

The Pre-History of the Culture Concept

The reality and experience of gravity precedes the development of the concept of gravity and the adoption of the word "gravity". Similarly, the reality and experience of culture long precedes the development of the modern concept of culture and the adoption of the word "culture".

The poet Pindar said "*Nomos* is king over all!" (*nomos basileus panton*). It is important to understand here that for the ancient Greeks the term *nomos* did not merely refer to the written "law" but also to the unwritten "law", that is, to customs. This is comparable to the modern sociological use of *nomos* to denote "a socially constructed ordering of existence" (Wikipedia). In ancient Greek usage *nomoi* comes close to matching our modern concept of "culture", since *nomoi* comprehended the laws, customs, institutions, traditions, way of life and ethos upon which every citizen depends.

Every since the sixth century BCE, the Greeks had argued as to whether nature (*phusis/physics*) or convention (*nomos*) had primacy. In other words, the nature or nurture (culture) debate is ancient. For Plato and Aristotle *nomoi* is integral to the very nature of the *polis*. Their views of *nomoi* were fashioned against the backdrop of Sophistic treatments of *nomoi* as being merely culturally conditioned and relative, a perspective they developed after the Greeks came into contact with other civilizations and were thereby exposed to different *nomoi*. Sophistic views threatened the entire foundations of Greek morality, suggesting that even such categories as "good and evil, truth and error, justice and injustice were not divinely sanctioned or rooted in nature but were mere conventions created by human society on the basis of expediency or imposed by those with superior power."¹

In Plato's *Crito* the perspectives of the imprisoned Socrates and his visiting friend Crito are contrasted.² Crito, the pragmatist, is "imprisoned" by his values: reputation (public opinion), property and physical life, which, since he regards this as an absolute value, causes him to fear death. Socrates, the idealist, is "free" because, though his body is imprisoned, his soul supremely values justice. Crito tries to save Socrates' body, while Socrates endeavours to save Crito's soul. Socrates holds the view that one person cannot directly damage another person's soul. However, he can damage the *nomoi* upon which every citizen depends.

The word "ethics" derives from the Greek word *ethos*. In rhetoric *ethos* was the first mode of persuasion used by a rhetorician, establishing his moral competence, as well as perhaps his expertise and knowledge. In such contexts as Greek tragedy or pictorial representation *ethos* might denote "character." However, this word was also used to refer to "usage", "custom" or "way of life." In the LXX this word is used in 1 Kings 18:28, which speaking of the Baal prophets, reads: "So they shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their *custom*, until their blood flowed." In John 19:40 the word is used to say that the wrapping of Jesus' body with spices in strips of linen "was in accordance with Jewish burial *customs*."

In Socrates' view to be a human being is to be a citizen. A city is its citizens, its institutions, customs, laws, traditions and ways of life. Heraclitus had insisted that citizens defend their *nomoi* as if defending their city walls. This is so because while

nomoi are imperfect and not firmly rooted in natural principles, they are to be treated with the same kind of respect and obedience as is due one's parents. For every individual is raised by both parents and *nomoi*, which includes, for example, language.

Socrates believes that the "soul" or ordering principle of the city is its *nomoi*, its culture. While one cannot directly harm the soul of another, one can indirectly do this by undermining the city's culture. For "the caretakers of custom are the souls of men who revere custom; customs are sustained by souls that cherish them - keep them alive." It is *nomoi*, culture, that binds citizens together. An unjust act is one that undermines this culture, this social order. For without conventions, institutions and social structures such as language, life and dialogue would be impossible. Socrates sees these as providing the very conditions which made his own life and career possible. So to undermine culture is to not only destroy one's own enabling context but also the matrix and context of the lives and activities of others. While customs change, life without customs is impossible.

Even by bribing the guide in order to see Socrates, Crito has chipped away at the social order that makes friendship and conversation possible. Everything a citizen does either contributes to or detracts from the culture of city, its moral and social environment.

All of the above illustrates that the reality and experience of culture was very real in ancient Greece. The importance attached to *paideia* further reinforces this. This is a word which approximates our modern words "enculturation" and "socialisation." *Paideia* was the classical Greek system used to educate and train people from childhood so that they might assume their rightful place in the *polis*. Such "enculturation" involved the development of body and mind via gymnastics, grammar, rhetoric, poetry, music, mathematics, geography, natural history, astronomy and the physical sciences, history of society and ethics, plus philosophy. Castle observes, "*Paideia* originally referred to a *process* of education, the *means* to an educational end. Later in Hellenistic times, it came to refer to the *end itself* and the word came to signify 'culture,' the very end to be achieved."³

The Greek historian Herodotus (c.484-425 BCE) wrote about the cultures of people he came across as he traveled in Asia, Egypt and Greece.⁴ For example, c.430 BCE he wrote *On the Customs of the Persians*.⁵ Here he records his observations of religious practices, the importance they attached to birthday celebrations, what they eat and drink, including differences between rich and poor, etiquette at meals, how they make decisions, how they greet each other, moral standards, funeral customs and trading practices. He also describes examples of cultural diffusion and states, "There is no nation which so readily adopts foreign customs as the Persians".

At the end of the first century CE, Tacitus, in his *Germania*, anticipated ethnography with his description of the customs of the Germans in the Rhine river valley region. Although these people were Rome's enemies Tacitus finds aspects of their culture commendable. Tacitus begins by describing the geography of Germany and seeking to explain the origin of the name Germany. He considers some of Germans' myths and legends. He attempts to describe their physical characteristics, their economic practices, their agricultural system, their behaviour and approach to warfare, their religious beliefs and practices, their governmental and legal system, including

marriage laws, the training of youth, typical dwellings, family life and their treatment of slaves. His own observations caused him to conclude that in peace time the men were indolent and surrendered the management of the household, home and land to the women, old men and the weakest members of the family. He also makes observations about modes of dress and differences among various classes and across gender. He admires the Germans for their sexual ethics and the value they place on hospitality. He comments on attitudes to hygiene, favoured foods and drink, recreational pursuits and funeral rites.

Around 1298 CE Marco Polo wrote *Description of the World* which included descriptions of Asian cultures and customs, especially those of China, though the authenticity of these accounts is in question. Arab politician and historian Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406 CE) represents the beginnings of 'scientific' thought about society and culture. He analysed the nature of and need for human society and made much of the need to determine the laws that govern the transformation of a society. Indeed, some regard him as the founder of sociology. In his great work *Muqaddima* Ibn Khaldun contrasted Bedouin and urban societies in Algeria. Though anachronistic we might say Khaldun was almost Hegelian in his understanding of society, seeing social change as a result of the constant interaction between nomads and townspeople.

Also in the 13th century, Roger Bacon, so-called Doctor Mirabilis, in his *Opus Majus*, remarked:

And we see that all things vary according to different localities of the world not only in nature, but also men in their customs; since the Ethiopians have one set of customs, the Spaniards another, the Romans still another, and the Greeks yet another. For even the Picards, who are neighbours to the true Gauls, have such a difference in customs and language, but that we cannot but wonder at such diversity in neighbouring localities.⁶

Muhsin Mahdi maintains that Arab historian Ibn Khaldun had begun a science of culture as early as the 14th century. He summarises Ibn Khaldun as conceiving of culture as that which belongs to the nature of man, differentiating him from the rest of the animal world, which essentially "is the power or faculty of intellect or mind..."⁷

The invention of Gutenberg's Printing Press in 1450 took place near the beginning of the Great Voyages of Discovery (1400-1600) and had much to do with the circulation of the exotic tales told by sailors and traders. Literate people were increasingly struck by the immense disparity between the values and customs of the West and the values and customs of newly discovered, especially so-called 'primitive' societies. In the late 16th century CE Michel de Montaigne (1533-92) introduced an early form of cultural relativism when he sought to understand the morality of such peoples on their own terms and spoke against the prevalent depiction of them as "barbaric" and "savage". Early forms of anthropological interest in "culture" were largely restricted to the study of isolated tribal groups and it was standard to suppose that European culture represented the highest level of cultural progress.

Giovanni Batista Vico's book *New Science* (1744) has led to him being dubbed the pioneer of ethnology. Vico had a view of culture that consisted in sets of linguistic and physical symbols holding societal structures together, which enabled individuals, as members of a group, to safely and successfully negotiate life.

By 1750 the concept of culture was also expressed by Anne Robert Jacques Turgot:

Possessor of a treasure of signs which he has the faculty of multiplying to infinity, he [man] is able to assure the retention of his acquired ideas, to communicate them to other men, and to transmit them to his successors as a constantly expanding heritage.⁸

It was in the 1870s that an articulated concept of culture was first introduced into the English language by Matthew Arnold and Edward B. Tylor.⁹ In *Culture and Anarchy*, Arnold explained in the preface that culture is

a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world, and, through this knowledge, turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits, which we now follow staunchly but mechanically, vainly imagining that there is a virtue in following them staunchly which makes up for the mischief of following them mechanically.

Arnold's view of culture is often dubbed "high culture." As the title of his book suggests, Arnold contrasted culture with anarchy. However, others were moving towards a concept of culture which rather depended on comparing and contrasting civilised life with the so-called "state of nature." It was Hobbes who sparked off interest in the state of nature with his view, expressed in *Leviathan*, that this natural human condition was lawless, apart from two natural impulses - the endeavour of each individual to seek peace and security, plus a willingness to allow others of like mind to enjoy commensurate freedom insofar as this promoted his own goals for peace and security. In Hobbes' mind it is these impulses that lead to the kind of mutual contracts that result in the formation of civil government. Others like Locke, Rousseau and Hume, with differing understandings of the state of nature, inevitably developed varying perspectives on the civilised life, with Rousseau, for example, even charging civilisation with the responsibility for teaching human beings to act badly.

But it was especially Tylor's definition of culture (1871) that continues to serve as a major reference point for all continuing discussions:

Culture, or civilization, taken in its broad, ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.

¹ James A. Colaiaco, *Socrates Against Athens: Philosophy on Trial* (New York: Routledge, 2001) 52.

² Much of what follows is summarized from Gordon L. Ziniewicz, *Plato's Socrates: The Crito: Customs (Nomoi) As Parents and Adversaries*. 1997. <http://www.americanphilosophy.com/crito.html> Downloaded 10/9/2009.

³ Davey Naugle, *The Greek Concept of Paideia*. www3.dbu.edu/naugle Downloaded 10/9/2009.

⁴ See too Coleman & Watson, *An Introduction to Anthropology* (London: Tiger Books International, 1992) 19.

⁵ This can be readily accessed on the internet. See, for example, *Ancient History Sourcebook*: <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/asbook.html>

⁶ Robert Belle Burke, *The Opus Majus of Roger Bacon, Volume 1* (trans. R.B. Burke; Kessinger Publishing, 1928) 159.

⁷ Langness, 1.

⁸ Langness, 1.

⁹ L.L. Langness, *The Study of Culture* (Chalder & Sharp Publications in Anthropology; eds. L.L. Langness & Robert B. Edgerton; Novato, California: Chandler & Sharp Publishers, Inc., 1974) 1.