

There is an urgent need for a wide-ranging public debate about the implications of state neutrality and how equitable treatment of different religions is possible. The main concerns of Muslim leaders are, however, rather with what is seen as the persistent mischaracterization of Islam by the media and politicians, the absence of public policy initiatives to support Islamic religious organizations, and the lack of public recognition that Muslims are Europeans too.

The above text is the introduction to Professor Klausen's book *The Islamic Challenge: Politics and Religion in Western Europe* (2005) and is excerpted with the permission of Oxford University Press (www.oup.com).

Europe and Islam: A Question of Culture?

The British Academy hosted a discussion meeting: 'Europe and Islam: A Question of Culture'. The event took the form of a panel discussion between Professor Adam Kuper FBA (Brunel University), Professor Fred Halliday FBA (London School of Economics), and Professor Jytte Klausen (British Academy Visiting Professor at Nuffield College, Oxford, and Brandeis University). The event was held first in London in 2004, and then repeated at Queen's University, Belfast in 2005. Later in the year, the discussion meeting was hosted by Bilkent University, Ankara, bringing British, Danish and Turkish scholars together in lively debate.

An audio recording of the debate that took place in Belfast is available on the Academy's web site via <http://britac.studyserve.com/home/default.asp>

Culture and Identity Politics

Professor Adam Kuper FBA, Brunel University, discusses the history of ideas about culture, and their significance in debates about identity in Europe today.

I

CULTURE SEEMS to explain everything at the moment. Intellectuals once thought that race was the key to history. More recently, everything was said to boil down to social class. The day before yesterday, gender was the secret. Today, culture explains everything from crime rates to economic development and even, in the hands of Samuel Huntington, the deep structure of international relations.

Writing in *Foreign Affairs* in 1993, Samuel Huntington put forward a series of large propositions about the new age that would succeed the era of the Cold War. History was not about to come to an end. New divisions would emerge, greater even than the ideological divisions of the previous generation, but they would be of a different order.

The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural ... The major differences in political and economic development among civilizations are clearly rooted in their different cultures ... cultural and cultural identities ... are shaping the patterns of cohesion, disintegration, and conflict in the post-Cold War world. ... In this new world, local politics is the politics of ethnicity; global politics is the politics of civilizations. The rivalry of the superpowers is replaced by the clash of civilizations.¹

Despite Huntington's claim that a new era has begun, with a new dynamic, he is peddling very old ideas, including even the equation of culture and religion. Half a century earlier, immediately after World War II, T.S. Eliot made the same point, more memorably: 'Ultimately, antagonistic religions mean antagonistic cultures; and ultimately, religions cannot be reconciled.'²

Arguments of this sort depend, of course, on what is meant by culture or civilisation. Both terms were born in the late eighteenth century, *civilisation* in France and, in

reaction, *kultur* in Germany. Civilisation was represented in the French tradition as a universal human good that marks us off from animals. Civilisation is progressive. It has advanced furthest, no doubt, in France. Yet even the proudest French intellectual insisted that civilisation was universal, enjoyed – though in different degrees – by savages, barbarians, and other Europeans. The greatest and most conclusive victories of civilisation had been booked in the fields of science and technology. Progress could be measured by the advance of reason in its cosmic battle against raw nature, instinct, superstition and traditional authority. But civilisation not only produces more reliable knowledge about the world. It also delivers a higher morality, and a more advanced and just political order.

As soon as the notion of civilisation crystallised in France, it provoked a reaction in Central Europe that gave birth to the idea of *Kultur*. *Kultur* was the very antithesis of an imperial, materialistic, soulless (and French-speaking) civilisation. It was associated with a specific people rather than a nebulous humanity, and it was inspired by spiritual rather than material values. The highest expression of a culture was a language. Its

most characteristic achievements were in the arts rather than the sciences. Its verities were local. What was true on one side of the Pyrenees might be false on the other side. While civilisation rejoiced in its inevitable spread and progress, culture lived in fear of being overrun, and by the juggernaut of material civilisation. In its own defence it had to look backwards, to a past way of life, uncompromised by foreign borrowings. And so culture abhorred the language of progress. This was, typically, the ideology of minorities in Europe's empires, or of irredentist movements. For the theorists of *kultur* had a political programme. While believers in civilisation took it for granted that the avant-garde nations were duty-bound to civilise less-developed peoples, the advocates of local cultures demanded sovereignty for each cultural group.

The English, as so often, disagreed with both the French and the Germans (although John Stuart Mill tried to persuade them not to). Matthew Arnold taught that culture was the sum of the highest human achievements in the arts and philosophy, 'the best that has been known and said'.³ This culture was made up of the most sublime achievements of the European tradition. Nevertheless it was universally valid, spreading sweetness and light wherever it went. But not everyone could claim it. It was the earned capital of a particular social class. This was not a class into which one was born but a class of the self-made, an elite of the educated and spiritually refined. Arnold called the enemies of culture the Philistines. They knew the price of everything but the value of nothing. They might deliver prosperity but at terrible cost to the spirit. So civilisation in the French sense of the word was a threat to Arnold's culture. Macaulay memorably summed up the dilemma: 'As civilisation advances, poetry almost necessarily declines'.⁴

These are the three classic ideas about culture. At one level, they present a confusing picture. But there are common themes. The conceptions of culture and civilisation have in common the notion that the most important elements in history are ideas, values, and intellectual creation. Culture and civilisation stand for absolute values. It has been suggested that these terms became current in the eighteenth century as religion

was losing its hold on European intellectuals. The civilising mission was perhaps the secular successor to the idea of the missionary project of the Catholic church. In contrast, the notion of a culture particular to a specific *Volk* fitted a Calvinist view of the world, in which each people is elected to a particular destiny.

II

THESE COMPETING ideas of culture and civilisation have been current for over two centuries, but they have not always been as fashionable as they are today. Norbert Elias remarked that culture and civilisation become matters of public concern at certain historical moments 'when something in the present state of society finds expression in the crystallization of the past embodied in the words'.⁵ We are apparently living through such a time. And today the notion of culture is yoked indissolubly to the notion of identity. Perhaps it was always this way. 'The concepts of identity-building and of culture were and could only be born together', Zygmunt Bauman has written.⁶ Certainly they came together in North America in the 1950s and 1960s, the notion of identity coming into fashion, with psychotherapy, just at the moment that sociologists and anthropologists in America were embracing a romantic idea of culture. In the romantic tradition, culture was something like the soul of a society, a sacred sphere of values, ideas and symbols, and it was culture that imbued the life of the individual with meaning. Indeed the romantics define identity in terms of culture: it refers to a relationship between the inner being of an individual and the collective spirit of a *Volk* or a nation, or, in modern times, an ethnic group. It is in this sense that people talk of an English identity, or a Muslim identity, or an African American identity, an identity that may be thought of as more or less encompassing. A healthy individual had to know who he was, which meant that he had to know which group he belonged to, and what its culture laid down for him.

The revival of this romantic conception of identity was linked with the popularisation of psychotherapy. Its most influential theorist, Erik Erikson, insisted on a connection between personal identity and collective identities, which he called cultures. Identity, he wrote, concerns 'a process 'located' in the core of the individual and yet also in the core of

his communal culture, a process which establishes, in fact, the identity of these two identities.'⁷

This was, of course, a very particular idea of culture, but it caught on. Nevertheless, not everyone agreed that it was necessary to achieve Erikson's identity between a deep sense of self and a culture, and European writers tended to be much less sure that it was a good thing. The existentialists were not keen on identities. They much preferred identity crises. Jean-Paul Sartre's *Réflexions sur la question juive*, published in 1946, made a powerful case against identity in the sense that Erikson was to give to the term. Sartre was concerned with what he called authenticity. An authentic identity was the outcome of a particular process of *Bildung* in which a free and rational person reflected on his life. The contrary of authenticity, the very essence of bad faith, was simply to take a ready-made identity from the shelf, or to accept a label that was foisted upon one by an accident of birth. And an example of inauthenticity was the identification of the individual with a stereotyped group, such as an ethnic group or a religious community.

However, the romantic conception of identity did offer a way of thinking about something that was happening in post-war America, a development that greatly surprised many social scientists. This was the revival of ethnicity. Apparently the melting pot was no longer working.

So in the '60s identity became not only a personal matter. In this case, the personal was political. Identity politics became respectable, even idealised. And if politics was a matter of identities, this implied, in turn, a very particular idea of the state itself: it was not unitary but rather a federation of little nations, without territories, perhaps, but with their own cultures and identities.

To describe this conception of society and the state, the term multiculturalism was coined, first, in the mid-1960s, in Canada.* Translated to the USA, multiculturalism was absorbed into a modern radical tradition that runs through the Civil Rights struggle, the resistance to the war in Vietnam, the women's movement and the gay rights movement. Culture was celebrated as the weapon of the weak. The left adopted an

extreme cultural relativism. Multiculturalists may challenge the claims of science to be universally valid, and self-evidently beneficial. But their primary concern is to apply culture theory to national politics. Very much like Polish or Czech intellectuals in the last days of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, they argue that the state behaves like an imperial power, not only in its foreign policy but also at home. On this argument, the USA is run by a culturally hegemonic community of WASP heterosexual men, who recognise only one set of standards and treat any form of difference from themselves as a sign of inferiority. The remedy of the radicals is that the USA must learn to celebrate difference. African Americans, Native Americans, Spanish-speakers, women, gays, even the disabled – all demand recognition of an authentic and credit-worthy cultural identity. Difference is the most fundamental value.

Conservative American intellectuals, however, have adopted the classic French ideology of a universal civilisation, its standard bearer the most advanced nation: now the USA. Its prophets proclaim that Western Civilisation – and courses in ‘Western Civ.’ – are good for everyone. Huntington himself predicted that even the clash of civilisations would turn out to be but a stage on the way to the climactic struggle to come, ‘the greater clash, the global ‘real clash’, between Civilization and barbarism’.⁸ In his most recent book, *Who are We?*, Huntington argues that civilisations and empires (which he tends to see as one and the same thing) will be fatally weakened if they do not sustain their own cultural values. The USA must therefore consolidate its traditional culture, and according to Huntington this is Anglo-Protestant. Immigrant values dilute this core, and must be resisted.

III

THE DEBATE in contemporary Europe is less polarised, but the same familiar and yet contradictory ideas about culture and civilisation are in play here too. The ambiguity of the conceptions of culture and

civilisation are happily exploited. In their crusade against the Islamic veil, French leaders preach the values of a universal civilisation. But when they worry about Hollywood, they invoke *l’exception culturelle*. European statesmen may be sceptical about the cosmic clash of civilisations. Yet they talk the language of culture theory readily enough when they debate the true meaning of the European project, even if they may not agree on whether it is Christianity that defines the spiritual identity of Europe, or whether European culture is the same thing as Western civilisation, and whether it is universal or suited only to Europeans, and, perhaps, Americans.

But at present Europe seems to be most concerned about immigration, and it is in debates about minorities that the rhetoric of culture is most troubling. In this context, most people do seem to know what they mean when they talk about culture. They refer to groups out there that appear to have a self-evident identity, and values that are different from those of the natives. Many people can evidently see for themselves the cultural threat, as they walk the streets of European cities. This suggests that we should be ready to translate the discourse of culture back into the language of race, and indeed this is very often a good short-cut to grasping what people are getting at. Like race, culture is popularly thought of as fixed, something to which one is born: to change a culture is somehow to be disloyal, a repudiation of roots, and even a denial of one’s true nature. Yet obviously, and particularly in immigrant situations, the experiences and attitudes of succeeding generations may be very different. What happens when the first language of children is English, and the second Punjabi? If children listen to different kinds of music, have political views that differ sharply from those of their parents, react against marriage customs, etc., how does one describe their ‘culture’?

The multiculturalists get themselves into trouble as soon as they try to identify, and to

name, the groups that are supposed to be culturally distinct. Religion, national origin, language and customs do not necessarily coincide. The classifications, even the names, may be alien and alienating. In Sweden, so-called Turks are often Kurds. In Holland, Turks and Moroccans are redefined as ‘Muslims’. This fits the traditional Dutch model, which grants primacy to religious identities, differences of language and national origin being treated as secondary. In Britain, for a long time, people spoke easily of ‘Asians’, a category that excluded Chinese people but included Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Indians and Sri Lankans regardless of differences of nationality, religion, language, caste or social class. They were lumped together because they all come from the same area of what was once the British Empire. Today, however, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis are lumped together with Arabs and Somalis as ‘Muslims’, despite obvious differences in language and social traditions, and in their positions in British society.

Yet, inevitably, some political entrepreneurs have grasped the opportunity presented by the new official discourse. It is hardly surprising that local politicians should try to mobilise ‘community’ groups, in part in order to tap into the funds offered by multicultural official programmes. The German romantic idea is gratefully adopted: only those born to a culture can speak for its bearers, because they share a unique way of looking at the world. Conversely, spokespeople may attempt to expand the constituency of people who, they claim, share their values. There are activists in the UK who choose to represent themselves as representatives of a wider Islamic community, or even of an international Muslim constituency. Like Huntington, they equate religion with culture. And governments may buy into the idea that they are confronting communities with distinctive ‘cultures’, and look for leaders, the chiefs of a modern system of indirect rule.

*Three specifically Canadian issues – apparently quite distinct – were yoked together under this heading. These were the contested place of Quebec in Canada, the problematic status and claims of the Inuit, and the first surge of what became a large immigration into Canada from the Far East. If all these issues could be brought together under one hat, if they were aspects of a single problem, then perhaps one policy could fit them all. Two influential Canadian theorists, Charles Taylor and Will Kymlicka, identified the central issue here as ‘recognition’, the acknowledgement of the value of the identity of others. They concluded that in order to achieve this recognition, each group had to be granted a certain autonomy. The state should therefore treat each cultural group as though it was a sort of non-geographical province of Canada.

IV

THESE NOTIONS of culture and civilisation are short-hand terms for Western ideologies. Ironically, however, they are now used by activists all over the world in order to mobilise support in defence of a local, home-grown 'culture' that is menaced by the West, or by globalisation, the name given today to the old bugbear of civilisation.

However useful they may be in political mobilisation, complex notions like culture and civilisation pack a lot of variables together, which is why they are so resistant to clear definition. Even in sophisticated contemporary social science a culture or a civilisation is usually treated as a single system, although it may be imagined as a process, shot through with inconsistencies, some of its holiest places bitterly contested. But it is often more profitable to pick apart this package, and to pay attention more particularly to religious beliefs, legal traditions, knowledge, values, the arts and rhetorical techniques. Separating out these

elements one can begin to work out the ways in which they may be related to each other. It is also possible to identify other processes that affect them, including market forces and political pressures. When trying to understand the situation of immigrants, one must also pay attention to their strategies of adaptation, to generational changes, and, of course, to the context they enter, and in particular to housing policies, policing, and employment and educational opportunities.

In thinking about international relations, it is surely sensible to give more weight to states and economic interests than to nebulous theories of civilisations. This is not to say that religion, for example, is irrelevant to international conflicts. But it is very dangerous to begin from the conviction that even worldly statesmen are unable to look beyond their ethnocentric values and views of the world. Although we may begin from different premises, we can still cut deals that we can live with.

There is also a moral objection to culture theory. It draws attention away from what we have in common instead of encouraging us to communicate across national, ethnic, and religious boundaries, and to venture beyond them.

¹ Samuel P. Huntington, 'The clash of civilizations', *Foreign Affairs*, Summer 1993, p. 22.

² T. S. Eliot, *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, 1948, p. 62.

³ Matthew Arnold, *Literature and Dogma*, preface to 1873 edition.

⁴ Thomas Babington Macaulay, 'Milton', first published 1825, collected in *Critical and Historical Essays*, 1843. Reissued 1907, p. 153.

⁵ Norbert Elias, *The History of Manners*, 1978, p. 7.

⁶ Zygmunt Bauman, 'From Pilgrim to Tourist – or a Short History of Identity', in Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (eds.) *Questions of Cultural Identity*, 1996, p. 19.

⁷ Erik Erikson, *Ghandi's Truth*, 1969, pp. 265-6.

⁸ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, 1996, p. 321.