Leisure, Culture and Civilization

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Culture or civilization? What is the most suitable context in which to locate leisure forms and practice? For some readers it may seem a peculiar brace of questions to address. In everyday speech, culture and civilization are often presented as interchangeable, with nothing but the thinness of a halfpenny to choose between them. Both terms signify distinctive continuities in collective patterns of behaviour. Continuities are understood as both enabling and constraining influences upon individual behaviour. Culture refers to localized continuities having to do with deep-rooted, customary principles and practices of inclusion and exclusion. For this reason, it is often most readily applied in respect of community, race, religion and the nation-state. Weber (2002: 67–98) emphasized the significance of the idea of ‘calling’ in the culture of Protestantism. He argued that it distinguished Protestants from other religions and provided the basis for continuity and solidarity upon which the roots of culture were established. Daniels’s (1995) study of leisure practice among Puritans in Colonial New England demonstrates powerfully how the Puritan critique of Roman and Anglican theology produced leisure forms organized around the doctrine of ‘sober mirth’ that was designed to cement cultural solidarity and automatically represent standards of cultural inclusion and exclusion. A corollary of the migration of people is the migration of cultures. The resultant cultural exchange between migrant and host cultures is a major resource in the development of civilization. Among the customary practices of a particular people at a particular time and place, it is possible to differentiate between high and low culture. But the crux of the differentiation refers to practices that are customary, local and embedded.

In contrast, the term ‘civilization’, which derives from the Latin *civilis*, meaning ‘referring to the citizen’, denotes levels of self-consciousness and reflexivity which are more mixed. Civilization is constructed from cultural and cross-cultural materials that permit levels of government, culture and ways of life that are rationally evaluated as ‘higher’ or ‘superior’. Because civilization is constituted from cultural and cross-cultural resources there is some confusion about where civilization starts and culture ends. Huntington (1993, 1996) deals with the problem by approaching civilization...
as the highest cultural grouping and broadest level of cultural identity organized around what he calls ‘common objective elements’. Among the ‘common objective elements’ he has in mind are language, history, religion, customs and institutions. Civilization, then, possesses an attachment to progress in the name of common objective elements that provide solidarity and the claim of superiority over other civilizations. Other definitions of civilization rely upon technical criteria. V. Gordon Childe (1936) identified civilization with technological mastery and the means of recording communication through writing. Among the preconditions of civilization that he lists are the plough, the wheeled cart, sailing ships, the smelting of copper and bronze, solar calendars, standards of measurement, irrigation, specialized craftsmanship, urban centres and surplus food. While particular cultures developed some of these characteristics their crystallization as the foundation of civilization depended upon cultural exchange through war, trade and travel. Civilization thus has a more dynamic connotation than culture. It implies advancement beyond a primitive stage, the refinement of interests, tastes, the elaboration of standards of sophisticated behaviour and self-control, through cross-cultural communication and exchange.

If anything, nowadays the term ‘civilization’ possesses a degree of stigma, certainly for liberals. Generally, commentators are more relaxed with the term ‘culture’. This undoubtedly reflects the influence of post-colonial criticism, in which ‘Western civilization’ is often conflated with ‘imperialism’.1 This criticism stresses the role of Empire in subduing Native populations in various ways and planting settler communities. The Native is corralled into a subaltern relationship in which the imperialist is the dominant partner, as the ‘barbarian’ is subordinate to the ‘civilized agent’. There is, then, palpable bad conscience in Western academic circles about ‘Western civilization’ since what might be called its ‘pre-post-colonial’ application is deemed to have gone hand in glove with imperialism.

As a result, it is all the more important to emphasize the contradictory nature of Western civilization. The Native and his advocates have every right to point to genocide, torture, rape, pillage and systematic subordination as elements in the imperial project to spread Western civilization globally. The other side of the coin is the application of legal-rational law, public education, an organized system of health and what Ernest Gellner (1998) called ‘the ethic of cognition’ which permitted various forms of positive technological and moral innovations and underpinned the principles of freedom of thought and freedom of speech.2

Since the late 1980s, the turn towards globalization in cultural and social theory has revived interest in the contradictory character of Western civilization. In the hands of commentators like Samuel P. Huntington (1993, 1996) globalization has replaced the ideological and political struggle of the Cold War and is instrumental in precipitating ‘the clash of civilizations’ as the various leading non-Western forms – Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Slavo-Orthodox and Latin American – confront Western hegemony and particularly the superpower status of the United States. Other writers are more sanguine, and regard globalization as presenting new opportunities for tolerance, reciprocity and cosmopolitan citizenship (Beck, 1999;