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# The Great Fear : The Disappearance of Culture and Cultural Diversity

This article deals with the concepts of culture and cultural diversity in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, using the ideas of various ethnologists (Claude Levi-Strauss, Clifford Geertz) and philosophers (Tzvetan Todorov, J. Huizinga) to show that they have come to represent a new form of the sacred. The author enunciates a theory of horizontal and vertical cultural hierarchies to articulate the relationship between occidental culture and the other cultures of the world.

Šiame straipsnyje aptariamos dvidešimtojo amžiaus ir dvidešimt pirmojo amžiaus pradžios kultūros sampratos ir kultūrinė įvairovė, pasitelkus etnologų (Claude Levi-Strauss, Clifford Geertz) ir filosofų (Tzvetan Todorov, J. Huizinga) idėjas, siekant parodyti, kad jie atskleidė naują šventybės formą. Straipsnio autorius plėtoja horizantaliosios ir vertikaliosios kultūrinės hierarchijos teoriją, stengdamasis atskleisti ryšį tarp Vakarų kultūros ir kitų pasaulio kultūrų.

## Introduction

The concept of culture enables us to designate – other than by race – diversity within the unity of the human species.[1] It is thus not the same thing as race, and yet it is still often associated with race, because the origins of each ethnic group are racial. Todorov remarks that it has the advantage of including two different conceptions of community, that which is acquired by family ties, i.e. by blood, and that which consists of a choice, a contract.[2] This flexibility, this ambivalence, however, is precisely what has allowed the notion to acquire not only a new meaning but a new value, replacing others that are increasingly considered to be obsolete.

The two main definitions of culture are : 1. The arts and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement regarded collectively, (or a refined understanding or appreciation of this) and 2. The customs, arts, social institutions, and achievements of a particular nation, people or other social group.[3] The first, then, is an esthetic notion corresponding more or less to the traditional French concept of civilization, and as such it is a universal category, while the second is a term used in the social sciences to designate a way of life, of which there are many. The first represents that which humanity shares and distinguishes it from animals whereas the second refers to what makes each ethnic group different from others just as a language does – it is therefore no coincidence that a language is generally considered to be an essential part of a given culture.

The second definition of culture implies a system of meaning shared and understood by a group of people but often impervious to those who are outside of it, as documented by ethnologists such as Clifford Geertz and Raymonde Carroll.[4] In other words, the meaning is relative to each culture. In one sense, then, a culture is a language, and in another sense the cultures of the world are comparable to the languages of the world insofar as they remain more or less hermetic in terms of meaning. My AIM in this paper is to show that this hermetic, mysterious quality,

the unelucidated meaning of foreign cultures, has come to acquire intrinsic value in the eyes of the intellectuals of the Western world, and that this value has usurped the role traditionally attributed to morality, the sacred, or God. For this value is synonymous with purity, with the power of nature, and with a faith leap or the withholding of judgement.

## Description of the Conceptual Transformation

If judgement must be withheld, it is because of the doctrine of cultural relativism, which dictates that one culture cannot be judged superior to another. In the absence of a scale on which to measure and evaluate the cultures of the world, then, they are all considered to be equal. My contention, however, is that from this initial position of cultural equality, which originated as a reaction against ethnocentrism,[5] there has been a shift to a conceptual framework in which there is indeed a scale of value, which I designate as the horizontal scale of cultural diversity, as opposed to the vertical scale of values within a given culture, civilization, or society.

Until the twentieth century, intellectuals of the Western world rarely questioned the superiority of the white race, its civilization, or its ideology, thereby establishing an ethnocentric hierarchy among the world's cultures and races, but at the same time there existed within our own culture(s), a vertical hierarchy of values based on a religious ideal : at the summit lay the pure, the immaterial, and the sacred, while at the base lay the impure, the material, and the profane.

The shift to which I refer has reversed the hierarchy among cultures or peoples while deligitimizing the hierarchy within cultures of the Western world, introducing global cultural relativism as an accompaniment to local democratization and social egalitarianism. What I am suggesting, however, is that a new hierarchy has appeared on the horizontal plane, a simulacrum of that which used to exist on the vertical plane : at the top now lie those cultures which are threatened, those which are at the periphery of the developed world and represent the pure, the immaterial, and the sacred, for they incarnate cultural diversity. The developed world, then, and most acutely its center, represented by the United States, is seen as the most impure, ersatz form of culture, the epitome of cultural pollution, whether it be intellectual, spiritual, or atmospheric. Those held responsible for the sins and crimes of the world, according to this perspective, are the Americans, while the world's victims can be variously designated as the inhabitants of the Bikini Islands, Brazilian Indians, or Native Americans, among many others whose cultures have been or are in the process of being destroyed. It goes without saying, then, that the pure form of culture which they represent is given a positive value while the democratic, industrialized, hygienic culture that victimizes it is given a negative value.

## Analysis of the Concept

Support for cultural diversity is virtually unanimous in the twentieth-first century, whether it be from members of powerful cultural groups who fear its loss for esthetic reasons or from members of cultural minorities who feel that their cultural identity is at stake. Strangely, however, the very concept is threatened by the three main elements which define it : purity, relativism, and distinctness.

The notion that a culture must remain free from foreign influences in order to remain intact and authentic – unless it assumes the aggressive role of colonialist or imperialist, assimilating others, in which case it is similarly branded with the stamp of impuri-

ty – spells the doom of every culture, for the history of the world is the story of continual contact, exchange, and influences. The myth of cultural purity, like that of linguistic purity,[6] translates the yearning for a state of untroubled equilibrium, a stasis that could only exist in an extinct culture or language. This search for authenticity is a nostalgia for origins, and it defines culture as being unchangeable, immobile, and rooted in a tradition. Thus, we look for true, unadulterated cultures in areas reputed to have remained as they were in the past, places that are known to have resisted modernity.

If change, mobility, and newness are the antitheses of culture, it is because culture is composed of two elements, one temporal and the other spatial. The first involves accumulation (history) while the second involves contrast, concentration, or distance (esthetics, or art). Thus, longevity and beauty are two positive qualities of culture. Longevity, in addition to immobility and immutability often make culture merge with nature, for they make it seem as if a culture has always been there, as if it were a given, not a creation ; or the slowness with which it has developed is confused with the slow evolution of plants and animals. The second element, beauty or contrast – linked to the first – is spatial by virtue of the principle which makes one woman in a hundred beautiful, while the remaining ninety-nine are characterized by varying degrees of ordinariness, unless, of course, the observer travels to a distant land where he finds a higher percentage of beautiful women than in his land of origin. And to say that beauty is a rare resource is in fact the same as saying that it is a peripheral phenomenon, like culture.

These two elements explain why a journey from the center to the periphery will generally be undertaken for cultural reasons, i.e. in order to observe and experience the slowly accumulated treasures of time, for the periphery is, by definitionm not a production center of material wealth, as is the capital. And as for the vestiges of this ancient civilization that one can find in the metropolis, they are precisely vestiges, monuments, culturally disconnected from the political, economic, social, artistic life of the big city. The tragic fate of the young, urban underclass is to grow up with no culture, not even that acquired by the popular wisdom still extant in the countryside, on account of the link between nature, agriculture, and culture.

And, as with beauty, what defines culture is contrast with ordinary, everyday life as it appears to us, i.e. a peripheral place on the map, be it social or geographic. This explains why Tibetans have more culture than Chinese, Canadians more than Americans, the Welsh mor than the English, and so on and so forth. And if the Chinese, the Americans, and the English have less culture than their peripheral counterparts, it is because their societies are places of consumption, loss and destruction of nature, as opposed to the conservation, preservation, and construction – for the wild trout proliferates only in the untroubled mountain lakes not yet touched by modern civilization – the kind of construction that can flourish only in a harmonious atmosphere.

Cultural relativism also threatens cultural diversity, for it clashes with universal norms and values. In other words, there is a contradiction between the upholding of the principle of women's rights, for instance, and the according of sacred status to all cultures : what to say about the Karok Indians' custom of buying wives ?[7] We are left with two possible solutions : either abandon universal principles in favor of absolute relativism, withholding judgement in the name of unconditional respect for cultural purity, or reduce the definition of culture to include only innocuous elements, transforming it into a formal, esthetic category. Of the two solutions, the better one is the first, for it

protects the concept of culture from any rational critique, putting it on the same footing with God in the eyes of a believer, a mysterious force without which the world has no meaning. Nonetheless, it is very difficult to circumvent universally recognized standards of hygiene, law, or ethics, so the second, less perfect remedy is more often adopted, reducing culture to costumes, dances, songs, pottery, or culinary specialties.

The third ingredient in the concept of culture is distinctness or remoteness, for just as we identify a language by the specificity of its sounds, structures, and vocabulary, we identify a culture by its specific customs, beliefs, and artefacts. Thus, those which happen to be shared with other cultures or countries seem less cultural, for that which is universal, according to our (second) definition of culture, ceases to be cultural. Stated differently, cultural elements are remote and distinguishable from ordinary, everyday, modern reality, somewhat as game is separated from reality in J. Huizinga's *Homo ludens*.[8] Authentic, pure culture always seems to be distant in space or time.

These three factors thus guarantee that culture and cultural diversity will continue to shrink or even disappear.

## Conclusions

If culture has come to incarnate an ideal, a threatened species, a victim, and a sacred entity, it is because it is associated with nature. This fact is ironic, for the term initially designated that which distinguishes human beings from animals, their capacity to transform their environment. Nonetheless, it helps us to understand why the task of defending and preserving it is a difficult or impossible one, for it involves a battle against the forces that shape modern society, such as industrialization, modern forms of communication and transportation, and virtually every form of technical progress.

Interestingly, the concept of culture as we now use it is quite recent, dating back to the eighteenth century, for the most part. We can see, for example, that the societies studied by ethnologists often had or have no word to designate culture.[9] Meanwhile, the referent is clearly disappearing even as the conceptual construct becomes more and more widespread. Respect for cultural differences will become synonymous with the nostalgia for an era when cultural diversity was still intact, long before the concept existed, a sort of cultural Garden of Eden, before the decline and fall of culture.

## NOTES

[1] *Denys Cuche*. La notion de culture dans les sciences sociales. Paris : La Découverte. 1996. P. 3.

[2] *Tzvetan Todorov*. Nous et les autres. Paris. Seuil. 1989. P. 424.

[3] The New Oxford Dictionary of English. Oxford University Press. 1998. P. 447.

[4] *Clifford Geertz*. The Interpretation of Cultures. New York : Basic Books. 1973. *Raymonde Carroll*. Evidences invisibles. Paris. Seuil. 1987.

[5] *Denys Cuche*. Op. cit. P. 21.

[6] *Michel Chicoučne et Laurynas-Algimantas Skupas*, Parlons lituanien. Paris. L'Harmattan. 1998. P. 194.

[7] *Mary Ellicott Arnold and Mabel Reed*. In the Land of the Grasshopper Song. Lincoln and London. University of Nebraska Press. 1980. (foreword).

[8] *J. Huizinga*. Homo ludens. Paris. Gallimard. 1951.

[9] Cuche. Op. cit. P. 7.

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2. *Carroll Raymonde.* Evidences invisibles. Paris. Seuil. 1987.
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5. *Geertz Clifford.* The Interpretation of Cultures. New York : Basic Books. 1973.
6. *Huizinga J.* Homo ludens. Paris : Gallimard. 1951.
7. *Todorov Tzvetan*. Nous et les autres. Paris. Seuil. 1989.


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## DIDŽIOJI BAIMĖ

KULTŪROS IŠNYKIMAS IR KULTŪRINĖ ĮVAIROVĖ

S a n t r a u k a

Kultūrinės įvairovės samprata remiasi ištakų nostalgija. Tai apima tris elementus : nejudamumą, nekintamumą ir tradiciją. Dėl šios konceptualios struktūros kultūra pasmerkta išnykti. Kvasireliginės vertybės Vakarų visuomenėse pakeičia tradicines religines vertybes. Todėl šiame straipsnyje aptariamas konceptualus pokytis iš vertikaliosios struktūros į horizontaliąją, išreiškiantis kultūrinę įvairovę.

PAGRINDINIAI ŽODŽIAI: kultūra, kultūrinė įvairovė, etnocentrizmas, kultūrinis reliatyvizmas.

KEY WORDS: culture, cultural diversity, ethnocentrism, cultural relativism.

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