The Power of Culture as the Most Enduring Means of Survival out of the Contemporary Crisis: The Role of Humanities Revisited

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Abstract: The present study undertakes an analysis of the dichotomy mind over matter, culture and civilization, a plea for art – with special focus on literature – and raising awareness of the increasing role of humanities and the liberal arts in a society driven and increasingly dominated by scientific advancement and aiming towards solely technological purposes. The paper stems from previous research interest in the field of cultural studies and relies on recent scholarly studies raising awareness about a revival of the word and language akin to the call "make it new" and calling attention to the impact of the image versus the power of the word highly valued by literature.
Keywords: Culture, Civilization, Crisis, Humanities, Universities

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"The sciences alone cannot illuminate the entirety of human experience without the light that comes from arts and humanities"
(Antonio R. Damasio: "The Strange Order of Things. Life, Feeling and the Making of the Cultural Mind")

"The humanities and arts play a central role in the history of democracy ... Literature and philosophy have changed the world" (Ruth O`Brien, foreword to "Not for Profit" by Martha Nussbaum)

Outline

Most poignantly in times of crisis, culture represents the most enduring means of survival as, it embodies the vital system of fundamental ideas of any age or society – viewed both vertically or chronologically and horizontally or geographically – or, as Immanuel Wallerstein noted "culture is a way of summarizing the ways in which groups distinguish themselves from other groups."[1] Moreover, culture also acts as the common denominator and connector of individuals, communities, nations: "Culture, on a global scale, concerns us all [...] it belongs to all humankind"[2] and "culture is the great instrument to overcome geographic" or any other kind of limitations, as Mario Vargas Llosa pointed out in an interview occasioned by the Nobel Prize for Literature Award. Culture is fundamentally a product of human creation, thus evincing the vitalist principle.

Furthermore, as Bourdieu sagaciously noted „culture includes beliefs, traditions, values, and language; it also mediates practices by connecting individuals and groups to institutionalized hierarchies."[3] Culture and civilization represent the most distinctive characteristics of humanity, furthermore "culture is what distinguishes humans from other beings" and according to recent discoveries in neurophysiology, analytical intelligence is slower than emotional intelligence, hence scientific and spiritual or cultural knowledge should be balanced.[4] One of the reasons that makes culture an enduring and perennial concept is its twofold nature: a social construct and a vivid notion with a lively soul with particular

characteristics given by the individuals inhabiting a particular geographical or historical region.

Raymond Williams defined culture as "one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language ... mainly because it has now come to be used for important concepts in several distinct intellectual disciplines"[5] and it has equally been regarded as the central concept in the humanities over the last decades particularly due to the widespread use of the term cultural studies – an interdisciplinary construct, a travelling theory, or an attempt to merge an academic discipline with an intellectual movement. Moreover, Raymond Williams distinguished between an "ideal" and a "documentary" analysis of culture, where the former perspective renders a definition of culture as "essentially the discovery and description, in lives and works, of those values which can be seen to compose a timeless order or to have a permanent reference to the universal human condition" and the latter one as "the activity of criticism, by which the nature of thought and experience, the details of the language, form and convention, in which these are active, are described and valued." In addition to these, the social perspective of culture provides "the clarification of the meanings and values implicit and explicit in a particular way of life, a particular culture".[6]

T.S. Eliot`s *Notes* represent one of the mot comprehensive definitions of culture to date, summing up multiple levels, several perspectives and highlighting the imperative to integrate them in a unified approach embedded all dimensions, rather than enhanced attention to one specific meaning, aiming at an overarching view. Therefore, T.S. Eliot`s scholarly analysis stands out in a class by itself in the context of related attempts to define culture as a daring project to set forth a thorough critique of contemporary society prone to endanger the very notion of culture, in a more traditional sense, rather than favouring it triggered or jeopardized by recent though massive social changes.

"We may be thinking of refinement of manners – or *urbanity* and *civility*: if so, we shall think first of a social class, and of the superior individual as representative of the best of that class. We may be thinking of *learning* and a close acquaintance with the accumulated wisdom of the past: if so, our man of culture is the scholar. We may be thinking of *philosophy* in the widest sense – an interest in, and some ability to manipulate, abstract ideas: if so, we may mean the intellectual ... Or we may be thinking of *the arts*: if so, we may mean the artist or the amateur or dilettante. But what we seldom have in mind is all of these things at the same time ... we must conclude that no perfection in one of them, to the exclusion of the others, can confer culture to anybody. We know that good manners, without education, intellect or sensibility to the arts, tends towards mere automatism; that learning without good manners or sensibility is mere pedantry; that intellectual ability without the more human attributes is admirable only in the same way as the brilliance of a child chess prodigy; and that the arts without intellectual context are vanity. The person who contributes to culture, however important his contribution may be, is not always a 'cultured person'"[7]

Culture is also the most effective instrument and concept of bridging the gap between polarities, alleviating discrepancies triggered by incongruent perspectives and different perceptions of space and time, facilitating an accurate and unbiased understanding of otherness, thus a powerful connector between such constructs as: dominant - dominated and core - periphery. Mention should be made here of the influential hypotheses set forth by communication theorist Harold Innis and anthropologist Edward Hall, conceptualized by means of different polarities, such as: space-biased and time-biased societies and civilizations, monochromic and polychromic time theory reflected in cross-cultural communication, as well as the distinction between high-context and low-context culture.[8]

Culture seems to embody a duality or a paradox in its very definition as it equally "provides the very ground for human communication and interaction; it is also a source of domination ... Whether in the form of dispositions, objects, systems, or institutions, culture embodies power relations" as explained by French social scientist Pierre Bourdieu.[9] Culture defines and shapes our humankind, therefore geographical or linguistic barriers should not impede other individuals' access to national cultures, although an essential and specific attribute of identity, culture can only be understood, perceived, accepted and interpreted in its relation to alterity or otherness. Culture has a twofold dimension: at national level and reaching worldwide; moreover, culture connects whereas power imposes distance, mainly at a social level, triggering hierarchy and it is commonly associated with notions of authority and wealth. There is a dual function of culture: on the one hand, there is a power to connect, create balance and transcend time`s afflictions in addition to acting as an instrument of power to achieve dominance. The latter notion best illustrates the idea of multiperspectivity as well as relativity, fluidity and dynamics of individual representation of self in relation to otherness, rooted in an approach based on cultural patterns and leading to the emergence of mental maps – relying on polarities – as a concept meant to define different and diverging views in relation to power, a subjective construct to provide a selective, even biased, view of the world.

> "The first [mechanism] concerns centrality. There is a tendency to place one`s own country in a central position, at least, in a more central position than it would be in others` maps and to group the rest of the world around it. Simultaneously, there is a tendency to make other countries and, indeed, entire continents peripheral ... The second mechanism concerns volume. There is a tendency to enlarge the surface of one`s own country, to inflate it disproportionately in comparison to others. Simultaneously,

there is a tendency to deflate other areas considered as irrelevant. The third mechanism concerns articulation. There is a tendency to render one`s own country in great and characteristic detail, and to reduce other countries and continents to shapeless blobs."[10]

Michael Denning noted that "as we look back on the last half of the twentieth century, it seems clear that culture moved to the foreground."[11] However, the perspective is not always an optimistic one, as recent decades had witnessed a commodification or technologization of culture, with a much deeper impact than the former distinction between " the two cultures" as defined by C.P. Snow in his 1959 Rede Lecture, in his attempt to accomplish a dialogue between science and art, who noted the parallel construction of writerly and scientific discourses and the urgent need for a connection, and, more recently, Solomon Marcus`s Romanian Academy Reception Speech (2008) emphasized the essential need / imperative of achieving a dialogue of disciplines as the their cultural values stems from and relies on communicative interaction.[12]

Further studies and articles raise awareness of the ubiquity of scientific advancement to all areas of our life, and the evidence that "science has been central to the rise of the modern world." Jay Tolson – editor of the Hedgehog Review, a journal published by the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture – however, voiced his concern "that as the power of science grows its dominion extends even into areas where its proclaimed authority is questionable".[13] Scholarly preoccupations regarding the contemporary role and status of humanities in a world whose culture is subject to increasing technicization as outlined, among others, by John Paul Russo – Professor of English and Classics – who engaged in a most topical, pithy and informed analysis of the dichotomy between the strong and weak forces, i.e. technology and literature, and the current state of their convergence, at a critical time when humanities "have suffered greatly at the hands of the technological society, they are more important to our social and ethical life than ever before in human history" setting forth an ominous preliminary conclusion that "today, the humanities are under attack from many quarters".[14]

Alongside this idea, a similar hypothesis was delineated by Ernest Bernea who undertook a critical analysis of the modern world reaching the same findings as aforementioned: everything pertaining to the cultural sphere has been technicized, in other words, culture has turned out to be excessively technical aspiring to cosmopolitanism, cutting off its deep-rooted connections to space and time, hence culture became too submissive to science where the latter one came to dominate all the activities of the modern man. Modern man`s crisis has been triggered by a certain degree of shallowness in most cultural endeavors, entailed by a competition between the material and the spiritual. The human being in contemporary times has been pulled away from the spiritual dimension, the cultural soul, harmony and complex unity and instead pushed out to the material and external world of mechanization, specialization, to the point where material and spiritual cultures overlap to the huge disadvantage of the individual, torn between the two horns of dichotomy and devoid of creativity.[15] Culture is the most powerful and enduring means of overcoming the "civilization of illiteracy" a phrase coined by Mihai Nadin, American scholar of Romanian origin, who set forth a daring hypothesis regarding the impact of technological advancement on humankind, which may also be better understood by reference to the economic law of diminishing returns, where apparent progress came to be accompanied, at a certain moment by undeniable regress.

"No other time than ours has had more of the future in it – and less of the past. The civilization we are entering is no promised land. The literate heritage might not be perfect, but it protects from the often disquieting changes that we all – enthusiasts, pessimists, critics – experience. In the palace of printed books, we were promised not only eternal truth and beauty, but also prosperity. One of the results of the conflict is that the visual has already surpassed the written, though not always for the better."[16]

Nowadays, the "the human situation" undergoes a different types of crisis, as one of them is entailed by the siege of overwhelming and rapidly shifting images, where individuals pursue a quest for entertainment as a means of distraction and escape from the routine of everyday life, where "men no longer amuse themselves, creatively, but sit and are passively amused by mechanical devices" hence leisure has been mechanized and people turned submissive to the longing of having a good time, immersed in the myriad opportunities for entertainment and with an increasing demand for time-killers that contemporary cities have to offer abundantly as a result of some demiurgical forces that have lured man into a moral and spiritual decline.[17] Aldous Huxley`s astute opinion some decades ago is very much in keeping with the current crisis identified by Mario Vargas Llosa who expressed his concern and grief over the state of culture nowadays and decried our contemporary civilization as one marked increasingly by performance, spectacle, entertainment. The phrase "civilization of the spectacle" depicts an accurate, topical, sagacious, pithy, ruthless, thorough and well documented analysis of culture in the contemporary situation of socio-economic phenomena and geopolitical context where authentic living was replaced by mediated representation of life, the genuine consumer turned into a consumer of mere illusions in the larger canvas of the culture-world, a concept coined by reputed sociologist Gilles Lipovetsky and Jean Serroy. Further to Jose Ortega y Gasset`s studies on the phenomenon of the mass, the former two scholars set forth an in-depth analysis of a culture world which was no longer elitist or highbrow but rather appealed to mass audiences, mainly as a consequence of the pre-eminence of the image and sound over the word, hence the final

picture is the world-screen which shattered culture's space-time balance and, finally, rendered a world where "things fall apart, the centre cannot hold" recalling Yeats' famous lines. It is worth paying attention to the discrepancy between the promotion of cultural values in numberless policies, strategies, white paper and other formal documents – UNESCO Conventions – with a parallel decline in the significance of cultural values entailed by the lure of entertainment and distraction. "How can one define the civilization of entertainment? It is the civilization of a world whose most prominent value is entertainment and enjoyment, and where distraction and merriment are the main preoccupation."[18] Mario Vargas Llosa witnessed a downfall of cultural values in society mainly triggered by the turmoil of changes affecting the social, political and economic dimensions of life, whose major consequences was that the image took over the word in terms of power and impact, because fast became the new code for most our actions whereas the attention to printed page and the written word became an underrated mental asset. Daniel Goleman`s theory might well be related to Antonio Damasio's studies thus bringing to the forefront the significance of emotional intelligence, an essential dimension of intercultural communication and one of the benefits and positive outcomes of humanities and related scholarly endeavours. Hence, very much in keeping with Mihai Nadin's book on the "civilization of illiteracy," Daniel Goleman could not fail to notice that "today's children are growing up in a new reality, one where they are attuning more to machines and less to people than has ever been true in human history ... digital engagement comes at a cost in face time with real people – the medium where we learn to 'read' nonverbals. The new crop of natives may be adroit at the keyboard, but they can be all thumbs when it comes to reading behavior face-to-face, in real time" hence lacking in cognitive abilities.[19]

Jose Ortega y Gasset summed up that "culture should lie at the heart of universities" meaning that higher education institutions – as centres of knowledge creation and transfer, embodying a critical mass of scholars and public intellectuals – are human repositories of cultural creativity and artistic innovation, encoding and decoding the specificity of cultural "languages".[20] Moreover, the world requires a transdisciplinary approach for an accurate and comprehensive understanding enabled by a more coherent connection of humanities and sciencese, ideas advocated by renown scholars such as Wolfgang Pauli and Basarab Nicolescu – who set the landmarks and foundation of transdisciplinarity in an attempt to mend the fragmentation of the human spirit and mind altered by overspecialization. An intellectual should maintain a dialogue between literature and science, endorsed by a spiritual backbone. Mention should be made here that it is essential for scholars to transgress the role of a private academic and undertake the mission of a public intellectual whose ideas are disseminated to, accepted and assimilated by the public, although the phrase "public intellectual" is not easy to define, as Russel Jacoby himself admitted, "they wrote to be read " usign the vernacular and addressing more than specialists thus committed to a wider public.[21] He also identified and exemplified a cultural shift in the attitude of intellectuals in relation to the public, with specific reference to the twentieth century which witnessed a particular distancing of the intellectuals from larger audiences: "a retreat from commitment to a public and critical prose ... The previous generation of intellectuals could be read, and were read, by educated readers the most recent intellectuals cannot be be – nor do they direct themselves to a public audience. They have settled themselves into specialties and sub-specialties" hence recalling Isaiah Berlin's astute distinction between the two types of intellectuals – the fox and the hedgehog.[22] An alternative to the civilization of illiteracy and the civilization of the spectacle could be provided by cultural intelligence, a more recent concept defined by Elisabeth Plum, or the intelligence revolution according to Basarab Nicolescu, coping to survive, from a cultural perspective, in the age of show business, ongoing performance and overwhelming advertisements, as well as in the attempt to find balance between technologization and artistic creativity or cultural endeavours, nourishing both mind and soul, in the struggle to raise awareness about the role of feelings as

> "the motives and negotiators of human cultural endeavour ... Cultural activity began and remains deeply embedded in feeling. The favourable and unfavourable interplay of feeling and reason must be acknowledged if we are to understand the conflicts and contradictions of the human condition. Therefore, cultures are not solely the result of the human mind and its cognitive processes ... The feeling minds are responsible for what is most distinctive about humanity: cultures and civilizations ... In their need to cope with the human heart in conflict, in their desire to reconcile the contradictions posed by suffering, fear, anger and the pursuit of well-being, humans ... discovered music making, painting, literature. Feeling moves the mind."[23]

To conclude, we shall recall Martha Nussbaum`s most powerful plea for humanities in a world increasingly marked by enhanced technicization to the disadvantage of moral and human values, a pragmatic and utilitarian perspective in addition to pressure for consumerism. Her academic studies – "Skills for Life" – and books – *Not for Profit. Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* – represent a most effective promotion of liberal arts in contemporary society and particularly in higher education.

> "Does global citizenship really require the humanities? ... Citizens cannot relate well to the complex word around them by factual knowledge and logic alone. The third ability of the citizen, closely related to those two, is what we can call the

narrative imagination. This means the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person`s story, to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have. The cultivation of sympathy has been a key part of the best modern ideas of democratic education, in both Western and non-Western nations."[24]

Humanities and art represent the way out of the current "crisis of massive proportions and grave global significance" enabled by such skills as "critical thought, daring imagination, empathetic understanding of human experiences of many different kinds, and understanding of the complexity of the world we live in."[25]

Notes:

1. Immanuel Wallerstein, quoted in Michael Denning, *Culture in the Age of the Three Worlds* (Verso: London & New York, 2004), 140.
2. Jean- Marie Gustave Le Clezio – Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2008/clezio/lecture/.
3. David Swartz, *Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 1.
4. Antonio Damasio, *The Strange Order of Things* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2018).
5. Raymond Williams, *Key Words. A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1976), 76-77.
6. R. Williams, "The Analysis of Culture," in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture. A Reader*, 2nd ed., edited and introduced by John Storey (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1998), 48.
7. T. S. Eliot, *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1949), 19, 21-22.
8. Harold Innis, *The Bias of Communication* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008) and Edward Hall, *Beyond Culture* (New York: Anchor Books, Garden City, 1976).
9. David Swartz. *Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu*, 1.
10. Jaap van Ginneken, *Understanding Global News* (London: Sage Publications, 2009), 4
11. Michael Denning. *Culture in the Age of the Three Worlds* (Longon & New York: Verso, 2004), 1.
12. https://acad.ro/com2008/pag_com08_0327Marcus.htm
13. https://hedgehogreview.com/web-features/thr/posts/introducing-the-fall-issue-the-cultural-contradictions-of-modern-science
14. https://css.cua.edu/humanitas_journal/humanities-technological-society/
15. Ernest Bernea, *Criza lumii moderne* (Bucharest: Editura Predania, 2011), 50, 86.
16. Mihai Nadin, *The Civilization of Illiteracy* (Dresden: Dresden University Press, 1998), vii-viii.
17. ldous Huxley, *Do What You Will*. (London: Chatto & Windus, 1956), 203, 205-206.
18. Mario Vargas Llosa, *Civilizatia Spectacolului* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2016), 22-25, 30-31, 67.
19. Daniel Goleman, *Focus* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2013).
20. Jose Ortega y Gasset, *Misiunea universității* (Bucharest: Editura Univers, 1999).
21. Russell Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals. American Culture in the Age of Academe*. (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 5-6.
22. Ibid., 9.
23. Antonio Damasio. *The Strange Order of Things*.
24. Martha Nussbaum, "Skills for Life," *Times Literary Supplement*, April 30, 2010, 13, 15.
25. Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit. Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 1, 6.

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