 2012, p. 181).

At this point, we might even venture one more critical remark. The bestseller **Why Nations Fail** oversimplifies matters somewhat. It explicitly opposes explaining major historical changes—during which certain nations, and even world empires and civilizations, rise and then fall—by anything other than the dynamics of extractive versus inclusive institutional and economic systems. At the beginning of the book, they devote a separate chapter to “theories that don’t work,” including geographical and cultural approaches (e.g., those referring to Chinese work culture or Protestant ethics). “Other factors, such as the extent to which people trust one another or are able to cooperate, are important, but they largely stem from the institutional system; they are not independent causal factors.” (Acemoglu 2012, p. 57.) In contrast, in my opinion, it is entirely obvious that geographical, historical-cultural, and physical-environmental factors—such as climate change, meteorological events, the depletion and exhaustion of resources, the activities of historical figures and small groups, cultural values, ideas, and ideologies, and yes, the level of civilization also plays a role in shaping a nation’s destiny, even if they are not truly independent of one another—none of these factors can be. Indeed, these factors, together with the institutional system, economic freedom, property rights, public order, and so on, systematically shape the history of nations by influencing one another and interacting back and forth.

Perhaps precisely because of its one-sidedness, their theory seems to have lost its edge when applied to China, since even with what they consider highly extractive institutions, China has managed to produce spectacular and sustained economic development. True, they say, the Soviet Union also developed for a few decades, and then look what became of it... Incidentally, the authors cannot account for the starkly divergent developmental trajectories of the two halves of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, even though, as they emphasize in many places, the entire empire was heavily extractive.

Of course, a theory of social development is of little value if it cannot offer at least some tentative proposals for a radical transformation of the situation—or even just for gradual improvement. The authors of **Why Nations Fail** also devoted 5–6 pages at the very end of their more than 500-page work to the so-called “empowerment” methodology. They cite the example of Brazil—a country that had been groaning under decades of military dictatorship and was certainly quite poor—which we have already referred to earlier. To briefly recap the story: It began in 1978 with an illegal strike, which a talented and ambitious union leader named Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva then organized into a national movement and subsequently into a political party—a party that, after persistent efforts, eventually seized power. According to the authors’ analysis, part of its success stemmed from the fact that society had grown weary of the long-standing military rule. They do not explicitly state it, but such feedback—or even a rebound effect—as a fundamental characteristic of the system may also have played a major role in the emergence of the “critical junctures” they mention. They do, however, state—and this is also a system-level response—that the movement, and later the party, required a very broad social alliance—extending beyond trade unions and professional associations to include churches, student organizations, and other social movements—and, of course, that when the Workers’ Party was finally formed, it continued to maintain this broad social base. Why didn’t some shrewd politicians from the existing leadership circle take advantage of this support to build their own power base (something we have, unfortunately, seen several examples of recently, particularly among Hungary’s green movements and parties)? They have no choice but to point to a series of contributing factors, such as at least an acceptable level of state organization, the traditions and remnants of a pluralistic political culture, as well as the openness of civil society and, above all, the press.

Despite its possible shortcomings, Acemoglu and Robertson’s theory is fruitful and sheds light on a great many social phenomena. For example, even today we often observe that a given political regime,

by expanding its political influence, accumulates economic power, which it then uses to “buy” even more power—whether individually (through vote-buying, bribing the press and other influential social segments or even individuals, etc.), or by social class, through the provision of various benefits, advantages, and special treatment. Right-wing governments generally channel these resources toward the rural population, while left-wing governments—to the extent that such still exist at all—channel them toward the urban population, or—if you will—the poorer segments of the population (though in both cases, they regard state assets as their own and, as such, seek first and foremost to use them to cement their own political power).

Unlike Acemoglu and his colleagues, Jared Diamond based his theory—explaining why it was Eurasia that colonized the Global South and not the other way around—on not one but three factors. His factors are: (i) the presence of wild plants suitable for the development of self-sufficient agriculture; similarly, (ii) the presence of large wild animals that can be domesticated for food production, transportation, and agricultural labor; and—and this is arguably the most interesting aspect of * *—(iii) the continent’s relative latitudinal extent, which allows human populations—and with them, technologies—to flow freely (Diamond 1997).

12. The Clash of Civilizations

(so-called Western Civilization) In the previous chapters of this lecture outline, we explored the multifaceted concept of civilization, ranging from individual and communal levels of civilization to civilizations at the societal and historical levels. We cannot avoid Samuel Huntington’s concept of civilization, which is “essentialist” in the sense that it attributes inherent characteristics to civilizations—specific social traits and institutional orders, a generally accepted religion, and exclusive solutions. In his view, all of this is natural and constant, as if given from the outset. In contrast, according to a relational (context-dependent) or dialectical (contradiction-analyzing) approach to civilization, the elements that constitute civilization develop in constant interaction with their external and internal environments and are in a state of continuous flux. This seemingly academic debate has enormous implications for global politics today, which is why we will return specifically to the terminological aspects in the next section. (Huntington 1993, 1996)

Among the West’s distinctive values are Christianity, pluralism, individualism, and the rule of law, which are fundamental prerequisites of the socio-economic system of modernity; the West considers it natural that these should be spread throughout the world. It is obvious that this is offensive to the communities of the developing world, the East, the Third World, and so on, who also strive to point out that Western civilization did not spring from nothing; among its precursors, there are certainly significant Eastern influences, such as Chinese and Arab ones. A striking expression of this view was, for example, Erdogan’s speech to Turkish students departing for foreign scholarships, in which he emphasized that the East has nothing to be ashamed of in the fields of the arts and sciences and can compete with the West without adopting its immorality or allowing it to influence them. Here, the Turkish president unwittingly alluded to the dual, relative distinction between culture and civilization. Or, as former Iranian President Mohammed Khatami put it in somewhat more nuanced terms, civilizations rise and fall. Meanwhile, unless they are completely isolated, they adopt and pass on important cultural elements to one another. In this sense, no single civilization can be called “new,” since they adopt and adapt elements from other civilizations that suit their goals and needs, and, of course, reject those that do not.

According to Václav Havel's benevolent and accepting observation, "if the East can borrow democracy and the values that go with it from the West—in which a reborn transcendence underpins authority—then the West, too, can learn from the East what true authority actually looks like, what follows from it, and how it behaves." Of course, Eastern authors nevertheless reject the dualism evident in this quote, especially if the rational and the spiritual were to be placed on opposing sides, set against one another. They also emphasize that pluralism and power are not entirely contradictory and certainly cannot be sharply contrasted (Bilgin 2012: 1105–7). That said, I believe Havel accurately sensed the increased importance of authority among the characteristics typical of the declining civilizations listed in the previous point, as well as the fact that postmodern leaders, whether operating in the East or the West, do not hesitate in the least to use religion to consolidate their power.

Shmuel N. Eisenstadt's concept of modernity traces back to two fundamental premises of the Western Enlightenment: the autonomous sphere of human action and the idea of historical progress, which supports the view that secular, humanist programs and movements enable people to plan and create their own world without having to entrust it to divine cosmology (Eisenstadt 2001, Lee 2020: 458).

Several of Elias's critics consider any Eurocentric distinction between Western and Eastern civilizations to be unfounded, on the grounds that in one, externally imposed (*shame-based*) while in the other, internalized (*guilt-based*) constraints are dominant in social interaction (Goody 2003: 67). This topic may also be related to the differences between individualistic and collectivist societies, which, as we have seen, are in fact distinctions of rather relative value (they have explanatory value, but there are numerous transitions and mixed patterns). Psychiatrists confirm that immigrants—precisely because they find themselves in a culture radically different from their own—experience severe stress and often even exhibit psychiatric symptoms. They view the most important and typical difference as the contrast between individualistic and collectivist cultures, which, at the individual level, manifests in the aforementioned pairs of concepts: idiocentric (self-centered) and allocentric (community-centered) personality traits (Bhugra 2007: 60). On the other hand, however, immigrants are precisely those who, in the overwhelming majority of cases, strive to adopt the values of the host civilization at breakneck speed—which, of course, is not always an enjoyable experience. It is interesting to note in this regard that Elias attributed the acquisition of civilized manners precisely to a desire to avoid vulnerability to others and to escape an inferior social status (shame) (Braun 2019: 292). It is, of course, questionable whether this is just as unbearable for a collectivist personality as it is for an individualist.

Assen Jablensky makes a similar observation in an early comprehensive publication, whose great merit is that his comparison of individual cultures is not an end in itself, but serves to deepen our understanding of medical and psychiatric symptom complexes. In his view, cultures (civilizations) are by no means as different from one another as many comparative cultural studies assume. On the contrary, the evidence overwhelmingly suggests that individual cultures generally produce similar personality types who employ very similar strategies, for example, for coping with stress. Accordingly, a telling similarity for the psychiatrist is the extensive overlap of specific clinical pictures even across distant regions of the world. At the same time, of course, diversity within a given culture (civilization) can be quite significant (Jablensky 1975: 120).

(essentialist, post-essentialist, interpretivist, critical-reflexive, and constructivist conceptions of civilization...) Although it is debatable to what extent these keywords help us navigate our understanding of the various, primarily religion-based civilizations, these terms—especially the first two—frequently arise in the discussion and continuation of Huntington's ideas. Without delving too deeply into this philosophical jargon (which would require being born again), it might not be useless

to attempt to convey their meaning in a form that is certainly overly simplified. So when Huntington takes it as a given that there are irreconcilable conflicts between Christian Western civilizations and Islamic civilizations—because that is how history has unfolded, and indeed, it seems the situation may even take a turn for the worse, almost inevitably—he is adopting an *essentialist* approach. That’s just the way it is. Let’s face the facts and prepare for the consequences. (Huntington 1993, 1996)

Fortunately, the academic literature quickly moved beyond this view (though political practice continues to invoke it readily when it suits its interests), which we can rightly call “*post-essentialist*.” Within this framework, more sophisticated analyses address the *interpretivist* perspective in civilization studies, which examines why those involved in the debate consider the clash of civilizations to be important—or even realistic at all. Thus, the concept of “civilization” refers less to objective facts and processes and more to why and how participants in world politics attribute importance to it. It is clear that whether or not there is an objective basis for the clash of civilizations, the very fact that many important decision-makers (including the press and voters) discuss it and consider it realistic can have a significant impact on the processes of world politics.

In contrast, the *critical-reflexive* approach—which, starting from a position quite similar to that of the interpretivist, leads to very different conclusions—is of primarily theoretical importance, although it may also have significant practical implications. This means examining what individual participants understand and utilize from the entire discourse on civilization—that is, from the concepts of civilization at the individual and communal levels, as well as at the societal, state, and international levels. In doing so, unfortunately, we return to the point where peoples, groups, and cultures deemed uncivilized are demarcated, segregated, and excluded by certain Western thinkers (?), who portray themselves as civilized and others as uncivilized in black-and-white terms. This, in turn, can continue to legitimize even violent actions aimed at maintaining historically established power relations and inequalities.

The *constructivist* approach, building on the two previous perspectives, now focuses explicitly on practical consequences—specifically, how the way actors perceive themselves and one another within a (international) system of relations influences their relationships and reality. Even if the underlying assumptions were perhaps flawed, the actors will, in any given case, structure their behavior and strategies around them. Thus, regarding the specific topic of the major world religions: if the “Muslim world” had not existed before Huntington, it exists now (Bettiza 2015: 576–7). Based on all this, it is perhaps the constructivist conception of civilization mentioned last that may have the far-reaching political and ideological consequences; in any case, this approach is the most outspoken.

Authors who have studied this topic list several factors related to how constructivist influence on decision-makers works. Those who convey information about Islamic civilization to society—and, of course, interpret and frame it—are primarily highly respected experts specializing in international relations, as well as leading professors at academic institutions and universities. On the other hand, the confrontation between the United States and foreign powers resonates strongly in American public discourse and traditions, especially when the latter belong to a markedly different civilization. Third, against the backdrop of Huntington’s theory, news stories about various Muslim states are linked together as if they were parts of a larger whole, whether they come from Morocco, Indonesia, or the Middle East (forming a kind of pattern, a “*Gestalt*”). Fourth, and perhaps most decisively, due to the terrorist acts committed by Islamic fanatics, the public—and, of course, political decision-makers as well—must formulate some kind of explanation or response to this compelling new situation. Credible-sounding expert explanations are indispensable during a crisis. Nor should we forget that in American public life, people in economic, political, and academic positions often move from one sector to another (*the “revolving door”*), which means that “Islam experts” demonstrating professional

competence can easily find themselves in some higher-level government or official advisory position—and vice versa (Bettiza 2015: 581–2).

(*The Clash of Global Civilizations*) Huntington's famous—or rather infamous—article and subsequent book (1993, 1996) are, according to widespread opinion, at best overly simplistic and, at worst, irresponsibly sensationalist. His critics never tire of listing the flaws in Huntington's conception of civilization: fixed, static, undifferentiated, centralized, homogeneous, arbitrarily defined, etc., to such an extent that it has jeopardized the very use of the concept itself—that is, as the critics put it: we almost had to throw out the baby of “civilization” along with Huntington's bathwater. Civilization should rather be understood—with the aid of a historical-sociological scientific framework—as a unique constellation of processes, relationships, complex systems, and internal pluralism. According to the non-essentialist view, therefore, civilization is a constantly changing pluralism, a totality of debates and differences, in which participants and parts are connected and cooperate in the most diverse ways. This generally takes the form of peaceful engagement and exchange, rather than violent confrontation (Bettiza 2015: 578).

Let's see how Huntington added fuel to the fire when, with the end of the Cold War, a far more complex and difficult-to-manage international political landscape—as American leaders, and to a lesser extent all Western decision-makers, were suddenly confronted with a multitude of people reaching out for a slice—large or small—of economic, political, and military power, as well as the cultural identity of modernism. According to Huntington, politicians believe that for Islam, the problem is not simply the CIA or the U.S. Department of Defense. The problem is the West itself—its civilization, which differs from their own—and, moreover, the fact that people in the West are convinced that their culture is universal. The West's response could have been obvious: it should have (and should) acknowledged that our civilization is just one among many (though it may, of course, be among the better ones), but they felt that this was hardly feasible. If we were to renounce the universality of the fundamental values of human rights, democracy, good governance, and the rule of law—values that are themselves bleeding from a thousand wounds on our side as well—it would have amounted to a degree of self-surrender and self-endangerment that no one in the Western world could have imagined²⁰. There was nothing else to do but prepare for a clash of civilizations. It is a pity that, following the obvious failure of tolerance, the solution of a conflict-free coexistence—free from second-rate civilization and the self-surrender that accompanies it—was never even considered.

The situation has changed significantly today: primarily due to the internet, Western and non-Western civilizations are drawing closer to one another, whether they like it or not. Recognizing this, some of the harshest dictatorships are attempting to isolate their populations from the internet; it is questionable to what extent and for how long this is possible, and if it is possible for a time, what economic and political price must be paid for it. The dual nature of the internet is now a cliché: social media either undermines the processes of genuine public discourse—or provides societies with new tools for democratic communication. Or: commercial media is a tool of “data colonization” and thus creates enormous inequalities in the world—or, conversely, it is a new, creative, and now indispensable tool and lifeblood of business and commerce (chosen at random from the multitude of

²⁰ Not to mention that virtually the entire body of international and national refugee law is based on this value system—that is, there is a minimum set of socioeconomic conditions, and if these are not met, a person may leave that country and has the right to seek refuge elsewhere. If these universal values were called into question, these institutions would also disappear (Csaba Kiss).

concurring opinions: Docherty 2026, p. 556.). Either way, in the world of the internet, the sociopolitical values listed above are relativized and dissolved, and the diluted mixture of the remaining values spreads evenly across the entire world.

As long as division occurred along the lines of ideologies and values that actually still existed, it was possible, under a somewhat more nuanced scenario, to seek out “good Muslims” who at least did not openly deny these values, and to reward them with generous support. As for the “bad Muslims,” political and cultural isolation and economic marginalization remain the response. The “worst”—that is, terrorist groups—were, however, physically targeted for destruction, particularly during the Bush administration. The Obama administration shifted its focus toward dialogue, at least with those in the Islamic world who were willing to engage. In a speech delivered at Al-Azhar University in Cairo in 2009, Barack Obama urged recognition of the mutual interests of both sides and mutual respect, and asserted that America and Islam are not diametrically opposed to one another and need not be (Bettiza 2015: 581–2, 585–8).

Abram de Swaan, on the other hand, articulates the Muslim men’s viewpoint in rather blunt terms: they find Western culture repulsive, where men flock to brothels and casinos, women walk naked in the streets, and children are ill-mannered. Men have become soft and effeminate, too lazy to even lift a finger unless driven by greed or debauchery. According to de Swaan, this bitterly extreme view is fundamentally fueled by two things: the West’s ubiquitous technological, economic, and military superiority, through which it floods the world—including the Arab world—with its mass culture in an almost irresistible manner. Their religiously motivated radicalism, however, is fueled directly and primarily by men’s deep-seated fear that they might lose their position of superiority over subordinates in their own societies—especially women. The more orthodox their religious orientation, the more inclined they are to carry out humiliating measures against economic and ethnic minorities and women (Swaan 2007: 404–5). In light of this position, we will discuss the situation of women in these civilizations in greater detail below.

Mohammed Khatami, then president of Iran and an Islamist political scientist, spoke at the 1997 meeting of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) in Tehran on the topic of the clash of civilizations, and his remarks were regarded as an antithesis not only to Huntington’s but also to Francis Fukuyama’s (author of the 1992 book *The End of History and the Last Man*). In any case, Khatami argues, the so-called periphery must also be taken into account when discussing international relations and the world order; this is, at the very least, logical. Khatami employs the simplest solutions of formal logic even when formulating what is perhaps his most important thesis: the binary, mutually exclusive categories of the West–Non-West opposition—a sort of gatekeeper, “go/no-go” approach—are in fact unrealistic. Based on these skillfully constructed arguments, it appears that Khatami is justified in demanding greater (essentially comprehensive) inclusivity in international relations and recognition of the necessity of diversity. It is reasonable for him to object to essentialist constructions of civilization based on ethnic and cultural differences that are presented as immutable. It must also be reasonable that no one can lay claim to a specific way of thinking, set of perspectives, or body of knowledge. Just because the West is economically successful and can demonstrate scientific achievements and democracy in the spirit of secular rationalism does not mean it should strive for universalism and intervene in places where these conditions do not exist.

“The periphery is not simply the periphery,” Khatami argues, “but a constituent part of the whole, one that may possess insights, practices, experiences, and contributions that could be lost due to consistent and categorical rejection based on notions of civilization.” Not to mention that the periphery has not always been—and clearly will not always be—the periphery. As we have already noted, it drew certain roots of Enlightenment ideas and numerous scientific starting points from the

highly developed Islamic culture of the time. The figures and histories of ancient Iran (Persia) and India, for example, are present as underlying currents in numerous passages of the Bible. We could, of course, also mention Chinese technological innovations, which were ultimately brought to fruition in Europe (Holliday 2025: 159–170).

(Religion and Civilization) The thesis of inevitable secularization—which applies to states organized on a religious basis, primarily (but not exclusively) Muslim states—(according to which the separation of church and state becomes irreversible as modernization progresses) was, for a long time, perhaps most notably, the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the state structure that emerged in its wake seemed to refute this thesis. In Western Europe, secularization essentially marked the end of violent acts committed in the name of religion; however, following Habermas, current developments in world politics can also be described as *post-secular* (Habermas 2008). This has serious implications for international relations and global security. Bilgin points out that the title of Huntington’s famous (or infamous) 1993 essay still ended with a question mark (“The Clash of Civilizations?”), but the question mark had disappeared from the title of his book published three years later (“The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order”), although in the latter work he naturally expounded his views in greater detail and *with greater nuance* (Huntington 1993, 1996, Bilgin 2012: 1099–1100).

It’s not always obvious, but these terms are broadly synonymous: “*Islam*” (as a noun) generally refers to the cultural system—primarily, of course, the religion—while “*the Muslim world*” (as an adjectival phrase) refers to a transcontinental chain of countries, a supranational category under which more than one billion people presumably share a common religious and cultural identity. Another aspect of the “Muslim world” is that it represented one of the major political dilemmas for the administrations of Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama. These presidents made countless gestures and attempted to send unified messages to the Muslim world, even though the regions and countries within it exhibit considerable diversity, a fact that must also be taken into account (Bettiza 2015: 575–6).

In Southeast Asia, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism—and even the animistic religious beliefs of indigenous peoples—coexisted peacefully for centuries. It was only after colonization and then decolonization that the leaders and followers of these religions realized that adherents of other religions were, in fact, enemies whom it might even be pleasing to God to exterminate. More generally, many scholars emphasize that Western colonization strengthened nationalist movements and, along with them, the ideological conflicts in the region, which can be traced to various causes (Chong 2017: 645).

Richard Harries, Bishop of Oxford, and Jonathan Sacks’s book **The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations* (2002), emphasizes that God surely intended for different civilizations to worship the Almighty in different ways, and therefore we must oppose all attempts at unification. In this regard, the original sin was likely committed by Plato, who proclaimed that universal, unified truth is superior to the various colorful partial truths. When this ancient idea encountered the culture of imperialism, a highly harmful and dangerous mixture was created. In contrast, Judaism, for example, can embrace any tradition as long as it conforms to universal moral standards. This, however, is not entirely in harmony with the letter of the Old Testament, where the various belief systems of neighboring peoples are indeed condemned in harsh terms. Symbolically, the story of the Tower of Babel also speaks to this. Nevertheless, truth crystallizes in the constant struggle against falsehood; ultimately, every religion arrives at the central idea of love. This revelation is common to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam alike.

Globalization has brought the issue of *identity* to the forefront. Just as the conflicts of the 20th century were caused by ideologies, many believe that in the 21st century, identity—and most likely, identity defined by religion—is the source of disagreements. In reality, of course, the loss of identity—as seen, for example, in Indonesia—was caused precisely by the fact that the rural population was lured to the cities at an accelerating pace to produce various cheap (competitive) products for Western markets. They became rootless and abandoned, and unscrupulous people exploited this identity crisis to stir up religious conflicts. In Indonesia, which was once a model of religious tolerance, bloody sectarian riots are now a daily occurrence (Gorsky 2004: 111–2). Things have changed since Aristotle: overly rapid urbanization does not promote civilization, but rather its opposite.

Islam's capacity for renewal and the reinterpretation of certain dogmas might make it possible for the religion to conform to internationally accepted liberal values, primarily requirements related to human rights. As we have already noted, this is the basis on which certain leading politicians, primarily American ones, draw a distinction between “civilized” and “barbaric” Islam. However, a debate has arisen regarding the compatibility of certain symbolic cultural elements—most notably the strict religious rules governing women's attire—with European norms of coexistence. The European Court of Human Rights ruled that the ban on wearing the Islamic headscarf in public spaces in Turkey, a member state of the European Convention, Turkey, does not violate freedom of religion, and justified the decision by stating that extremist groups sought to impose their own religious rules on society as a whole through the wearing of the headscarf (*Sahin v. Turkey* and *Karaduman v. Turkey*, both from 1993).

At the same time, in a different political and cultural context, the British House of Lords ruled that the headscarf and traditional Islamic women's attire do not threaten the liberal social order (*Begun/Rahman v. Headteacher and Governors of Denbigh High School*, 2007), although it made clear that the most conservative form of Islamic dress, the jilbab, does pose such a threat. The court explicitly distinguished between two types of Islamic communities, classifying one as liberal and the other as very strict. It is not difficult to recognize in this line of reasoning the distinction between “good Islam” and “bad Islam,” a distinction originating primarily in the United States.

Similar arguments were made regarding the French legislation (2004), when the issue went beyond mere clothing; Islamists viewed women's presence in public spaces as a breeding ground for promiscuity (sexual freedom), while the majority of the French public saw it as a fundamental expression of individual freedom. Regarding the modernization of Islam, Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im stated in 1990 that sacred religious texts must always be interpreted within the context of the circumstances of a given era; some passages clearly cannot be upheld at all, while others can be applied in accordance with the requirements of the modern age.

Some believe that young girls have the right to decide whether to wear strictly restrictive clothing and whether this causes them discomfort, feels like an inconvenient constraint, or—on the contrary—is something they welcome. Others, however, argue that within a given Islamic community or family, this is by no means a matter of free choice. Still others point out that, for example, among American teenagers, it is essentially mandatory to leave parts of their bodies exposed—which may not be something they find pleasant deep down—so even there, free choice is open to question. Moreover, the debate here may also touch on the objectification of the female body as a commodity. Ultimately, Wendy Brown takes the same position on this issue as Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights: individuals must enjoy complete freedom regarding which religion they follow, but the public display of religion, along with other forms of expression, may be subject to restrictions. According to Brown as well—as we discussed in detail earlier—tolerance applies to private matters, which therefore cannot be subject to public legal scrutiny (Vakulenko 2008: 338).

(*The Role of Women in Civilizations*) Even before the modern era, there were numerous instances in which women played prominent historical roles due to their talent, aptitude, and, of course, in most cases, their unique family, community, and cultural backgrounds and upbringing. For example, the Maya queen K'awiil Ajaw, who lived in the 7th century CE, commanded an army of 50,000–70,000 and achieved significant military successes, as evidenced by relief carvings on rock (Hammond 2025: 242).

During the imperialist era of American history, the aforementioned “sentimental sense of home”—the concept of the motherland and motherhood itself, employed through multiple layers of metaphor—played a significant role. Moral idealism—the essence of American identity—consisted of values and convictions in the name of which millions of American men—even as soldiers—could be persuaded to do almost anything; at the same time, a great many immoral acts committed abroad or at home to the detriment of other nations and races could be made to seem entirely natural (Lowry 2009: 311). It is interesting to note the significant role that culture and the arts—particularly photography—played in shaping this national identity, which was false in many respects. For example, photographs of Native Americans, in which they are first shown in their traditional national dress and then in the “civilized” attire of American colleges and workplaces; or a photo series of young soldiers, set against the immaculately clean and orderly backdrop of their cruiser and dressed in snow-white uniforms, which served to obscure news reports of unnecessary bloodshed and atrocities in the Philippines (Lowry 2009: 330).

American women, of course, paid dearly for their traditional and long-standing—indeed, excessively long-standing (in contrast, for example, to Japan, which is otherwise quite conservative and respectful of tradition)—elevation to a pedestal and idealization, through their near-hermetic exclusion from social and economic positions and from numerous cultural opportunities. At the same time, they considered it their sacred duty (obviously, all parties involved felt this way, though not entirely from the same starting point) for mothers to strictly and consistently instill the values of American culture in their children. It is telling how much the male-dominated society—which exalted certain roles for women within the family and society—feared (or still fears) that even the slightest shadow of feminine attributes might fall upon them (Lowry 2009: 334–5). Paradoxically, in the 1960s, when general freedom and licentiousness came to dominate the growing baby-boom generation, women were assigned a rather objectified role in culture, particularly in the depiction—or rather, the exploitation—of the female body in extremely popular American films. In Italy and France, neither the communists nor the Christian Democrats looked favorably upon this (...), so they attempted to create unique European variations on the objectification of the female body by developing their own versions of beauty pageants and featuring such heavyweights as Brigitte Bardot or Sophia Loren (Hewitt 1999: 356).

Finally, the very broad—and to some extent abusive—exaggeration and generalization of family values also manifested itself in the distinction between the foreign and the domestic, between outsiders and insiders. This brings us back to one of the fundamental tenets of nationalism: *borders*, which, although primarily physical, are not limited to that but carry broad significance—including, among other things, the rigid demarcation of people, categories, words, and meanings. This black-and-white, “either-or” mindset also reflects a general rigidity of thought, which we previously alluded to in connection with Kernberg’s book on borderline personality disorder (Lowry 2009: 337).

We should note, however, that female authors also point out that, paradoxically, precisely when the progressive forces in society champion women’s equality, they simultaneously renounce tolerance.

This is because equality presupposes (compulsory) uniformity, whereas tolerance would entail the appropriate handling of natural differences (Vakulenko 2008: 326).

As for the role of women in the clash of civilizations, perhaps one of the most important works is by a professor at the University of Amsterdam, Abram de Swaan, titled *"The Clash of Civilizations and the Battle of the Sexes,"* which examines the role played by the unstoppable advance of women's equality during the 20th century in the radicalization of Islam. A key point is that while this process took place gradually over several centuries in Western countries, it occurred in the Arab world and other developing countries in just a few decades. The author, , is quick to point out that the most controversial issue in Islamic culture—the role of women in the family and in society—stems not from Islamic religious texts but rather from the patriarchal traditions of pre-industrial societies.

Men in Islamic countries are also finding that when girls are allowed to participate in the education system, they can sometimes be even better and more successful than boys. And when women enter the workforce, nothing can prevent them from performing their jobs more competently and efficiently (though initially, for quite some time, they will obviously be paid less...). In response, men stubbornly cling to an interpretation of sacred texts that guarantees their superiority without any special effort, while women generally avoid open and direct confrontation with these views, as they wish to remain loyal to their families and communities (Swaan 2007: 403). Perhaps, in defense of men and boys, it must be said that the pursuit of status is very strongly encoded in them, both genetically and culturally. It would be very difficult to completely abandon this impulse, especially when it comes to one half of the human race.

Khatami's policy of democratization—based on the constitution, the rule of law, and respect for civil rights and civil society—also guaranteed women's rights in public debates, economic life, and all branches of culture. With this program, he achieved landslide election victories on multiple occasions, which alarmed Iran's clerical leadership and thus, paradoxically, it contributed to the introduction of an extremely strict, religion-based institutional system and mode of operation that did not shy away from cruelty toward women (Holliday 2025: 174).

(normal relations between civilizations) Since civilization generally prevails only within a group, community, or society, violence against other civilizations—particularly from a collectivist perspective—may be permissible, or even desirable. Of course, there also exist numerous nonviolent forms of interaction with very different civilizations, based on the mutual interests of the parties, such as trade, pilgrimage, the establishment of monastic orders, missionary work, migration, adventurous long journeys, or even professional exchanges and study trips (even as far back as the Middle Ages, when, for example, this was essentially mandatory for guild apprentices—let's not think that it all began with the Erasmus program...), and even the marriage of women off among rulers and aristocratic dynasties for political and economic reasons, but also among the common people, perhaps in response to certain demographic pressures (Chong 2017: 645).

Cultural exchange existed even in antiquity. According to archaeological sources, the Maya communities that lived 2,000 years ago, although they waged brutal wars against their neighbors, also developed a kind of regional, Central American culture, as evidenced, among other things, by the common, "international" elements in their diet (tamales, tortillas, and cocoa drinks). This cultural exchange took place primarily through the marriage of women and, secondarily, through a kind of pilgrimage; in fact, a combination of the two was common due to women's pilgrimages, mainly for health and fertility reasons. From there, it was only a short step for this shared culture to manifest

itself in fashion items as well, in the form of pendant shapes and patterns that spread throughout the entire region (Hammond 2025: 241).

The dialogue between civilizations—which has been the subject of numerous isolated and a few coordinated international efforts throughout our history—could, in my opinion, benefit from a more precise definition of the concepts of civilization and culture. It is by no means impossible that cultural differences—which undoubtedly exist, particularly in the realm of technological culture—will be balanced out accordingly, or better yet, will inspire one another. Differences between civilizations, however, can undermine peaceful cultural exchange and dialogue if they are not addressed appropriately.

Only a process in which the participants pay proper attention to one another can be called a dialogue. In contrast to a monologue, which ignores the other person, dialogue presupposes equal rights and responsibilities, in which the parties complement each other's existence (as we have already noted regarding the general laws governing the attraction of differences and diversities). A person can only truly be themselves if they are able to incorporate the perspectives of others (cf. the paradox of individualization). Whether we are speaking of religious, ethnic, or civilizational identity, we cannot assume pre-given (essentialist) social facts, but only processes of negotiation between people and interest groups (communities).

In any case, the United Nations' *Dialogue of Civilizations (DoC)* initiative would renegotiate and reinterpret the international order based on Western-centric, liberal ideas (Bilgin 2012: 1108, 1113). Some of our earlier remarks on strategies to counter "uncivilized" behavior may also be relevant in this regard: these parties seek (demand) tolerance, even though it may be that only a secondary form of civilization is actually at stake. Of course, Eastern cultures and Islam certainly have many traits that are quite tolerable and deserve tolerance; but toward others, the maximum expectation can only be that "we do not shoot back," or, to put it less figuratively, that we do not seek to stigmatize, retaliate against, or forcibly change institutions, norms, or behaviors that are incompatible with our principles and fundamental values. This, as we have already noted, is the path of "mutual non-interference."

The structure and network of relationships among Western states were gradually shaped—through many painful experiences—by conventional standards of voluntary abstention from violence. In Southeast Asia, however, ideas, traditions, and customs had already contributed significantly to the avoidance of violence among ruling houses from the very beginning. For the princes, demonstrating spiritual and moral superiority was the primary factor in establishing their legitimacy; therefore, they resorted to violence only to the extent that it did not undermine these principles. They even showered hostile rulers or their envoys with lavish gifts, thereby demonstrating their moral—and indeed "cosmological"—superiority. Losing too many soldiers, whether from their own ranks or those of the enemy, would have been counterproductive in any case, given the demographic conditions of the time. If fighting did occur, they did not look down on the defeated nor did they seek to humiliate them in any way; rather, they sought to learn from them and, if possible, make them their vassals or subjects. They were indeed surprised when, at the head of the Portuguese fleet, Alphonso Albuquerque massacred every last one of the defeated Indians (Chong 2017: 638, 646–9).

Proper conduct, along with morality and goodwill, is rooted primarily in Confucianism in Asia, and Confucianism is regarded as the origin of Chinese civilization. Proper conduct means adhering to established standards of civilized behavior and meeting expectations regarding public conduct. This is behavior that is considerate of one's surroundings and respects the social order, even in small gestures—such as giving up one's seat to a pregnant woman or an elderly person on a crowded bus.

Furthermore, civilized people must refrain from pushing in line or appearing half-naked in public. In this Asian model, too, the organic intertwining of culture and civilization is clearly evident.

The Chinese government attaches great importance to proper behavior, as it believes this has a far-reaching impact on how the country is perceived abroad. The Chinese people themselves are also sensitive to this issue, especially when they learn how their level of civility is compared to that of other countries.

Historically, in Confucian China, propriety and civility also served as markers of social class distinction. In any case, the nobility and those in higher positions were presumed to exhibit more civilized behavior and were expected to do so. To this day, propriety remains an important factor in social . Psychological scholars suggest that a more detailed and in-depth definition of propriety—as well as of civilized behavior—would be very useful, given that the Chinese people, due to their deeply rooted culture, consider it so important and worthy of emulation (Xuan 2015: 108–9).

We must briefly quote Yong Wook Lee again, who drew the conclusion from these endeavors and phenomena that Asian politics seeks to present values through which it aims to demonstrate that there are multiple paths leading to modernity. This value system offers an alternative to neoliberal ideas that strive for universalism (Lee 2020: 456–7). We might note that while there may already be (or have been) multiple paths toward modernity, the path toward postmodernity is a veritable labyrinth. In any case, in this global civilizational game, the cards are being reshuffled—that much is certain.

More specifically, the Confucian-based Asian values mentioned above—which are believed to be broadly shared by the continent’s inhabitants—may have been key determinants of the region’s economic rise. The most important elements of this value system are family and community cohesion—that is, the subordination of individual well-being and even freedom to the goals of the group—respect for authority, and even submission to power (unconditional respect) in order to maintain order and stability. All of this clearly gives rise to the Asian work ethic, respect for hard work, ambition, and a strong emphasis on education. Critics, of course, argue that the emphasis on Asian values serves primarily to defend—and, if possible, to disguise—authoritarian (authority-based) methods of governance. In any case, the articulation of Asian values can foster a sense of “we” among leaders and the public—obviously, primarily in the interests of the former. At the same time, at least for “soft” Asian leaders, their domestic power is fundamentally reinforced by their country’s economic performance, which is why certain disruptions to social peace and cohesion are still tolerated. But a little anti-colonial nationalism can only be beneficial in this regard (Lee 2020: 457). For our part, of course—though the author does not refer to it directly—we can largely see here a juxtaposition, or at least a comparison, of collectivist and individualist cultural models.

It runs almost perfectly parallel to the Chinese example, which is why we refer to it here as well: late medieval and early modern societies shared a characteristic highlighted by Elias, namely that civilized behavior was fundamentally class-dependent. Etiquette originated in absolutist courts and trickled down through the high nobility to the bourgeois families who imitated them. Civilized (cultured) behavior remained—and to some extent still remains today—a hallmark of “high society” for a long time. It is extremely important to note that good manners and eating with a knife and fork were not entirely new; the aristocracy of earlier eras also practiced them to a certain extent—albeit in a rather refined manner—but their civilization had vanished, leaving only traces behind. Much had to be reinvented, though there was undoubtedly a foundation to draw upon when it came to the essentials (Goody 2003: 65). Of course, the question arises as to why it was precisely the uppermost strata of society that began to behave in a civilized manner. Fundamentally, it was obviously because the sword hung over their heads; if they hadn’t avoided awkward topics, if they hadn’t shown consideration for

one another—and instead had frequently quarreled—it would have ended badly. This is true everywhere in the natural world: those who possess deadly weapons must, at some point, restrain their aggression for the sake of the species. Wolves are able to avoid deadly fights, whereas pigeons tear each other apart. Let's say the connection between the aristocracy and the style mentioned above can also be approached from another angle: fundamentally, they had enough free time and material prosperity to acquire and practice high culture. Which, of course, immediately served to distinguish them from the common people, the boors, and others of their ilk.

To briefly mention another continent again, a new wave of African musicians vehemently rejects the idea that Western culture should define their art; instead, they seek to create work that inspires the entire world, in the name of an Africa that matters. They want to unite all Black people around the world, highlighting the injustices of imperialism and the historical lies. As one of their internationally recognized musicians, Burna Boy, told the New York Times: "They don't teach us the real history; they leave out the strength and power that African people originally possessed, and they don't explain how we ended up in such a difficult situation as the one we're in now." (Lorenz 2022: 34)

(The Role of Civilizational Standards in International Law) The notion that the world outside Europe is inferior from a civilizational standpoint and that an influx of Western capital could remedy its shortcomings remains, in essence, one of the fundamental tenets of modern international law to this day—behind which it is by no means difficult to discern direct economic interests and the effort to maintain the current unjust market imbalances. And when certain "supported" countries embarked on a path of reliable improvement—which in this context meant implementing capitalist reforms and opening up their domestic markets—these less developed states were able to gain full sovereignty. At the same time, other nations were "not ready" for this change.

At the dawn of the modern era, Western states used civilizational standards to orient themselves within international law, namely, which countries should be recognized as sovereign states (toward which the rules of tolerance and coexistence should apply), which countries might be candidates for this status, and which countries were so far removed from it that they could be freely exploited. In contrast, throughout history there has in fact always been cultural exchange among civilizations; they have mutually adopted social, technical, and other practices from one another, and they have recognized civilizational "dialects"—that is, the assessment of civilizations was not dichotomous (divided into two categories), or binary (Lee 2020: 465).

The standard of civilization underlying these barely veiled aggressive expansionist ambitions is, according to José Enrique Alvarez, in fact a constantly evolving, unstable concept driven by the laws of capitalist production and accumulation. It was against this ideological backdrop that the great Western powers concluded unequal treaties with China and Japan during the classical period of international law. However, consideration of civilizational standards formed the basis for the judgments handed down by the International Court of Justice in The Hague in the 1950s and continuing through 1971 in cases concerning South West Africa (Namibia), and it was on this basis that neoliberal reforms were imposed on a devastated Iraq in 2003–2004.

Following the September 11, 2001 (9/11) attacks against the United States, international action against terrorism was, in effect, guided by civilizational standards based on the principle of so-called "unwilling or unable countries." The use of force in such countries was legitimate from the perspective of international law. Ultimately, it is not inconceivable that, even in the present era, civilizational standards may underlie certain new norms of international law related to climate change. International standards imply an obligation to adopt certain general cultural (primarily national-level legal)

expectations, thereby obscuring the essence of civilizational standards—which are based on differences in power and levels of development (economic, military, and technological)—and, in particular, how these differences came about, as well as what historical responsibility the West bears for looming global crises, the unprecedented scale of human migration, worldwide health threats, and the state of the planet’s environment—which, of course, is by no means limited to climate change (Alvarez 2023: 364–6). In any case, the principle of CBDR (common but differentiated responsibility) was included in the 1992 Rio Declaration in this context; it acknowledges that, in the face of the ecological crisis, developed countries bear greater responsibility—and developing countries bear significantly less—due to their longer history of more intense pollution and environmental destruction.

By invoking the “unwilling or unable” doctrine, certain Western states carry out targeted killings on the territory of other, developing countries on the grounds that those countries are unable to adequately address the threat of terrorism. Even before the 9/11 terrorist attacks, this possibility had arisen on the basis of the rather vague paragraphs 2(4) and (5) of the UN Charter. The rule of law and good governance are hallmarks of a civilized state, and indeed, in international law to this day, they remain closely linked to the recognition of individual states’ sovereignty and independent statehood. A country that is unable to maintain control over political and military forces within its territory (such as uprisings, movements, etc.) can expect its recognition under international law to diminish or even be lost (recall the list of requirements imposed on civilized states, of which this was one of the most important elements). This also includes compliance with basic public health standards, the failure to uphold which could threaten the international community due to global pandemics; which is why the World Health Organization (WHO) may expect certain measures to be taken, and international financial institutions reinforce this demand by granting or withholding loans and technical assistance. If the community of Western states can do all this, the question arises with increasing urgency: Can China, which possesses increasingly effective means of influence, also take action based on certain principles—whether interpreted or reinterpreted by China itself? (Alvarez 2023, 367–8)

Finally, Alvarez cites (and challenges) Tzouvala’s position, according to which it can be concluded from civilizational standards and the “willing and able” doctrine that the liberal international legal order does not really appear to be the polar opposite of rising authoritarian regimes, or the racism and sexism that are intensifying alongside them; rather, it is inextricably linked to them (Alvarez 2023: 371, Tzouvala 2020).

Several authors point out that, regardless of the pretext or ideology they employ, economically, militarily, and politically stronger countries have always sought to extend their influence into regions that lag behind in development. China was preparing to do just that when the COVID-19 pandemic broke out. In fact, accelerating *the Belt and Road Initiative*—a plan they had been nurturing for a decade—was an appropriate and fitting response on their part. From the Chinese perspective, this is described as a civilizational process in the sense defined by Norbert Elias (the restructuring of people’s behavior and habitus). This is interesting if only because its primary aim is ultimately directed precisely toward those developed Western markets that, for centuries, have sought, among other things, to “raise China to a higher level of civilization.”

The goal of the current process of Chinese civilization is to create a kind of transnational civilization. It is evident that China is moving slowly but surely toward exerting ever-greater influence on global processes, primarily as an exporter of capital and norms. Indeed, it is evident that countries that accept Chinese capital are simultaneously compelled to accept the lender’s legal terms. In many cases, this entails deep and detailed interference in the host country’s legal system through contracts and intergovernmental agreements (which, of course, must also specify which law applies in the event of a legal dispute—usually Chinese law), as well as the extraction of favorable regulatory frameworks and

exceptional provisions²¹. At the same time, it can also be argued that Chinese companies, like any international enterprise, are obligated to comply with the legal system of the host country, including provisions of corporate law, tax law, public procurement law, labor law, environmental law, anti-corruption rules, and many other regulations. This, therefore, may also represent a reverse civilizational process, involving mutual adaptation and learning.

In addition, the influence of Chinese tech companies is inevitable with regard to both society and the relevant regulations, since if subsidiaries wish to communicate with their Chinese parent company, they can easily be forced to adopt the Asian company's communication channels. These effects, of course, are not linear—nor are they even unidirectional—and they come with numerous unintended side effects and repercussions. In any case, the trend of growing Chinese influence appeared to strengthen in parallel with the COVID-19 pandemic, with the effects accelerating and intensifying (Eric 2023: 2–3, 11–12).

13. The Emergence of a New Civilization and the Transmission of Culture: The Prerequisites for Sustainability

(the culture that can help us weather the collapse of civilization; the potential of technological culture)

Even if the power companies cut off the electricity, the internet goes down, and the corner store closes, the knowledge accumulated in our minds and in our books will not be destroyed. Instead, it becomes all the more valuable that many of us are highly skilled at managing local water supply, energy provision, heating, and the construction, repair, and insulation of homes. Many are familiar with the types and composition of farmland, and know where, what, and how to grow crops—even without fertilizers or pesticides.

The biggest problem, however, in such a post-apocalyptic situation is not that our accumulated practical and environmental knowledge would be lost, but rather that the society that seamlessly absorbed and utilized these skills no longer exists. This is why maintaining or rebuilding a civilizational standard that is acceptable to us is essential.

Four areas of human culture are typically identified, which form an interconnected, complementary, and mutually dependent system, although there is no doubt that every element of this system tends to break free and dominate the entire culture. *The sciences* help us understand the world and ourselves, but of course, understanding in and of itself should not immediately translate into action or the manipulation of things and processes. The culture of *technology and the economy* is intended to satisfy society's material needs—and, if possible, nothing more. The culture of *politics and religion* organizes society and coordinates the interests of various groups for the benefit of society as a whole, but of course these too require the balancing influence of the other elements. Finally, the *arts* satisfy

²¹ Let us not think, for example, that this trend has not taken hold in Hungary. On February 5, 2016, the Government of Hungary and the Government of the People's Republic of China signed an international treaty regarding the development, construction, and financing of the Hungarian section of the Budapest–Belgrade railway line reconstruction project (promulgated as Act XXIV of 2016). A civil society organization requested the disclosure of data related to the project, citing the citizens' right to access information of public interest as enshrined in the Hungarian Fundamental Law. In its Decision No. 3200/2025 (June 23), the Hungarian Constitutional Court found it appropriate that the country's Minister of Foreign Affairs had decided on the request in accordance with the conditions dictated by the Chinese side (refusing to disclose the information).

our aesthetic needs; they themselves are closely linked to an integrated, holistic approach to the world and society, which is indispensable for the proper functioning of the other cultural sectors and of culture as a whole (Fülöp 2018). It is evident that even smaller communities can fully possess a significant part of human culture; one might say they can take as much of it as they can handle. Indeed, alongside the maintenance of civilization (civilized society), this may be another fundamental condition for their successful survival.

Marvin Brown's book **Civilizing the Economy** deals with economic culture. While acknowledging *corporate* social responsibility (CSR), green initiatives, and other similar projects, the author's main message is that, instead of an economy organized around property, we should focus on provision—ensuring that people in the economy can take care of themselves and their families. At the same time, our societies should develop a well-defined and substantiated vision of the good life (well-being, which, according to green ideologies, is by no means synonymous with economic prosperity), so that—and we must emphasize this in light of what was previously said regarding the crisis of civilization—thereby providing a purpose for the lives of all people (Newton 2012: 598).

(*Can “uncivilized” behavior be managed?*) How can we put a stop to the increasingly rampant deviant behaviors, and how can we restore trust among people in order to preserve the functionality of society (or what remains of it)? Is this even possible? Or have we perhaps been on the wrong track all along when it comes to preventing and addressing deviant behavior?

It has always seemed like an obvious solution to impose some form of disadvantage on individuals who renege on their obligation to cooperate with society. This can range from mild disapproval to criminal prosecution and sanctions; in any case, consistency and predictability are fundamental prerequisites for its effectiveness. We have seen Elias's enthusiasm for feudal absolutism, where the ruler (or ruling class), possessing absolute power, used an iron fist to force the people into the framework of behavioral norms deemed correct by the ruler. The often brutal punishment of uncivilized or antisocial behavior certainly filled the majority of ordinary people with dread; it remained with them constantly and became ingrained in their personalities as a kind of superego. The effects of this could then be felt across generations.

Not everyone was quite so enthusiastic about using punishment as a means of discipline. As early as the 1970s, a consensus had emerged among psychiatrists that a continuum of biological and social causes might underlie the most severe mental illnesses. In some cases, social stigma or even the excessive “effectiveness” of oppressive social structures at the macro- and micro-levels may be a key causal factor in the development of schizophrenia. Obvious evidence of the social context lies in the historical variability of the manifestations of schizophrenia or its significantly differing prevalence rates across social groups (e.g., immigrants), which would be difficult to attribute to rapid changes in biological factors. Particularly telling is the recurring observation in the literature that schizophrenia is much more common in urban environments (Jablensky 1975: 113, 115). The so-called “borderline” symptom clusters—which fall between schizophrenia and milder psychiatric conditions (borderline personality disorders: “*as-if*” personality, sociopathy, etc.)—are generally characterized by a complete inability to learn from punishment. Their cognitive map for predicting consequences is severely distorted; quite simply, they cannot imagine that their actions might backfire. In societies in decline, these symptom patterns may proliferate or, quite simply, become more visible and gain greater prominence (Kernberg 1975). In any case, it can be argued that these dangerous pathologies and personality distortions come at too high a price for the apparent effectiveness of punishment-based forms of discipline.

Over a long historical period, state punitive measures have increasingly moved away from cruel punishments involving physical pain and extreme suffering, and have ceased to carry out punishments in public. This could even be described as the penal system becoming more civilized, although this process depends on many sociopolitical factors and may stall or even reverse (Pratt 2016, p. 1). The “de-civilization” of punishments can occur, for example, because the state feels threatened and social order is disrupted by new phenomena and trends.

A typical example of arguments concerning the decline of *the welfare state* and the “inevitable” increase in *state violence* is John J. Rodger’s 2008 work. According to his analysis, the most important dual task of welfare societies was to keep social discontent in check by ensuring a certain degree of social justice, thereby fostering a society governed from within—one that is, so to speak, disciplined by conviction. Under such conditions, with a secure social safety net in place, citizens were willing to work and pay their taxes. The state monopolized the use of force and punishment, while the increasingly complex division of labor created a chain of social interdependence that was accompanied by greater awareness of interpersonal relationships, empathy, and, conversely, sensitivity to all forms of brutality and cruelty. By the end of the Victorian era—though social differences had not disappeared—society had achieved a state of harmony; social, cultural, and economic tensions had been smoothed over, and a functioning democracy had been established. At the same time, over the course of a good century, this system had worn itself out; at some point, a few uncivilized and antisocial generations did indeed emerge, a phenomenon that many attributed primarily to the effects of excessive and unconditional prosperity. Young people sought new thrills and excitement under the banner of “sex, drugs, and rock and roll,” which went hand in hand with a devaluation of efforts to combat deviance and a tendency to downplay the seriousness of the problem.

The social response was not long in coming; the demand for stronger external control over people’s behavior grew ever more intense. The situation was exacerbated by the fact that, beginning in the 1970s, the civilizing processes described above came to a standstill. (Neoliberal) structural reforms in the economy and the world of work, deregulation, and, of course, globalization created a useless, aimless social stratum. Meanwhile, individualized consumer ethics undermined the foundations of the institutional system of social solidarity. As John J. Rodger puts it, these “de-civilizing processes in a kind of degenerate modernity” have created growing enclaves in small and large cities where post-industrialism, a declining educational system, and meaningless, poorly paid work have produced a culture, lifestyle, and social behavior that are incompatible with civilization—indeed, they explicitly reject the active and disciplined lifestyle that modern society demands. The repercussions of this are the growing efforts to exclude these groups from society, criminalize them, and subject them to other disadvantages. The Keynesian *redistributive discourse*, which was characteristic of welfare societies, is giving way to the Schumpeterian merit-based welfare system (the “*workfare post-national state*”), where conformity becomes the primary goal, and social assistance is clearly conditional. Culture gives way to civilization; in Rodger’s succinct formulation: survival is more important than ambition. (Rodger 2008)

At this point, there may still be political choices: strengthening redistributive measures alongside progressive taxation to prevent the social breakdown brought about by an unbridled market society (where everything that exists is merely a commodity or service). But Rodger makes these proposals almost as an afterthought (Morgan 2009: 145–7).

By expanding slightly on the question posed in the subtitle, we arrive at the fundamental question posed by Norbert Elias and his numerous followers and interpreters: Is it even possible to make people, communities, and nations more civilized, and if so, how should we go about it? If it is true that we are dealing with a decline on a historical scale, then no matter how many partial successes we achieve

through punishment, education, or lecturing, the structures will continue to produce deviance and various forms of free-riding behavior anyway, and the statistics will not fundamentally change. Unless we create new structures. But even in that regard, I believe we must proceed with great caution, because what worked 50–100 years ago—or even longer—in some idealized world is very unlikely to function sustainably and without conflict today. Of course, we can still look back to Aristotle: if circumstances force cooperation among local residents, something may still develop from it, as Takács-Sánta writes: ecological local communities may serve as the crystallizing nuclei of a social order that is more environmentally friendly, democratic, and just than the current one (Takács-Sánta 2017, p. 17). A lack of civility and the crime rate—an excellent indicator of which is Layard’s 2005 study—show a strong negative correlation with the number of friends that people living in a given area have who live within a quarter-hour’s walk (Horváth 2020, p. 36).

(*A local solution to the problem of uncivilized behavior*) While signs of an ecological crisis are multiplying around the world (Rockström et al. 2009, 2023), it is also evident that the entire industrial-capitalist civilization is in crisis, having depleted the resources necessary for its functioning and destroyed the natural conditions upon which it depends. This era will therefore slowly but surely come to an end (that is, we do not know when or in what form, but we know that it will happen sometime in the near future) and, in the best-case scenario, give way to a post-industrial, information age (Castells, 1996). In any case, the crisis of civilization’s dominant form is also dramatically reducing the level of human civilization. We are witnessing how long-term, peaceful cooperation—based on persuasion and agreement, mutual interests, and trust—is increasingly and more intensely being replaced by violence and threats at every level of society and international life.

Changes in civilizations are generally brought about by major wars, religious transformations, or shifts in technology and the ruling elite. Presumably, global environmental catastrophes also trigger changes of similar intensity. In such a situation, individual groups tend to develop their own alternative cultures almost spontaneously; however, human values may be severely compromised in the process, and the new value system may, for a long time, consist solely of values centered on survival (Cohen 1990: 3).

In his influential book **Deep Adaptation**, Jem Bendell points out that “If the major natural resource and framework systems collapse before a new infrastructure and institutional system—tailored to the new framework and boundary conditions—can be established, chaotic conditions may ensue. This can only be somewhat anticipated through community preparedness, fostering cooperation rather than competition and conflict (Bendell, 2021). András Takács-Sánta reaches a similar conclusion in his book **Világeleje** (The Beginning of the World), which also has a very evocative and witty title: “Current trends point toward the ecological suicide of our market-consumer civilization (...) On the one hand, I would not for the life of me describe the problem as insignificant. I don’t think that the experts will just figure it out anyway, so there’s no point in worrying too much about the situation. I consider the problem to be much greater than that. On the other hand, however, I’m just as far from proclaiming the impending end of the world or the inevitable ecological collapse. Others will solve it. It doesn’t matter anyway. These are two relatively easy paths. I propose a third, a much more difficult one (...) To prevent an ecological catastrophe, it would be vitally important for far more of us than at present to embark on this path—the path of active hope.” (Takács-Sánta, 2024, pp. 9–10 and 12–13.)

The ecological literature essentially agrees that responsible, cooperative behavior—one that also cares for the living conditions of the community and future generations—can only be realized within a network of sustainable local communities with a new mindset (Kajner 2016, Lányi 2020, Takács-Sánta 2024). This coincides in a unique way with the events that have followed civilizations to date. We have

seen, however, that local communities—which have, to a certain extent, taken the place of declining central governments—have been able to utilize only a portion of the cultural wealth accumulated up to that point, and generally only in a more primitive form; the remnants and traces of high culture lay dormant during these eras, waiting for better times when someone would rediscover, understand, and make use of them. It is possible, however, that the civilizational crisis that lies (quite directly) ahead of us may, after all, give rise to a different kind of behavior; in the best-case scenario, the organization and resources of local communities could be at a much higher level than what we would expect based on a post-apocalyptic zombie movie.

As for the social upheaval that typically occurs at such times, the situation is similar. If and where the transition is managed properly, the appropriate social mechanisms can be established to maintain—and even deepen—’s civilized, dignified conduct. Uncivilized behavior (freeloading, picking fights, selfishness, looting, etc.) is generally sanctioned with infinite simplicity under such circumstances: the antisocial members of the community are quite simply expelled—that is, ostracized. Social upheaval, of course, rarely leads to generally peaceful solutions. Norbert Elias’s experiences in postcolonial Ghana in the early 1960s showed that, without a sufficiently strong overarching economic, political, and military power, village communities strive to determine the balance of power among themselves. To this end, on the one hand, their lives are marked by constant fear that any neighboring tribe might at any time slaughter them or reduce them to slavery; on the other hand, they prepare with all their might to do the same to their neighbors should the opportunity arise. (van Krieken 2026, p. 9.) This could hardly have been otherwise during the feudal anarchy of the early Middle Ages, until central authority—or at least regional authority—had strengthened. Obviously, in a completely different historical situation, humanity would not necessarily react this way, but I would not entirely rule out the possibility; it requires further consideration.

(Sustainable local communities today) In his comprehensive, multifaceted collection on sustainable community initiatives, András Takács-Sánta summarizes their fundamental motivations as follows: to eat tasty and healthy food produced by local farmers whom we know personally; to avoid falling ill from unhealthy air and to prevent deafening noise from impairing our quality of life; to live in a world where we can marvel daily at the wonderful diversity of wildlife, and above all, in a world where we are not lonely but rediscover the strength and importance of communities (Takács-Sánta, 2017, pp. 13, 15). In connection with this latter motivation, purely out of caution, I would like to recall the paradox of individualization characteristic of the information society. This certainly complicates the connection between the individual and a particular chosen community, but of course it does not make it impossible; in fact, under the right circumstances, it can help foster very useful relationships.

Through vivid examples, Takács-Sánta demonstrates that the building blocks of such a new world already exist today. I’d like to briefly highlight just a few chapters from the book: “A Farmer of One’s Own for Everyone! —Évkerék Ökotanya in Balástya”—this chapter clearly illustrates, on the one hand, how beneficial such solutions are for both consumers and farmers, while the ongoing relationship serves as an important example of how crucial it is to establish a framework of trust and honest cooperation and to recognize its dynamics, alongside the development of agricultural and commercial methodologies in the region. Today in Hungary, the yields of organic farms are comparable to those of industrial agriculture; however, from an economic standpoint, reliable sales opportunities represent a significant advantage for the former. For customers, it is also significant that organic farms supply them seasonally with 40–50 varieties of fruits and vegetables—about 120 different types— and always at the right time, following annual and seasonal rhythms, rather than from a supermarket’s freezer after traveling thousands of kilometers and undergoing countless processing steps (preservation, flavoring,

and even flavor enhancement, coloring, etc.—it’s better if we don’t even know about them). At the farmers’ market, however, customers know exactly what they’re getting and when; they also get to know one another, exchange recipes, and organize themselves into a loose online network, while the producers (including some of them) enlist the help of volunteers and casual workers and train them. University professors, civil society organizations, other organic farmers, and local farm owners have joined—and continue to join—the network described in the book. This is a great example of how network members do not have to be together all the time, yet over the long term, a community based on growing trust and mutual benefits emerges.

This sense of community—its emergence and strengthening as a sort of automatic byproduct—is a common element in Takács-Sánta’s case studies. In the chapter “Recycling with a Healing Purpose—the retextil facility in Pécs,” this small, highly commendable foundation-run enterprise was joined by intellectual supporters (sociologists and educators who not only learned a great deal from the project themselves but also sought to contribute their own experiences to it), local civil society organizations, and the local government—the latter by making the workshop available for a nominal rent or even free of charge.

A unique network emerged in the chapter titled “Your Trash Is Their Treasure—Thrift Stores.” At first, donors simply wanted to get rid of their unwanted items; later, many of them began to prioritize the cause, the essentially destitute “customer base,” and the disadvantaged unemployed people employed there. There were also quite a few who volunteered to help out in the shops. The store network itself strives to reinforce these processes by organizing film screenings, craft workshops, and lectures for customers, donors, volunteers, and staff, as well as a peculiar hybrid (yet still successful) event known as “Donors’ Night.” Such an event can serve to confer a certain degree of social prestige on active participants, which—as with philanthropy in general—can yield indirect benefits that should not be underestimated in developed democracies with mature social networks. Of course, the municipalities involved are also participating in supporting the initiative—this demonstrates that even local self-government, which has been stifled for decades and stripped of virtually all its resources, can be revitalized if given a meaningful, substantive purpose.

Another chapter deals with local renewable energy production, and—lo and behold!—in recent years, more than 10,000 people have visited Vép to see for themselves the reality of this form of energy generation. Let me add that the methodology of local energy communities—which have long been popular in Austria, with tens of thousands of such communities—and, of course, not least their legal, procedural, and institutional framework, are also gaining ground in Hungary. Ágnes Gajdics, an environmental and energy lawyer at EMLA, plays a significant role in this regard.

The local currency in Hajdúnánás is yet another extremely interesting and creative solution for strengthening the economic—and, of course, social—ties within a small region, and for revitalizing the local economy as a whole. This “Bocskai Korona” is the first municipal project of its kind; its predecessors—the “Kékfrank” in Sopron and the “Balaton Korona”—were civic initiatives. While 100% of the forint value is held in reserve at the bank in accordance with the law, the Bocskai Korona circulates actively, and local businesses offer discounts to one another and to individuals who pay with it. Within a few years, three neighboring towns have joined this local economic revitalization project—here, too, we see the formation of a network!

The book also features other projects with a similar spirit, though operating in very different fields, such as the locally community-run poplar-based wastewater treatment plant, the community frog-rescue project, the beautifully flourishing farm-based educational initiative, and the construction and

housing communities—all involve gentle, gradual community-building, while each also effectively supports its own professional and local economic objectives.

In fact, a counterexample—though it still works excellently, of course—in the book is the Krishna Valley initiative in Somogyvámos, where community-building came first, and was carried out under a very strict, disciplined order, upon which the religious, economic, charitable, socialization, and decision-making processes were built. This complex communal structure—rooted in ancient religious traditions yet modernized as much as possible, and, in my view, borrowing certain solutions from the English Methodist Church—naturally struggles to adapt to the inevitable process of individualization in the modern era, a topic I’ve written about extensively in the past, in various contexts. But if the participants are satisfied, who has the right to criticize them?

The final piece in Takács-Sánta’s fantastic collection also stands out a bit from the rest (which, incidentally, were by no means cut from the same cloth), in that they are using the legal tools of participatory democracy to fight against the polluting plant that has settled in their village. Of course, extra-legal means are also an integral part of the campaign in such cases: demonstrations, putting pressure on local council members, and, of course, the media—especially social media. But this story is similar to most of those in the book in that, while the collective struggle is loose, it has created a lasting network among the participants that extends far beyond the duration of the case itself.

There are currently hundreds of local communities in Hungary that are already capable of taking care of themselves—and are happy to do so. These may consist of a few villages, a small region, or even just one or two houses, farm buildings, or a few hectares—a farm maintained by an extended family or a community of friends, a lifestyle experiment, cultural activities, and often shared religious practices—in other words, a *distinctive local culture*. These communities are generally connected to other, similar communities both domestically and abroad. Examples include *the Global Ecovillage Network* (GEN) and the international *Deep Adaptation* network, of which Hungary is home to one of the largest numbers of communities.

In the event of the collapse of civilization—hopefully only temporary—the importance of such communities will increase, and if they can make use of the appropriate, valuable aspects of technological civilization, they can be successful. It is also evident, however, that these communities will face numerous threats; therefore, it is essential that they maintain and develop their relationships with neighboring and even more distant communities of a similar nature. The eco-political ideas currently in circulation are reminiscent of the final days of ancient civilization, when, according to Alasdair MacIntyre, for example, “set out—mostly without fully realizing what they were doing—to devise new forms of community within which a moral life could be sustained, so that morality and civilization might survive the coming age of barbarism and darkness” (MacIntyre 1999, Lányi 2020: 126).

(Property) We have noted on several occasions in the previous chapters that civilized and efficient societies must address the institution of property, because in its current form it does not serve the well-being of communities and societies, but is increasingly destructive. Of course, communist experiments attempted to abolish or at least severely restrict private property as a tool of oppression and exploitation of others, but they consistently failed, resulting in widespread misery. Obviously, individual ambition and humanity’s status-seeking nature cannot do without some lasting trace of one’s achievements, and nothing symbolizes a person’s high social status better than a magnificent villa, a luxury car, or a cruise around the world. This kind of ostentation, however, is deeply at odds

with the feelings and self-esteem of those who are somewhat further removed from the “pot of meat”; thus, restricting luxury consumption and imposing progressive taxation on it is clearly a legitimate political goal, while a form of normal accumulation— especially the proper provision for one’s descendants through the bequest of property, should rather be encouraged. At the same time, we can speak of those unimaginably vast fortunes that accumulate in the hands of certain individuals thanks to a series of fortunate (?) stock market transactions or other business maneuvers that teeter on the edge of legality. At this level, money already equates to social power, and hardly anyone can believe that it is reasonable—or in the best interest of the community’s future—for a stock market shark or a real estate mogul to dictate the direction of the economy, politics, science, healthcare, or the development of the civil sector.

Private ownership of natural resources poses a particularly serious problem, especially in the case of water and the land associated with it, as it conflicts with our fundamental human right—access to water—as well as with water retention projects that shape the lives of communities. Even Roman law faced this dilemma, which it resolved by regulating higher social interests separately from the rights of private individuals (*res divini iuris*—matters subject to divine law, and *res humani iuris*—matters subject to human law). Based on this, they made it possible for everyone to use the waters of rivers and harbors, regardless of who owned the water bodies or the shorelines. One of the greatest weaknesses of modern environmental protection, however, is that it always comes to a halt in the face of private property. Throughout history, the number of things in public ownership has generally declined steadily, and political liberalism has ultimately made private property virtually unrestricted and one-sided.

However, the social and environmental blindness of property rights renders sustainable development illusory. For this reason, the rights and obligations associated with property must be brought into balance. And those owners who are unable or unwilling to demonstrate adequate social sensitivity and ecological responsibility are unworthy of their property. Immoral property is not property (Fülöp 2016).

(Global Issues) Our current civilization is fundamentally global, and so is its crisis. Let us be clear: even today, no one is addressing humanity’s global problems. The United Nations and other global organizations are not yet effective; at present, even their very existence is a major achievement, and the loose networks of civil society organizations and scientific institutions are still unable to address these problems. The only effective global network is that of large multinational corporations, but we generally do not welcome this. At best, nations wait for one another and bombard their publics with high-sounding rhetoric, but amid the cutthroat competition for economic and political power, they have no intention whatsoever of doing anything for humanity.

If this impotent institutional mass were to disintegrate in the wake of a moderately violent global cataclysm, that might still count among the more favorable scenarios; the oceans, rainforests, and other natural factors might even come out of it better off. The other, safer—though unfortunately less likely—scenario would be for the global system to be slowly (though not too slowly, because we don’t have that much time) transformed by a comprehensive and sweeping grassroots initiative. Lányi describes and analyzes these ideas in detail in the chapter “*What Kind of Third Way*” in his book **Introduction to Eco-Philosophy** (Lányi 2020: 129–34). According to these ideas, a new global culture would be needed, which would, of course, also influence the civilized cooperation among international actors.

14. Issues of Transition

We must not for a moment forget the advice of the distinguished humorist Béla Salamon. In the 1950s, during the darkest period of communism in Hungary, a mediocre colleague at a party group meeting of the theater troupe tried to embarrass the very popular—but “unfortunately” somewhat religious—comedian. He posed the question point-blank: “Comrade Salamon, do you know what will happen under communism?” The answer remains valid to this day: “Of course I know... I just don’t know what will happen until then.”

Throughout history, turbulent conditions have always arisen between two phases of civilization: revolutions have broken out, power structures have undergone radical transformation, and a series of other significant changes have taken place. At the same time, in more fortunate cases, these intensified political, social, and cultural changes heighten society’s self-examination and self-awareness regarding what structures and forms of governance were and will be necessary (Freeman 2004: 138).

(Power of 10) In a world falling apart, even a simple theory can be of great significance if it sheds light on the connections between the various layers of the human world and defines our place and our tasks within this system. Avit Bhowmik, Mark McCaffrey, and their colleagues conceptualize the world and human society as divided into 10 layers and define the scope and responsibilities of each level as precisely as possible. An individual’s (1) environmental awareness is, of course, fundamental to the behavior of the family (2). If more families consistently uphold these values, they can spread to local communities (3) as well. Several local communities can already reach the first level of administration: local (district—though large cities obviously constitute a separate category) government (4). County, county-level city, and capital city governments (5) are certainly the arena of politics; if these can be “infected” with the new culture, this could in turn bring about a transformation at the level of national parties, institutions, and authorities (6). Such a cultural shift would already be on a solid enough foundation for certain groups of countries (7), regions (8), and entire continents to embody a culture of sustainability in their most important decisions (Bhowmik et al. 2020). And that is how we arrive at global (10) changes. How, exactly?

On the one hand, “*Powers of 10*” is a symbolic expression of the systemic nature of global society—the fact that its individual elements form layers and subsets and fit precisely into a complex structure with at least 10 levels. On the other hand, it also provides psychological reassurance and support to know that we have a place in this system, that our individual efforts contribute to it, and—more than that—that they are an indispensable part of the greater whole. Of course, this also entails a moral obligation: we ourselves, our families, and our communities must carry out the share of the tasks that falls to us.

(The divide between people, communities, and politics) Among the signs of a crisis in civilization, people often cite the hollowing out of representative democracy, which frequently allows populist, dictatorial regimes to come to power and remain there for what are sometimes shockingly long periods. Moreover, the structure of the state is becoming increasingly complex and will eventually collapse under its own weight. Emily Hauptmann analyzes three books that offer some kind of solution to this legitimacy gap. The majority of voters are pathetically disinterested and therefore very easily manipulated, the authors of the works examined conclude, although in the information age it would

be a contradiction to claim that people are incapable of participating in the management of public affairs—or at least of discussing them substantively—provided the appropriate conditions are in place (cf. what was previously said regarding Rorty and Posner’s concept of democracy). It is true, however, that one of the serious symptoms of the crisis in our current civilization—the chasm-like depth of social disparities and their continued widening—clearly precludes the possibility that everyone could have even nearly equal influence on any given government decision.

Furthermore, the problem is that people have lost their free time, and as their livelihoods are increasingly at risk, engaging in public affairs is not a priority for them; they leave that to career politicians and the professional lobbyists of various influential interest groups. In this context, however, the legitimacy of government decisions is very low, and this undermines the effectiveness of government operations at a time when it is most needed.

Nevertheless, the authors do not consider it impossible at all to select, in a manner similar to the jury system in Anglo-Saxon countries—with some variations—a sufficient number of voters from a sufficiently representative pool through a mandatory, *random process*, to compensate them for their time, and to provide them with the necessary information and other conditions for decision-making. These new legal institutions could be linked to existing mechanisms for shaping the will of the people, such as referendums or even an independent, democratic evaluation of individual campaign promises and policy platforms immediately prior to elections. Such bodies would not necessarily be temporary in nature; some authors go so far as to suggest that they could even evolve into a new branch of government (obviously with appropriate rotation of participants, while continuing to follow the principle of random, representative selection). In this case, however, the constitutional design of checks and balances—and, of course, their effective operation—would be no small task (Hauptmann 2004: 821–2). Furthermore, care would need to be taken to ensure that the experiment does not degenerate into a system consisting of corporatist, centrally appointed, and/or manipulated groups.

These proposals could even be organically integrated into existing legal institutions, such as constitutional provisions on local self-government or community participation. Local self-government has a long tradition even in Central and Eastern Europe, which can serve as a foundation; in my view, there is still enormous potential in fostering closer ties between local affairs and local communities. The latter—the further development of community participation—would be supported by the Aarhus Convention, the Escazú Agreement, and a number of other well-developed international legal documents, for which the regional and national infrastructure and practices have been surprisingly well established over the past two to three decades. Of course, the so-called “participation capacity-building” system should be strengthened (e.g., based on Article 3 of the Aarhus Convention and several other scattered provisions), and from this angle, we should also begin building connections not only toward the direct democratic constitutional proposals currently on the table but also toward the organically developing system and network of sustainable local communities.

Antal Herrmann, the renowned 19th-century ethnographer, maintained that in a multi-ethnic state—such as Hungary was after the Compromise—a thorough understanding of one another’s cultures is a fundamental prerequisite for peaceful interethnic relations. In 1887, in keeping with the spirit of the times and to reach a wider international audience, he and his fellow scholars launched a German-language journal (*Ethnologische Mitteilungen aus Ungarn*) and published their numerous studies on Hungarian culture in it. In 1889, they founded the Hungarian (!) Ethnographic Society, in which numerous non-Hungarian folklorists also participated. Herrmann worked in the field of comparative ethnography and actively supported the establishment of Saxon and Romanian folklore museums in Transylvania. Let there be no misunderstanding: Herrmann was also a nationalist, which at the time was still considered a natural expression of progress. He described the Hungarian language as a

treasured asset and, in general, fought against ethnic separatism according to his own convictions—and, as we can easily see in retrospect based on historical experience, much more wisely than the administrative coercive measures the ruling bureaucracy imposed on minorities (Davis 2017: 12). By reviving the Hermann initiative, there would be a great need—even under today’s circumstances—for the various ethnic cultures to draw closer together; without it, however, these cultures could be exploited during this turbulent period of transition to weaken the civilizational bonds between and within countries.

(*social media*) No matter how modern industrial civilization may collapse, it will, to some extent and in some form, give way to the information society—and, of course, it has already done so to a significant degree (Castells 1996). The economy and politics, as well as communication between and within societies, are already fundamentally shaped by the internet; however, artificial intelligence could pose a new, immense threat to all forms of human civilization. In any case, as long as the Internet and social media operate within today’s more or less transparent (I almost wrote “controllable”) framework—at least in part, the tip of the iceberg, but one with which the majority of users can cope—they can also serve as a key tool for the potential transition outlined in the previous chapter. There is a chance—albeit not a very big one—that future generations will be able to free themselves to some extent from constant browsing, online presence, and the influence of influencers (what a telling name!) and others. However, emerging sustainable communities truly cannot do without a repository of the most important and highest-quality technological information (agricultural, natural science, industrial, community-related, etc.) while it is still within their reach; compared to this, the use of libraries would be like a stone axe. That said, it wouldn’t hurt for sustainable local communities to have a library of their own—one that isn’t just electronic.

There is, therefore, a need to foster conscious, authentic, and resilient internet use in our societies. Very serious programs—sparing no expense or expertise—are being launched to provide training in this area. Who is behind them? Well, multinational giants like Meta, Google, and TikTok... The training materials, which were developed with the participation of independent (?) research centers and civil society organizations, drew on the work of Norbert Elias. The task, after all, has not changed: to “civilize” the participants in a new arena—that is, to suppress their aggressive tendencies toward self-assertion, which are also rampant on the internet, for the sake of collectively achievable results (Docherty 2026, pp. 556 and 559).

15. Summary

In this chapter, based on *the Theses* and their elaboration, I review the elements that I will directly use in teaching the course titled “*Culture and Civilization*.”

1. To what extent will the fate of this civilization differ from that of previous ones?

- A widespread shortage of resources, a complex ecological disaster;
- Globalization means there is nowhere to retreat to;
- A highly developed culture, with certain branches and values of culture taking on outstanding importance;

- Unprecedented interconnectedness and interoperability among communities, along with the resulting high level of individualization among community members;
- Civilization may be replaced by substitutes: consumption, the excessive pursuit of status symbols, the abusive dominance of the institution of property, state coercion, and manipulation.

2. The Individual Elements of Culture

As we put it in the spirit of Chuck Norris, culture is “everything,” but why not attempt to compile at least its most commonly recognized elements? It is also possible that we may uncover certain systemic characteristics among these elements. In any case, the list below may evoke a sort of holistic sense in the reader.

- The word’s etymology refers to our relationship with our physical and social environment (to cultivate, to till, to settle in, to care for, to nurture);
- An omnipresent concept that defines and describes the fabric, network of relationships, and structure of a civilization;
- It is a social construct—a collective interpretation of life, a sum of symbols and meanings;
- It influences us; we learn it, incorporate it, and pass it on; it shapes our thinking, actions, and communication;
- It offers ready-made, tried-and-true solutions that have proven successful over a long period of time;
- It is characterized by stability, predictability, and fundamental values, which are often implicit;
- It can be broken down into sectors or groups of sectors, such as social (*soft*) and technical (*hard*) culture, though these are closely interrelated;
- It has a history and geography, but transformations are continuous, and overlaps and connections are significant;
- High culture and popular culture are generally distinct, but the postmodern, postindustrial era may be characterized precisely by the blurring of the two;
- Culture is also a matter of power, a tool of domination (and resistance), since it shapes the thoughts and actions of people and communities; there are always ambitious politicians who seek to exploit culture in a planned and systematic way to extend their dominance;
- Culture, however, also directly and autonomously defines and shapes (status) relationships among people, and behavioral culture—or, in other words, civility—is the key element of civilizations;
- It is a heritage, but not property; yet it requires preservation and protection—the active engagement of people, communities, and societies with their culture remains a matter of debate;
- A “technical” issue is the storage of culture: in means of communication, objects, works of art, as well as in institutions, ideas, norms, cults, etc.

Some of the above definitional elements examine the significance of culture from the individual’s perspective, while others do so at the societal level; some refer to local culture, while others speak of societal or even global culture. Some of these distinctions are intentionally vague and contradictory, intended to suggest that we are dealing with an infinitely complex phenomenon whose essence can only be intuited but never fully grasped. The essence of the collective unconscious or cultural unconscious, for example, is precisely that it clearly influences us, yet we do not know exactly what it is or how it exerts its influence.

It is possible to speak much more concretely about specific cultural spheres—such as scientific and technological culture, political culture from the perspectives of the powerful on the one hand and the subjugated on the other, the cultural spheres of ideas and beliefs, and the colorful, rich world of the arts, etc. Some cultural achievements are less tangible, while others are more so—manifesting in works of art, artifacts, norms known to all whether written down or not, and institutions that serve and promote various cultural sectors.

Definitions of culture can also be divisive: they may contrast “hard” and “soft” culture, elite and mass culture; political culture, meanwhile, may either enable or make it natural for citizens to participate in government decisions that affect them, or it may seek to exclude them. Educational culture can be Prussian-style and authority-based, instilling discipline and knowledge in children, or American-style, leaving them capable of coping with life but uneducated.

However, there is one thing these definitions do not address: how all of this can help civilizations, especially our own, which is in decline. Sometimes, the most important part of a definition is precisely what is left out of it.

3. Individual Freedom

If our culture defines all our thoughts and actions to such an extent, if it lurks so deeply even in our subconscious, how can we be free at all? I suggest we look away from the weighty philosophical questions hurtling toward us and limit ourselves to examining the phenomenon known as the paradox of individualization, which offers a kind of answer to this dilemma.

Throughout history, increasingly complex social structures have emerged; we can belong to an ever-greater variety of communities and must master an ever-greater number of community norms and forms of knowledge. As a result, an increasingly specialized blend of cultural influences can take shape within each individual. This individualization can be valuable for our communities (all of our communities), since diversity is the key to better adapting to changing situations. It remains valuable as long as communities are able to organize the productive cooperation of the most diverse individuals working within them.

At the same time, identities that are becoming increasingly specialized and are inevitably drifting apart from one another also pose a threat to communities; they can easily tear them apart. Who knows how we will live with our ever-increasing freedom? In theory, greater freedom brings greater insight—a kind of freedom even from our own visceral impulses—and this, at any rate, gives us reason for hope.

4. Civilization

As the social division of labor becomes increasingly complex and the network of human relationships grows ever denser, what should civilized behavior—which is becoming ever more indispensable—look like?

- A civilized person is able to assert their will and needs without coercion or violence, or to set them aside for a shorter or longer period of time if their goals cannot be achieved otherwise;
- Civilization, therefore, is the ability to postpone one’s needs and desires;
- The choice of behavioral strategies that takes into account short- and long-term, physical, and social constraints;
- Cooperative, polite, and fair behavior that does not violate the dignity of others;

- Mutual, predictable behavior that holds true over the long term;
- The level of trust (as an expectation of civilization) and civilized behavior can reinforce or weaken each other in a circular manner;
- The institution of property signifies a consolidated social status (without relying on the institutions of dignity and respect), yet it cannot be exercised entirely unilaterally, without cooperation.

The degree of cooperation and trust can vary significantly at the community, local, societal, and global levels. The following factors come into play to enforce civilized behavior: a rational understanding of immediate and long-term reciprocity; built-in moral and ethical restraints and inhibitions; community disapproval and retaliation; and, ultimately, state coercion and the legal proceedings based on it. It is always questionable to what extent people's behavior remains civilized when strict external controls are relaxed.

However, uncivilized behavior in and of itself can disturb others, even if it is not otherwise violent. People who, for whatever reason, are not sufficiently socialized and behave in a very uncivilized manner are unsuited for community life; thus, civility and culture are not contradictory concepts.

If we think about it, however, the paradox of individualization—as a fundamental cultural concept—points toward an increase in civilization. The more diverse people are, the more they depend on one another in the division of labor; therefore, their cooperation must be all the more seamless, meaning their level of civilization must be all the higher. On the other hand, the more individualistic a person is, the greater the chance that their valuable contribution to the community's well-being will be properly recognized. Individualism, therefore, also gives rise to a heightened demand for human dignity.

5. Barbarism

Perhaps all manifestations of uncivilized behavior are linked in some way to humans' fundamental quest for status. Clearly, if people's social status (within groups, organizations, society, or even in an international context) becomes uncertain, cooperation, trust, respect, and the other criteria of civility listed in the previous point may break down. There are varying degrees and levels of this, as well as different forms of manifestation, such as:

- Arrogance, haughtiness;
- Free-riding (parasitic, pushy) strategy;
- Intrigue;
- *Bullying*;
- Harassment;
- Psychological terror;
- Threats between individuals, aggressive behavior;
- Open, direct violence;
- Xenophobia, intergroup violence, oppression and discrimination against minorities;
- International conflict, war.

Based on these, one could almost plot these manifestations of barbarism on two perpendicular number lines, where in one dimension the element of coercion—brutality—increases or decreases, while the other represents the level of uncivilized behavior, its geographical and personal scope, and, along with this, the possibility or impossibility of social control.

6. Responses to Uncivilized Behavior—Multi-Round Games, Comprehensive Strategies

As the saying goes, fights start when someone strikes back. When someone behaves uncivilized, the interaction usually doesn't end there; the exchange of responses back and forth is the most important part of conflict situations:

- Aggressive response, counterattack, or even a preemptive strike
- Defense, escalation, de-escalation (reconciliation, persuasion, reconciliation of interests);
- Deflection, withdrawal from the situation, escape (regaining the restricted space);
- Secondary civility (leaving the other party alone);
- Tolerance (acceptance).

In any case, few authors address the progression of uncivilized behavior or its temporal dimensions; however, even those who do tend to focus primarily on the most extreme manifestations of the types of uncivilized behavior listed in the previous point (No. 5) and, among the possible responses to them, generally concentrate only on the harshest ones. In response to the longer-term, so to speak, strategic forms of uncivilized behavior found in the middle section of the list in the previous point, a temporal combination and flexible structure of the response options listed here would clearly be appropriate. A complex strategy and a high degree of organization, comparable to the response required for the most significant and impactful forms of uncivilized behavior—those at the group, societal, and international levels listed at the top of the list—may be necessary.

7. The Development of Civilization

Personal and social levels:

- Civilization as a coercive social construct;
- Superego (the internalization of external coercion, the suppression of the instinctual self by authority);
- Humility;
- Cultural unconscious (the superego shared by a community or society);
- Archetypes (the inherited unconscious);
- Despite all this, humans are responsible for what they become (even if not everyone can be *an Übermensch*).

International level:

- The civilized “us” and the savage “them” (according to Elias, civilization is the West’s self-consciousness, so this can, of course, easily become circular logic);
- Cultural refinement and civilized behavior signify higher social status in Asia (which is why everyone strives for it even without coercion—clever!);
- Confucian values—a potential *leverage point* for transforming Asian societies;
- Globalization vs. Islam, purification vs. smile diplomacy: with cultural, economic, and political consequences;
- General recognition of culture-building, moral universalism (related to manifestations of secondary civilization).

Historical Perspective:

- The evolution of culture (and behavioral culture) (natural selection of more effective solutions);

- The spread of rules of courtesy (etiquette); the Hungarian term itself is derived from a word referring to the aristocratic order (udvar);
- Freud and absolutism: guilt is the price we pay for the development of civilization;
- Socialization, civilization, and cultural development (varying by society and historically determined);
- Liberal education instead of authoritarian education;
- Identity education and learning about other identities (returning to the topic of the individualization paradox).

From these three approaches, we can draw the same conclusion: it is neither acceptable nor effective for education toward civilization to be carried out in an uncivilized manner.

8. Culture and Civilization

Differences and Distinctions

- Culture is organized around positive values, while civilization seeks to keep negative impulses in check;
- Cultural refinement can be cultivated individually, while civilization is a shared experience of the community;
- Cultural institutions are extremely diverse, while the organizations that sustain civilization are relatively homogeneous (coercive organizations);
- Culture develops in a straight line, while civilization develops in a wave-like pattern;
- Global culture is not currently in retreat, but global civilization is;
- The institution of property is about power; thus, it is fundamentally a concept of civilization, but in the realm of culture, it is difficult to interpret and leads to contradictions.

The close connection between the two concepts

- The division of labor is fundamentally an agrarian, industrial, and technical-scientific cultural trait, and it is generally from this that the requirements of civilization are derived;
- The pursuit of fundamental cultural values (beauty, cleanliness, order) and a culture of hygiene also form a close connection (continuum) that extends from respect and human dignity to a civilized way of life (compatibility, respect, behavior free from coercion and violence);
- The concept of humanity brings together lifestyle, philosophical, and legal culture (human rights, fair and just procedures, etc.) with the requirements of civilization;
- Discourse (a culture of debate), the protection of personal autonomy, and the protection of minorities (diversity) as fundamental requirements of civilization;
- Culture can also represent a rebellion against all forms of oppression (barbarism);
- The achievements of technological culture cannot prevail or be put to use under all (or any) civilizational conditions;
- In certain cases, a cultural sector that was previously useful (in our case, technological culture and perhaps information culture as well) can be downright dangerous within a different set of civilizational conditions;
- A two-way effect: while fundamental cultural traits may lie behind shame and humiliation, the role of civilization is significant—people begin to “behave” accordingly; on the other hand, a sense of exclusion can lead to antisocial behavior (outbursts of anger, hostility, etc.);

- Fundamental cultural (universal human) values themselves can have a very significant constructive effect, but also a destructive one (diminishing civilization); for example, they can unite nations and communities, or, in the name of rising nationalism, they can alienate them.

We have seen that authors addressing this topic generally refer to a large, closely interrelated system of culture and civilization, in which the two factors primarily reinforce and sustain one another. However, these observations were made primarily over the past century and a half, when our current civilization was still at or near its zenith. In a declining civilization, however, the situation may be different; for this reason, it was worthwhile to examine the relationship between the two concepts from a historical perspective as well.

9. History of Civilization and Culture

It was also worthwhile to examine the *temporal dimension* of the following:

- Civilization, civilizations;
- Power, culture, and civilization at royal courts and among the bourgeoisie; folk culture and collectivism; the culture of conformity in China;
- Culture is, on the one hand, a form of self-reflection on civilization; on the other hand, by interpreting civilization, it also reshapes it—indeed, culture can even be an instrument of power;
- Culture develops and accumulates slowly and organically, whereas civilization does not.

Signs of a Declining Civilization

- environmental disasters,
- depletion of resources,
- supply disruptions and unrest,
- civil war,
- foreign invasions, raids, and wars,
- disruptions in international trade relations,
- epidemics,
- migration,
- increasing levels of aggression in politics, plans for violent expansion, cultural totalitarianism, efforts at homogenization, inward-looking policies, inflexibility, intolerance,
- the “*carpe diem*” attitude of the elites, luxury consumption, and, on the other hand, growing anti-elite sentiment in society,
- democracy is politically undesirable and, moreover, is becoming a comparative economic disadvantage,
- the decline of literacy (!),
- the disappearance of high art,
- the decline of urban life, the fragmentation of larger communities, and the emergence of self-sufficient village communities,
- rarely: slow decline, periods of fluctuation.

A “*perfect storm*”—the complex interplay and acceleration of these factors. Throughout history, the cultures that have served as saviors, in chronological order, have been agricultural-technological, moral-religious, and industrial-technological cultures; next in line: information technology culture?

Our current civilization exhibits most of the above indicators of decline, even though the examples cited come from a wide variety of historical periods. One interesting parallel, among others, is that the age of the Internet is accompanied by widespread illiteracy and functional illiteracy among the masses. However, the emergence of self-sufficient village communities is not yet part of the solution within this system, but rather one of the symptoms (e.g., along with *preppers* and those preparing for collapse as lone warriors).

In addition to uncivilized (violent, intolerant, selfish, narrow-minded, antisocial, etc.) forms of behavior, cultural decline is also mentioned. The long-term trajectories of these two factors, however, differ; most of the abandoned cultural values can be revived and put to use later.

10. Clash of Civilizations/Cultures

Following this historical examination, it is logical to also employ the tools of comparative analysis, which—to put it bluntly—can be grouped around the theme of conflict.

The West represents the values of modernity:

- through pluralism, individualism, the rule of law, and secularism, as opposed to a monolithic, collectivist, authoritarian state structure,
- The two fundamental tenets of the Western Enlightenment—autonomous human agency and historical progress—are, of course, less readily accepted by collectivist communities,
- Internalized (*guilt-based*) civilizational constraints, as opposed to externally controlled (*shame-based*) behavior—these concepts also show some parallels with the individualism-collectivism dichotomy,
- The changing role of women is a defining feature of Western civilization. Topics frequently covered in the news regarding non-Western civilizations—such as clothing and public appearance—are, of course, only the tip of the iceberg. In reality, a fierce power struggle is raging between the two genders, in which Western civilizations have spent a century more or less coming to terms with women's rise, while Eastern societies have had far less time to do so—a significant difference. Women's status-seeking behavior is a rarely studied topic (unlike in ethology).

Another question is how the values of modernity can prevail in the postmodern era. Nor is it possible to know exactly how deeply and widely the rejection of the West—(men's idleness, women's debauchery, children's lack of discipline, etc.)—is rooted in Islamic culture and public life. What we generally learn about is the reflection of Western politicians and political scientists on a purported Islamic worldview. From this perspective, Khatami's speeches and writings are exceptionally unique and valuable sources. He argues skillfully when he criticizes the "West-Non-West" dichotomy as an extreme black-and-white distinction, and points out that the center and the periphery are logically part of the same system. Furthermore, what is the periphery today can easily become the center tomorrow, and vice versa—and this is nothing less than a celebration of diversity. However, even the most astute Islamic interlocutors demand tolerance in areas where, without significant self-sacrifice on the part of the West, there can be at best only a secondary form of civilization.

Arguments against the "clash of civilizations":

- The multiple meanings of boundaries: black-and-white distinctions are a clear symptom of *borderline personality disorder*,

- The dual loyalty of Muslim women (to family values and the struggles of their own gender), and, more broadly, the new, perhaps less confrontational approach of female leaders and opinion-makers,
- Peaceful cultural and exchange relationships: trade, pilgrimage, the establishment of monastic orders (or their modern equivalents), missionary work (in its various forms), migration, adventurous long-distance journeys, professional exchanges, study trips (apprentices and the Erasmus program), the marriage of women, the spread of fashion items and trends (even in antiquity),
- the gradual decoupling of international law and international economic relations from the service of imperialist globalization;
- How long can the new, legitimizing justification for direct and forceful intervention in the internal affairs of other states—*“unwilling or unable”* (if a state is unwilling or unable to take action against international terrorist hubs using its territory as a base)—be sustained,
- Countries that were once considered in need of *“civilization”*—such as China—now seek to civilize others.

11. Scope of Action, Options for Action

“We teach defiance through beatings!”—that is, there are very serious limitations to suppressing uncivilized behavior through coercion and punishment. Tolerance, however, may prove to be a dead end in some more serious cases, whereas the strategy of secondary civilization may offer a good alternative.

The welfare state model, while it functioned, was a good solution for increasing civility and raising social awareness regarding uncivilized behavior; it succeeded in smoothing out social, cultural, and economic tensions and establishing a kind of functioning democracy.

Why and how did the welfare society begin to unravel in the 1970s?

- The welfare society became uninspiring for the younger generations (sex, drugs, and rock and roll); some describe this with the expression *“it’s okay to be a grandchild,”* which is indeed an unmistakable symptom of a civilization’s exhaustion and decline;
- The advance of individualization and its economic manifestations (the transformation of mass production);
- Globalization, neoliberal economic reforms, the information society, and post-industrial and postmodern phenomena; It is clearly a chicken-and-egg dilemma, but the transformation of personalities, the shift in consumer demands toward “,” and the paradoxical demand for information have played at least as important a role in these developments as the strategies of multinational corporations, billionaires, and speculators jumping at the new economic opportunities that have opened up;
- Useless, aimless masses; the widespread loss of human dignity;
- The ruthless competition inherent in consumerist morality (where everything that exists is a commodity or service) has weakened social solidarity; the situation is characterized by a weakening social safety net, healthcare, food security, and environmental protection, as well as a declining and highly selective education system;
- Proposed solutions generally remain within the existing system or otherwise lack a systemic approach; for example, it is questionable how realistic the proposal is that, alongside progressive taxation, redistributive measures must be strengthened to prevent social decline. Still, it might be worth trying until we come up with something better.

Can culture help?

- If we cannot maintain a minimum level of civilization, then obviously not much;
- The hubris of certain cultural sectors is a significant obstacle;
- Rethinking the role of property (many have already tried this...), and distinguishing between prosperity (wealth) and well-being (a value-based life), however, could be a significant consideration.

Local Solutions

- In civilizations in crisis, strengthening local communities is the obvious path to survival, based on experience to date; the question is whether this path is viable in a global, information-based, networked society, or whether, at the very least, significant modifications are necessary;
- A significant difference compared to the self-organizing local communities of previous historical eras may be that these communities possess a rich technical and other cultural background, a significant portion of which they are able to utilize even under changed circumstances;
- We must equip ourselves with tools (plans, rules, institutions, technology, etc.) to prevent and ward off manifestations of internal and external barbarism;
- We must ensure the motivation of individualistic yet highly valuable participants and preserve the human dignity, self-respect, and self-reflection of all participants (which, as we have seen, is a fundamental condition of internally driven civility);
- We must resist exaggerated, impatient collectivist tendencies;
- It is necessary to continuously share existing and acquired experiences through networks; strengthening the network of relationships can be key to the survival of sustainable local communities;
- The slogan “*think globally, act locally*” takes on many new meanings at a time when the existing—and already dysfunctional—system of global organizations is being dismantled; the information society also creates the opportunity for local communities, civil society organizations, and academic institutions to form a new kind of global alliance capable of counterbalancing, in some form, multinational corporations and out-of-control superpowers.

But what will happen in the meantime?

- The “*Power of 10*” system of sustainability must come together (and perhaps be institutionalized in some loose form);
- To bridge the existing legitimacy gap, the distance between politics and citizens must be narrowed from both sides: on the one hand, through decentralization and meaningful self-governance / partial self-governance (in line with the principle of subsidiarity), and on the other hand, through *capacity building* and independent, expert civil society organizations acting as intermediaries;
- Cultural exchange among nations, ethnic groups, and other social groups can also be very helpful; therefore, we must not focus solely on the cultivation of scientific and technical culture.

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