

THE AGE OF CULTURE - WHY, WHAT, AND HOW?

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An excellent video concerning Paul Schafer's work, in which many of the themes in this paper are presented and which was shown to the delegates at the beginning of the Conference, is available [here](#).

Culture in the future is the crux of the future.

—Eleanora Barbieri Masini

We have arrived at a crucial point in human history. We can continue living in the age of economics, or we can enter the age of culture. The decision is ours to make.

Many complex problems have emerged over the last few decades that threaten survival and well-being on the planet. Most prominent among these are climate change, global warming, escalating shortages of natural resources and basic foodstuffs, huge inequalities in income and wealth, conflicts between different genders, groups, races, religions, cultures, countries, and civilizations, the migration of millions of people, increased violence and terrorism, and threats of nuclear, chemical, or biological warfare.

The environmental crisis has brought things to a head. When the population of the world was much smaller than it is today and we were less connected there were often great problems, but they were local in effect. Still, even in the late 1700s there were signs that humanity as a whole could be in for a rocky ride in the future, especially when Thomas Malthus in his 1798 book, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, predicated population growth would over time outstrip the means of subsistence.

Contrary to Malthus's prediction, however, economic growth has provided not only subsistence but a plethora of additional goods and services for a rapidly growing world population. The groundwork for this was laid in Adam Smith's 1776 book, *The Wealth of Nations*. Smith described in theoretical and practical terms how people's standards of living and quality of life could be improved significantly through economics, economies, specialization, economic growth, and pursuing one's self-interest.

In the early 19th century David Ricardo contended that economics should take precedence over all other activities and constitute the main concern of countries. And in the mid-19th century Karl Marx created an interpretation of human history generally in terms of economics. He

believed that the affairs of nations could be divided into an “economic base” and “non-economic superstructure” because economics is the “cause” and “basis” of everything.

Later economic theories advanced during and after the Great Depression by John Maynard Keynes and neoliberal economists such as Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman, along with the development of quantitative and statistical indicators for measuring gross and net national product and per capita income, gave further impetus to economics as the foundation of societies and indeed the entire world order.¹

It is now generally accepted in all parts of the world that if we look after economics and economies properly, everything else will fall into place and work out for the best. Our predominant concern is producing as many goods and services, and as much material and monetary wealth as possible. In order to do this, production, consumption, productivity, growth, and profits are maximized and numerous activities are valued primarily for their “economic impact.” Humanity has been so deeply immersed in this age that it is taken for granted without question.

That is until recently: During the last few decades, research undertaken by many scientific and environmental organizations, as well as the findings of the Brundtland Commission on the Environment and Development and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, have caused many people to have serious reservations about the economic age. They believe “business as usual” is not acceptable because the risks and dangers are too great—things must change and change dramatically if environmental sustainability and human welfare and well-being are to be assured in the future.

Given this situation, an impartial and candid assessment of the economic age is required.² It is impossible, however, to conduct this assessment without recognizing the achievements of the economic age. Not only has it resulted in the production, distribution, and consumption of a phenomenal number of goods and services and creation of an astronomical amount of material and monetary wealth, but also it has improved living standards and the quality of life for billions of people throughout the world. Countless advances have been made in agriculture, industry, science, technology, education, communications, health care, politics, and the arts. Given these things, it is tempting to conclude we should continue to live in an economic age in the future.

However, there are a number of basic problems with the age of economics that must be taken into consideration because they are evolving very rapidly and threatening to escalate out of control. The most obvious problem is the disastrous effect the economic age is having on the

¹ See D. Paul Schafer, *Revolution or Renaissance: Making the Transition from an Economic Age to a Cultural Age* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2008), 9-135, for a detailed account of the origins, evolution, and mechanics of the economic age, as well as an objective assessment of the basic strengths and shortcomings of the economic age.

² Ibid.

natural environment. Throughout the economic age the natural environment has been ignored. The problem with this is that it is not possible to insert the natural environment into the ideological underpinnings and fundamental principles and practices of the economic age *after the fact*. The architectural equivalent to this would be building a colossal office tower on sand. At some point, it is bound to collapse. The economic age was built on faulty foundations and a different type of age is required in the future with new theoretical and practical foundations.

Further, as time goes on, it becomes more and more apparent that the economic age is not capable of coming to grips with a number of other complicated problems, especially conflicts between different peoples, groups, classes, races, religions, countries, and cultures, vast inequalities in income and wealth, increased violence and terrorism, numerous immigrant, refugee, and migration difficulties, countless communications issues, and the inability to achieve some of humanity's most important goals or maintain its highest ideals.

The basic problem of the economic age is that it treats economics as “the whole” and everything else as “parts.” There is a huge difference between saying that economics plays a crucial role in our lives and in the world—which is an undeniable fact and will likely always be the case—and saying that economics is the whole and everything else is part of it. There are many things in life that have little or nothing to do with economics, such as love, friendship, compassion, integrity, beliefs, truth, and trust.

A great deal of light was shed on this error when anthropologists began travelling to different parts of the world in the 19th and 20th centuries to study the activities of human societies and human behaviour in depth and on the ground. These anthropologists needed a word that described how all these activities were woven together in different combinations to create a whole or total way of life. Culture was the word they used to designate this holistic phenomenon. Edward Burnett Tylor, one of the world's first anthropologists, chose the word “culture” to describe this holistic phenomenon on the very first page of his book *The Origins of Culture*: “Culture or Civilization, taken in the wide ethnographical 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.”³

Since that time, the word “culture” in the holistic sense has been confirmed by countless anthropologists, sociologists, and cultural historians. It has also been confirmed by the member states of UNESCO when they declared, “Culture ought to be considered today the *whole* collection of distinctive traits, spiritual and material, intellectual and affective, which characterize a society or social group.”⁴ Wole Soyinka, the African Nobel Laureate in Literature, also had this in mind when he said, “We need therefore to constantly reinforce our awareness

³ E. B. Tylor, *The Origins of Culture* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1958), 1 (italics added).

⁴ UNESCO, *A Practical Guide to the World Decade for Cultural Development 1988-1997* (Paris: UNESCO, 1997) 16 (italics added).

of the primacy of Source, and that source is the universal spring of Culture. It is nourished by its tributaries, which sink back into the earth, and thereby replenish that common source in an unending, creative cycle.”⁵ And most of all, it is confirmed by people when they say they are “products of their culture.” By this they usually mean that they are products of everything that exists in their society or “their culture as a whole.”

What is true for culture is also true for cultures. They are also wholes or total ways of life made up of myriad parts. Seen from this holistic perspective, it is obvious that the world is made up of culture and cultures at its very core and in its fundamental essence. Like culture, cultures are concerned with the entire way people visualize and interpret the world, organize themselves, conduct their affairs, embellish and enrich life, position themselves in the world, and act in the world. Indeed, there is very little in the world that is not concerned with or connected to culture and cultures in this all-inclusive sense.

This all-encompassing perception of culture and cultures is desperately needed in the world today. It is needed to focus attention on the “big picture,” since this is the thing that is most lacking and urgently required in the world. It is also needed to bring people and activities together rather than split them apart—to *unite rather than divide*—since this is what holism and the holistic perspective are really all about. Moreover, it is needed to make the changes that are essential in people’s lives, behavior, worldviews, and lifestyles to come to grips with the environmental crisis. And it is needed to situate economics and economies in a broader and deeper cultural and environmental context so that they will be informed by environmental, social, ethical, and human values and not just commercial, financial, and technological concerns.

Unfortunately, the holistic perception of culture and cultures has been ignored over the last few centuries because the world has been preoccupied with economics and economies. Nevertheless, this all-encompassing perception must now be fully utilized because it has profound implications and powerful consequences for all decisions, developments, policies, and actions in the world. This is why Ruth Benedict, the American cultural scholar, emphatically declared that, “the whole *determines* the parts, not only their relation, but their very nature.”⁶ The time has come to capitalize on the holistic perception of culture and cultures as well as the rich legacy of cultural scholars. This is the key to making the transition from the age of economics to the age of culture. It is through deeper and deeper forays into the domain of culture and cultures and legacy of cultural scholars that the portrait of a cultural age emerges and manifests itself.

It is a portrait that commences with people, as well it should. For all people live a “cultural life” in the sense that they are compelled to combine all the different parts of their lives together to form a whole or total way of life. Regardless of what priorities they assign to specific activities

⁵ W. Soyinka, “Culture, Memory, and Development,” International Conference on Culture and Development in Africa, April 2-3, 1992 (Washington: The World Bank, 1992), 21.

⁶ R. Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963) 36 (italics added).

in their lives—religion, economics, education, politics, or sports for example, as well as what their worldviews, values, beliefs, and ideals are—the fact remains that they must weave together all the activities in which they are engaged to form a holistic entity. Developing as much harmony and balance as possible between all these different activities is what living a cultural life is all about. This is needed for joy, happiness, and fulfillment in life, and also to experience good health, well-being, spirituality, contentment, and the sublime.

This requirement has been recognized by cultural scholars for more than a century and gave rise to the idea of “the whole person.” Matthew Arnold, the nineteenth century cultural scholar, believed that the whole person is best achieved through the “harmonious expansion of all the powers which make the beauty and worth of human nature, and is not consistent with the over-development of any one power at the expense of the rest.”⁷ John Cowper Powys echoed these sentiments when he said, “The whole purpose and end of culture is a thrilling happiness of a particular sort—of the sort, in fact, that is caused by a response to life made by a harmony of the intellect, the imagination, and the senses.”⁸ This is also consistent with Goethe’s sage advice to “live in the whole, in the good, in the beautiful.”

Artists, humanists, architects, and similar types of people create many of the signs, symbols, insights, ideas, and works that are necessary to open the doors to cultures and therefore act as “gateways” to all the different cultures in the world. This is because paintings, plays, music, stories, dances, films, myths, legends, and architectural masterpieces are parts of cultures that have deep symbolic significance for cultures as wholes. Think, for instance, of what Sibelius’ *Finlandia* with its stirring melodies, Smetana’s *Moldau* with its rapidly-flowing water, Copland’s *Appalachian Spring* with its *Simple Gifts*, and Monet’s *Water Lilies* with their exquisite flowers mean to the people and cultures of Finland, the Czech Republic, the United States, and France. Mahatma Gandhi captured this best when he said, “a nation’s culture resides in the hearts and in the soul of its people.”

It is through examples like this, and many others, that it is possible to piece together an understanding of the holistic character of all the local, regional, national, international, urban, rural, and ethnic cultures in the world, as well as the cultures of corporations, governments, hospitals, police forces, and so forth. This latter area has “taken off” recently because we are beginning to realize that the term “culture” in the holistic sense applies to organizations, institutions, and associations as well. Peter Drucker hit the nail on the head for corporations when he said, “culture eats strategy for breakfast.”

Regardless of what cultures we are concerned with, the challenge is the same for cultures as it is for people. It is to achieve balance and harmony between the many different parts of cultures. Johan Huizinga, the Dutch cultural historian, gave us a profound insight into how

⁷ M. Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955), 47-48.

⁸ J. C. Powys, *The Meaning of Culture* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1929), 77.

imperative this is in the overall scheme of things when he said, “The realities of economic life, of power, of technology, of everything conducive to man’s material well-being must be balanced by strongly developed spiritual, intellectual, moral and aesthetic values.”⁹

In the age of economics, serious imbalances and disharmonies exist between the material and non-material and the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of development, and these imbalances and disharmonies are now threatening human survival and well-being on the planet. Indeed, it would not be far off the mark to say that, after a certain point, the more the realities of economic life, power, technology, and everything conducive to people’s material well-being are pursued, the less environmental, spiritual, intellectual, moral, and aesthetic values are sustained or achieved. Oscar Wilde warned us about the danger of this problem more than a century ago when he said, “it is possible to know the price of everything and value of nothing.”

The solution to this problem is to place a high priority on the environment, the arts, sciences, education, ethics, and spirituality in the age of culture. On the one hand, this would reduce humanity’s demands on the natural environment because these activities are largely labor-intensive rather than material-intensive in character and therefore do not make as many demands on nature and nature’s precious resource legacy. On the other hand, it would help to decrease poverty and disparities in income and wealth because a much higher priority would be placed on caring, sharing, and compassion that are essential for eliminating poverty and yielding far more income equality in the world.

It is also essential to develop other crucial relationships in the age of culture, relationships between human beings, the natural environment, and other species, different genders, groups, races, and religions, technology and society, the arts and the sciences, the private sector and the public sector, people’s rights and responsibilities. Furthermore, it is imperative to achieve balance and harmony not only *within* cultures, but also *between* cultures. All cultures need to be positioned effectively in the natural, historical, and global environment. This would result in more environmental sustainability and, also, make it possible to come to grips with the cultural baggage people inherit from the past and carry with them in the present and the future. This is the key to reducing conflicts and improving relations between the diverse peoples, groups, races, countries, and cultures of the world, as well as ensuring that all cultures are properly situated in time as well as in space.

The age of culture would not be an alternative to the economic age. Rather, it would incorporate the economic age in a broader, deeper, and more all-encompassing vision of the global situation, human condition, and world of the future. It is a vision that is much more in keeping with the needs of all people, countries, and species. Possibly this is what Erasmus had in mind when he said, “What a world I see dawning before me” at the sunrise of the modern

⁹ K. J. Weintraub, *Visions of Culture: Voltaire, Guizot, Burckhardt, Lamprecht, Huizinga, Ortega y Gasset* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 216.

era, as well as what Eleanora Barbieri Masini meant when she said, “Culture in the future is the crux of the future.”¹⁰

¹⁰ E. B. Masini, *The Futures of Culture* (1991). Volume I: Meeting of the Working Group on the Futures of Culture, January 9-10, Paris: UNESCO (1991), 6.