

“Cultural Conflict”: Problem and Resolution Readdressed in Terms of Property Rights*

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Abstract

Within the classical dichotomy between “culture” and “civilization”, in some narrow sense, the first term is held responsible for conflict propensity (for it is what coagulates communities, sometimes along with exalted differentiation), while the second is endowed with the great wisdom of disciplining clashes (since the division of labour in society is the very basis for productive cooperation, to speak of economic civilization). Even if this picture does not necessarily do justice to culture, which has a far greater bright side, and neglects the selective nature of economic competition among cultures, what should not be missed when speaking of ethnic, religious or territorial cultural identity is the conflict-spurring scarcity of resources, that is ultimately reducible and solvable in the logic of clearly defined and properly enforced property rights.

Keywords: *culture, civilization, conflict, cooperation, property rights.*

JEL classification: B53, D23, D74, F51

Introduction

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). In the beginning of both *arguments (disputes)* and (*argued*) *truces* there are always involved (not divine, but) manly words. Whether being within the realm of ideas or in that of the tangibles, both agreements and disagreements rest upon arms and armours, as well as on wisely thought and wittily spoken words. What could be noticed around the concept of “cultural conflicts” is that the word “culture” itself is trapped in some epistemic “conflict”, best revealed by the relation with its step-twin term “civilization”, both addressing societies’ identities and possessions. The term “culture” (Latin, *cultura*) is the “older brother” and its content conserved the original Latin meaning, while “civilization” (Latin, *civis*) was born later in France and England, Germans preferring *Kultur* to speak of humankind achievements.

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In the present essay we will briefly revisit the idea of “cultural conflict”, suggesting that before residing in “culture” it is about mutually exclusive satisfaction of needs between different (groups of) individuals, and, as such, it emerges neither from out-of-control instincts nor from fundamentally evil human nature, but the ultimately source of conflict is the inescapable scarcity of material resources mixed with (in this case) cultural significations. This essay is organized in four sections: *the first one* observes how culture(s) and civilization do interact and balance one another; *the second one* notes how ethnicity, religion, and territory are reducible to scarcity maps; *the third one* readdresses the disciplining function of soundly defined private property rights, *the fourth one* brings into picture the great force of (intra- and international) markets to tame propensity to (culturally disguised) conflicts.

1. The eternal saga: “how to civilize cultures”

The conceptual relation between “culture(s)” and “civilization” is not exclusively some playground for philosophers and anthropologists, economists and political scientists, but a profoundly pragmatic concern for entrepreneurs, managers, policy-makers as well as civil society as a whole. By subtly discriminating between, on one hand, what is *commonly particular* to a certain group in terms of understanding surrounding world and intimate life (“the software of the mind”, as Hofstede put it) and, on the other, what makes universally possible for humans to subsist or thrive, in terms of ends-serving means, reproducible within the technologically assisted and institutionally predictable *cooperative division* of labour (“the hardware” of society), anyone can better portray both the state and the flow of the globally or locally acknowledged society / societies.

Table 1. Mann’s “Germany vs. France&Britain” Dichotomy

Germany	France&Britain
Culture	Civilization
Art is poetry and music	Art is literature and prose
Protestantism	Universalism
Burgher	Bourgeois
National	Feeling humanitarianism
Pessimism	Progressivism
Life	Society
Irony	Radicalism
Reverence	Enlightenment
Inwardness	Reason
People	Class and mass
Aristocracy	Democracy
Ethics	Politics

Source: Botz-Bornstein (2012), based on Mann (1983)

The “trivial” distinction between civilization and culture places the former term closer to material, technical, economic, and social facts, while the latter is related to spiritual, intellectual, and artistic phenomena. But in the definitional domain of both concepts there lays “cultural statements” critical for business and politics. Illustrative is the classical Franco-German “definitional dispute” (mirroring somehow the age-old geopolitical rivalry). For Thomas Mann, *Kultur* is what is German – music, morals and mentality –, while *civilisation* is what is French – political thought and social concern. German *Kultur* needed protection from dissolution by civilization’s “democratic enlightenment and bourgeois rhetoric” (Botz-Bornstein 2012). Or in Richard Wagner’s words (Botz-Bornstein 2012): “civilization disappears before music, like mist before the sun”.

The tension between culture and civilization is revealed when the two concepts are juxtaposed not only for revealing relative differences, but relative superiority. Oswald Spengler’s (1938) discussion in terms of “inward turned cultural energy” and “outward turned civilizational exposure” prepares a culturalist (traced back to natural, ancestral social equilibria) approach against modernization waves (perceived as mechanical, imperialist, alienating, decadent). If Tylor (creator of *civilization* “culture-civilization holistic definition”, analogue to Herder’s *Kultur* synthesis) showed evolutionary optimism, for Spengler, “civilizations are the most external and artificial states of which a species of developed humanity is capable”, “the conclusion”, “the inevitable destiny of culture”, though some cultures have enough force to contest civilization.

Table 2. Spengler’s “Culture vs. Civilization” Dichotomy

Culture	Civilization
Home	The world city
Reverence for tradition and age	Cold matter-of-fact attitude
The older religion of the heart	Scientific irreligion
Natural	Heart-earned rights
Fruitful earth and primitive values	Money as an inorganic and abstract magnitude
Folk	Mass
Primitive instincts and conditions	Wage disputes and football-grounds

Source: Botz-Bornstein (2012), based on Spengler (1938)

2. The *sensibility*: ethnicity, religion, territory

“*The discovery of the plurality of cultures is never a harmless experience*”, says Ricoeur (1965) noting the mismatches accompanying multiculturalism. Dynamited with the excitement of rediscovered passions, the (linguistic, ethnic, religious, cleaned from the ideological agent) *identity* was lighting up the spirits in the post- Cold War, (former) Soviet Union and (former) Yugoslavia. The world seemed to abandon the ideological conflict, latent and inconsistent, in favour of the acute and generous passions of the identities after which it longed for over half a century. It was being discovered the fact that the naturalness of the identity fuel

qualitatively prevailed over the strident bids of ideology. Mother Nature beats human synthesis in efficiency. The fire was hotter! The ideological coke was paling in the face of identity anthracite. Nowadays the fiefdom of cultural (civilizational!?) clash moved in the backyard of Western Civilization, perceived as either / both too “imperialistic” abroad or / and too “inclusive” at home. The West lives for quite long time an “age of fatigue” (Boia 2013a; 2013b) because while trying obsessively to change the outer world it forgot to change the inner one. In multiculturalism, not only in the Christianity - Islam “9/11” and “Je suis” sensitivity, the arrogance of “one size fits all” fits... nobody.

We are conflicting beings since we are the owners of our interests. We obstinately follow them and we want to fulfil them by relatively *any* means (peacefully economic or coercively politic / warlike). Ritually noticed when the children strive to grab the first objects that will allegedly mark the future spiritual and material way, private property is, undoubtedly, part of the natural order of things. Before agreeing to share with their peers, human beings want to own. The conflict appears when at this ends - means level, imbalances occur. When needs become inter-personally plural and competitive, while a certain resource stubbornly remains in the singular, conflicts burst. Scarcity is trans-seasonal. It is not related to époques or eras or eons. It is the law of inter-personal reality, valid at any time of day or night, in any place on the globe, regardless of political, skin and blood colours. Culture only colours what logic and history already imprinted in our way of representing and living social reality. It adds candour and sometimes cruelty, but it is finally about the need to control a particular habitat, which is the sum of things owned individually or commonly: a certain territory with all vital dependencies, where to breathe and live according to own family / tribe / nation shared assumptions, beliefs, convictions, and duties.

Defining the notion of “conflict” thickened the volumes of a vast literature. We chose the definitions selected by Malița (1998) in the part dedicated to *cultural conflicts*. “*Politics is war*” (Jouvenel 1965); conflict represents a dispute (more or less violent) with “*political purposes for power*”; *hostility, insecurity, antagonism, competition* and *the will to exercise violence and produce casualties* are words common to all definitions after Choucri (1984). But, once reaching the definition of Azar (1984), we can find in the “*hostile interactions which extend over long periods of time... fluctuating in frequency and intensity... rooted in ethnicity and / or nationalism*” the type of conflicts that will keep on guard diplomats trained for negotiation and conflict prevention with cultural implications (values, beliefs, identity). The Venetian nationalist demagogue from Michael Dibdin’s (1994) novel, *Dead Lagoon*, quoted by Huntington (1996), provides a gloomy painting for the age to come: “*There cannot be true friends without true enemies. Unless we hate what we are not, we cannot love what we are. These are the old truths that we are painfully rediscovering after more than a century of sentimental cant. Those who deny them deny their family, their heritage, their culture, their birthright, their very selves! They will not lightly be forgiven*”.

2.1 Ethnicity and conflict

Ethnicity is a core identity benchmark. Its extreme form, *nationalism*, often leads to situations like “the world is too small for the two of us”. The rebirth of the nationalist deviations and exaggerations is attributed to the sudden awakening from painful peace after the Cold War. It was a time when people began to feverishly seek for new common grounds to exist.

Claval (2001) establishes a deterministic relationship between the post-Cold War nationalist tensions in the ex-Soviet space and the policy carried out by the Stalinist regime.

Stalin was fully aware of the power of nationalism, supporting identity-affirmation of former nations-colonies, aiming so to ruin the European imperialism. But Stalin was also fully aware of the problems associated with USSR own territory, trying to suppress the dreams of independence of subjugated nations by surrogate statutes such as the recognition of the national republics or granting the status of district for smaller minorities. The perfidy of such policy stands in the incongruity between the established territorial assemblies and the natural limits of ethnic groups, being created minorities loyal to the Communist Party’s politics and unable to consolidate by ethnic lineages. The artificial geometry of these constructions can be seen today in the conflicting hotspots from Nagorno-Karabakh and Abkhazia, but also in nowadays Ukraine (see Crimea secession and Donetsk and Lugansk tensions).

The perfidy went on. The Stalinist regime recognized the peoples’ right to use their own language, but steadily eroded history in favour of folkloric issues. The marginalization of the elite was matching perfectly with deleting from social memory the periods of independence or development from a nation’s past, offering the facile substitute of folk literature, stories, contributing to the alteration and destruction of real history. Nationalism was placed outside history. The ethnic diversity of the Soviet Union was denied, peoples were being presented as uniform masses of peasants and farmers, particularized only through their popular costumes and practiced dances. While history was dissolving into myth and religion was a taboo, the folkloric valve acted according to the “law of unintended consequences”, preparing the future fuel of post-communist ethnic identities.

2.2 Religion and conflict

The culture system of religion carries out phenomena of revitalization of impressive and unexpected proportions, able to lead to essential movements of the masses in the “tectonic” movements of human existence. Religions have experienced an undisturbed ascent, shattering the exalted Enlightenment thesis that we were climbing on the ladder of science / knowledge / rationality progress, in a world where religions go back to catacombs. D’Alembert’s “philosophical XVIII century” *receded* to Malraux’s “religious XXI century”.

The last century is described by controversies in the evolution of religious beliefs. The two faces of religion – *instrument of politics*, noticeable in the Mohammedan states, lands of expansion and proselytism, and *individual and social need* of identity and response to the existential challenges which cannot find fulfilment in human reason – simultaneously connect and disconnect each other. The scope of religion still seems to be the preservation of a peaceful *status quo*, once kept away from ideology and politics, together with which is TNT.

A universal religion seems equally unlikely to be born as a universal language. The beginning of this century was marked by a global resurgence of religions worldwide. This resurgence involved the identification of religious consciousness and of fundamentalist movements' proliferation. Millennia of human history have shown that religion gaps do not enter the Freudian logic of the "narcissism of small differences", being perhaps the most profound difference that exists between humans, dependent on their *Creator* or *created* Gods.

The great official Churches, from the "civilized" West, appear to have entered the recoil, according to some approaches. We cannot say the same thing regarding the religious feeling, which is found worldwide, where fundamentalism preached the return to an original point undefiled by ideological developments or small political "trade-offs", the eradication of any (already fragile) attempts of modernity and the development of a long-winded political speech instinctively headed against the West. But faith cleaning starts with ethnic cleansing?

Paradoxes sometimes surprise us, sometimes horrify us: the preachers of Christian love are the creators of the Crusades, of devastating religious wars and of the Inquisition, while the excited followers of Mohamed present their collateral offer through the holy war, the murderers' sect and the ISIS terrorism, to which they lend the sacredness of the supreme sacrifice. The infinite love for and obedience to God is matched by scarcer material world from where the first candidates to exclusion / extinction are those suffering from "otherness".

2.3 Territory and conflict

More than two hundred ethnic and religious minorities, but also subordinate majorities worldwide question the justice of their incorporation in the global order (Gurr 1993). Why do some people rebel against a "national" territorial order? The answer is said to derive from a separation: *territory as "common good"* vs. "*need*".

The territory of a state is normally a *common good*, a legacy equally divided between the state's citizens. For this reason, the territory is considered to be one of three basic components – along with population and government – which constitute a state with a moral sovereign personality, universally recognized by the nations' law and community. As long as the national territory is perceived as a "patrimonial" good and is equally used by all citizens, the possibility of territorial claims does not appear.

Territorial claims arise when the “national territory” – or what state authorities consider to be “national territory” – is no longer perceived as a common good by a particular group of citizens and becomes a particular *need* for this specific group. Territorial claims refer to the decentralization of territorial absolutism. They represent the iconoclastic revolt of “politically active communal groups” and raise doubt concerning the absolutely sacred dogma of a state’s territorial integrity, being a source of violence and instability.

The fact that what is considered to be a part of the territory of a sovereign state becomes a need for a certain group of people is essentially a political problem. Since politics is about who takes what, when and how, then this need to shape the “national” territory is in fact a need for new and different governance, which means a new and “right / fair” distribution of power materially and symbolically. Reshaping territories is a political taboo, but it can lube economic integration (Hoppe 1993).

3. The (common) *sense*: property rights logic

One of the fundamental realities experienced by man in this world – and also the core problem of economics – is the *scarcity* of resources. As the plethora of his ends is much larger than that of his means, man is “forced” to economize the latter – to allocate them towards the most important needs. Otherwise, massive opportunity costs, waste and degradation are generated. Therefore, he is confronted with the *economic problem*. This economic problem is centred on a resource allocation process, thus the question of *who is to decide* (or is empowered to) that allocation becomes paramount. Around this particular question there were – and still are – many *cultural (ideological) disputes* on the *economic system* or on the most appropriate *institutional arrangement* to overcome all these scarcity problems (Jora 2006; Jacob 2012).

Historically, two main answers were being given to these basic questions. And both of them are accordingly associated to ideological perspectives.

One was that of *classical liberalism* that focused on *property rights*. In other words, the allocation decision of a particular scarce resource belongs to its private owner, who legitimately acquired it by “*homesteading*” (appropriating unused or abandoned resources from the natural environment), *production* (combining his bodily labour with factors of production), free *exchange* or *unilateral acts* (bequests, gifts, donations). The virtues with which the liberals trusted the social order based on private property rights (on the allocation decision of the owner) – *capitalism* – were: *adequate incentives system* – every individual is basically motivated to pursue his own interest and, once generalized, the entire society benefits from this situation (Smith 1991); *minimum information difficulties* – every person knows best his interests and is in the best position to pursue them (Hayek 1945); and the possibility of the *economic calculation* of the rational allocation of resources in a complex economy – exchanges between private owners give rise to markets and the monetary price system serves for the (anticipatory) calculation of profits and losses, thus for the assessment of the profitability of the competing projects (Mises 1998).

The second answer to the challenge of resource allocation was that of *socialism*. In fact, it was rather a *via negativa* response, rejecting the classical liberal system without explaining how other systems may work in order to produce wealth. According to it, the decision to allocate a resource should not belong to its private owner (in the sense proposed by the classical liberals), but to the “society” as some sort of entity. Instead of developing, enforcing and maintaining a system of private property rights over scarce resources, these resources should be socialized, passed into governmental ownership. Production should be managed like a military enterprise. The gamble of such a world would be the creation of the New Man, for whom work will not have disutility and, with it, the material and spiritual abundance, equality and feelings of brotherhood will supremely reign in the *communist* ultimate phase. The implementation of the socialist scheme quickly escalated into tyranny, the domination of a small group of decision-makers over the rest of society. And such “society’s decisions” soon became the arbitrary rulings of a “caste of potentates”.

The maximum refinement in assessing and addressing the *property rights economics* was attained with the Austrian School of economics, mainly after its fuse with the libertarian politico-philosophical movement. This synthesis issued the best economically and ethically defence ever for the idea of *the private property rights order*.

The first line of defence was the *utilitarian*-type of argument, best stated by Mises (1998): the institution of private property, through engendered incentives and the possibility of economic calculation, makes social cooperation more fruitful than conflict or autarky; since only social cooperation can support extensive and durable prosperity for the members of society, then private property becomes profoundly desirable from a social perspective. Another line of argumentation tried to avoid the shortcomings of utilitarian pleas, which are exposed to unscientific “value judgments”. Rothbard (1982) shows that even without looking for “good consequences”, humans are subject to own “natural law”, what is best for each individual, as “fulfilment of (his) being”. This only happens in the absence of aggression (initiation of gratuitous violence and hindrance of the pursuit of happiness of fellow beings). In an analogous logic, Hoppe (1993) argues that any ethical statement relies on the pure logic of discourse, of mutually assumed authentic argumentation; in this dynamic, each arguer may logically understand that the intrinsic consistency of the argument implies *volens nolens* mutual respect for the fullness of bodily and extra-bodily faculties useful to argumentation (including private property) of the partners conducting the dialogue. Therefore, “aggression-defending argumentative justification” is a *performing contradiction*, being a mere gibberish.

Therefore, private property rights fulfil not only an economic / efficiency function, but, along with it, they represent the basis for an ethical / orderly response to the conflicting propensity that scarcity displays within human interactions perimeter. They represent, in this sense, a civilized and civilizational tool, responsive to any (cultural) conflict over resources.

4. Property, markets, and integrated cultures

Up to now, the present essay took a flash tour through the *culture - civilization* relationship, noted the idea of (*cultural*) *conflict*, emphasizing the common perspective on the place of ethnicity, religion and territory in its combustion, revealed the market-orderly nature of *private property rights* in the allocation and management of the scarce resources. Thus, there were prepared the final remarks on the role of poorly defined and defended property rights in conflicts emergence and, symmetrically, the role of private-property-rights-based markets in shifting the stakes of cultural conflicts. The economic literature (mainly that of classical liberal pedigree) reserved a central role to arguments pointing to the contribution of free markets (essentially the expression of private property rights) in reducing the propensity for conflicts (with or without cultural coloratura). “*The crossroads of trade are the meeting place of ideas, the attrition ground of rival customs and beliefs; diversities beget conflict, comparison, thought; superstitions cancel one another and reason begins*”, condensed Durant in *The Life of Greece* (1939) the essence of the fructuous relationship (*free*) market - (*cultural*) peace.

Participation in production and exchange are maybe the most efficient ways of bonding people of different races, ethnicities, religions, intermingled in the same territory to which they attribute own cultural significations. Tolerance, trust, respect came with free interaction both in the markets for goods as in those for ideas, creating a general ambient of generalized opportunity for material and moral benefits which are the anchors for civilizing a society. Hume (1978), Smith (1982; 1991), Bastiat (2012), Cobden (1973) argued for the civilizing force of commercial cooperation. Hayek (1960) said that the participation in the spontaneous order of markets transforms strangers into friends by activating moral ties, while Bauer (2000) explained how the route from autarchic subsistence to extended exchange shapes not only industrious opportunities, but also the transformation of the cultural mindset. Free(d) trade is not only an economic-wealth enhancer, but also a cultural-value designer, for those involved are exposed to various *Weltanschauungs*. Cultural and institutional competition, experimentation, and evolution (Bernstein 2008) round up the picture of a civilized society.

The lesson of appeasement by cultivating the “economic” means (in Oppenheimer’s sense of voluntary market interactions in a private property order) as opposed to the “political” means (theft and fraud) was not properly understood in history and a lot of “cultural” conflicts escalated along the lines of property usurpation.

There can be mentioned at least two dramatically illustrative examples in which the uninspired way of representing and enforcing property rights was followed-up by tormenting history: the Israel-Palestine conflict and the tensed multiculturalist climate from Western Europe (unaided by sound economic integrating policies).

An illustrative quote on the natural-property-rights-founded way of thinking ethically and economically: *“In short, neither military force, God, a distant past, Lord Balfour, Hitler, nor Arab state acts may, by equal standards of international law, be called upon to demonstrate the rightfulness and legality of taking the land of Palestine from Moslem and Christian Arabs and giving it to Zionists from Europe and elsewhere. If the Zionist settlers (which excludes indigenous Palestinian Jews, whose claim to their land is beyond question) have a rightful claim to the territory, it can only be because they acquired it from the Palestinian Arabs in a just manner. If it can be shown empirically that at the time Israel was founded the overwhelming majority of Palestine's inhabitants were Arabs and that most of the country's land was held by Arabs, then the Zionists' claim to legitimacy must be based on their acquisition of the land through equitable and voluntary methods based on the consent of the indigenous inhabitants. But if Palestine was in essence stolen from its people, not only does Israel's existence become negotiable, but a secular democracy becomes imperative”* (Halbrook 1991). One inspired reading, in the same proprietary spirit: Rothbard (1967).

As for the issue of multiculturalism and the tensed atmosphere from within Western European communities, aggravated by the recent odious terrorist attack from France, there can be found ethical and economic rationales for avoiding the sensation of adulterant which is associated to migrant minorities: *“In short, a series of rules should be designed to prevent immigration from being used for coercive and interventionist ends which conflict with free interaction between nations and individuals. [1. P]eople who immigrate must do so at their own risk. This means that immigration must not be subsidised by the Welfare State, i.e. by benefits provided by the government and financed through taxes. [... 2. A]ll immigrants must be able to demonstrate that they have independent means to live on [...] in order to contribute their labour, technical or entrepreneurial capacity. [... 3. U]nder no circumstance, should the political vote be granted to immigrants quickly, since this could [...] give them the right to use the mechanism of political coercion (represented by the democratic vote) to sponsor policies of income redistribution or to intervene in or modify the spontaneous processes of the national markets which they enter”* (Huerta de Soto 1998).

Conclusion

In an age when the state is considered the perfect remedy for “market failures”, culture becomes either a victim or a paravane for governments' own failures. Cultures are presented as fighting one another from an instinctual sense on which, allegedly, they rely, being ignored the fact that cultural clashes are the result of statist unfortunate mapping of the access to resources. The logic of distributive justice was historically proven as being unsatisfactorily, since granting an artificial right to some people is equal to denying a natural right to others.

The logic of the overriding formal (between countries) or informal borders (within countries) by encouraging economic cooperation (by production and exchange), with the respect for correctly defined, strongly defended, and freely disposable property rights, the logic of “common projects” (but devised by means of free economic integration and not by means of unnatural, unstable political designs) remains a sensitive issue. Civilizing cultures stands and falls with the quality of institutions, amongst which property rights are paramount.

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