

The word civilization: on the border between civilization and culture.

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In these days of crisis, which are gradually starting to come together with the seasons, while one hopes that they will also pass with the seasons, there is every reason to think once again about the concept ‘civilization’. It is actually such a peculiar concept that we can (almost) no longer imagine that whole generations have lived with it as though it was the most natural thing in the world, as if it was a process to which everyone only needs to contribute their best efforts in order to help humanity progress.

Those naïve times are gone, and one recalls – not without some sense of ‘complicity’ – that the middle-Dutch word ‘bescaeven’ (beschaving = civilization) meant ‘to shave off’, ‘to scratch off’ and consequently also ‘to rob’; the meaning we now attach to the word was then completely unknown. Later the nuance of ‘robbery’ disappeared and the meaning of ‘smoothing’, ‘polishing’ came to the fore, from which it developed into our concept of civilization or culture. The Dictionary of the Dutch Language indicates, without any ironic intent, that the word ‘especially in this century has become very common’. Indeed, very common, so common that it has long been thought that civilization clings to the modern person. Perhaps that is indeed so, but for us the how and why of that is already very problematic; all the more so, given that the Middle-Dutch meaning sometimes seems once again to become especially appropriate.

Does the Dutch work ‘beschaving’ match the French word ‘civilization’ or the German ‘Kultur’? It undoubtedly stands closer to the concept of civilization than culture; in any case, the Dutch language also has the word ‘cultuur’, which is used partly in opposition to ‘beschaving’. A civilised person is not yet a cultural person, but it is hard to imagine a cultural person who is not also civilised; culture thus encompasses civilization, and is in addition not just more extensive, but also ‘deeper’. Civilization belongs primarily to the realm of good manners, forms of interaction, while culture concerns mainly the practice of the arts and sciences; but the contrast is certainly not absolute, since one does not include among ‘civilised peoples’ those who are well-behaved, but those who have become civilised, i.e. distinguish themselves through special norms from those who are wild, primitive, or however one wishes to describe that non-civilised other. While among the Germans the gap between ‘Zivilisation’ and ‘Kultur’ is pretty well unbridgeable, because there one usually thinks of ‘Zivilisation’ in terms of superficiality, and of ‘Kultur’ in terms of unfathomable depth, the contrast also exists in Dutch, but it is expressed and used in a much less dogmatic way. In this respect, too, we take up an intermediate position, of which the word ‘beschaving’ is a good symbol. Dutch people are polished, and we are not ashamed of it; but we also realise that one does not automatically also possess culture; we appreciate the superficial, but we also have the feeling that we have to dive deeper, at least on ceremonial occasions, to be more than civilised, i.e. cultural.

The term speaks through its history

If one asks what ‘civilization’, ‘culture’ and the Dutch word ‘beschaving’ are precisely, one has to answer that, on the whole, they are nothing other than words with a developmental history, through which one aims to convey that human beings in their social groups have taken on a particular attitude towards ‘nature’; one thus has to know their history in order to understand what they precisely represent. ‘Mathematical concepts can be separated from the group which uses them,’ says Norbert Elias, whose interesting book I would like to focus on here, ‘[t]riangles may be explicable without reference to historical situations. Concepts such as ‘civilisation’ and *Kultur* are not.’ Quite right: it is precisely the charm of such concepts that one cannot capture them precisely. A Dutch person attaches a different meaning to civilization from a French or German person, but two Dutch people are just as little in agreement about what it means to be ‘beschaved’; one only has to put someone from The Hague and another from Amsterdam in a small room and ask them to define the concept accurately, in order to realise in a little while – from the resultant uncivilised sounds (cries, etc) – that they are unable to reach agreement. Civilization and culture have become one thing in one region, something else in another; and associated with their developmental process is the essence of shifts among peoples, social groups and individuals; one can thus deduce from these conceptual transformations what one needs to know about the ways in which different human groups have formed their way of life. This is why it is necessary, if one wishes to account for the substance of our civilization, to use the words in a supple way, but to identify, in the most precise way, the historical situations determining the concepts’ variegation.

On spitting

Norbert Elias’s book is so fascinating, then, precisely because the writer follows these paths; we get here not a sterile scholastic debate around ‘this is culture and that is civilization’, but an almost playful and still completely academically rigorous study of the realities underpinning these nuanced concepts. In order to address this task, one has to have, for example, a sharp eye for tableware and household goods, for knives, forks, spittoons and similar objects, the development of which reveals a great deal about the obligations people impose on each other. The fact that the beautifully crafted spittoon has long been an accepted piece of furniture shows, for example, that the boundary between what is acceptable and unacceptable for a ‘civilised’ person has shifted considerably over time. In the past, one had to ask someone in the name of civilization not to spit in the room, but in the spittoon; today one must ask him (if he does not yet know it through a ‘civilised’ education) to keep his saliva to himself; even on the street, spitting is no longer acceptable for a gentleman. A sixteenth century archbishop who commented on behaviour at the dinner table, wrote, as if he was observing a colossal wonder: ‘I have often heard that whole peoples have sometimes lived so moderately and conducted themselves so honourably that they found spitting quite unnecessary’ (p. 152). That someone does not spit at all (like most ‘civilised’ people today), seemed to this writer to be a fable, which he himself, as a ‘civilised’ spitter in the sixteenth century, could hardly believe!

One could regard this and similar observations merely as anecdotes and laugh about them; but they become of great significance if one, like Norbert Elias, compares the manuals for the behaviour of ‘civilised’ people since the Middle Ages with one other, from which one can draw conclusions about the development of our feelings about what is and is not ‘permissible’. Elias shows, for example, that the famous humanist Erasmus, through his book *De Civilitate Morum Puerilium*, had enormous influence on our civilizational standards; standing between two forms of society (the old feudal knightly society and the new society with its tone set by the absolutist court) the humanist describes how one should behave in social life if one wishes to be a civilised person, and in his manual he deals with all the activities we, well advanced in this area, leave to governors and nannies. For Erasmus, whom one can hardly describe as an uncivilised person, spitting is however still

something self-evidently civilised, and he even emphasises that it is 'inurbanum' (boorish) to hold in one's saliva!

All these apparently insignificant habits, which normally attract far less attention than battles and great men, are a rich source of knowledge for those who, like Norbert Elias, trace the civilizing process in an intelligent way. One sees with them (spitting is just one example) how particular behaviours which are already attested in the Middle Ages, then become part of the standards of civilization. In time, slowly but surely they are driven from their accepted place and have to be practiced secretly; not only is that fact interesting, but so is the course of the whole process, given that every moment at which one can observe a particular situation is actually a complete state of civilization'. Those who then set the tone seem to us to be advanced compared to those who lived earlier, and backward compared to those who came later, but they themselves were above all conscious that they were civilised people *par excellence*. The man who spits in his handkerchief or in a spittoon, if his father or grandfather still used to spit on the ground, feels himself to be the representative of a civilised world.

Hiding and taming

In general, the examples that Elias examines also show that our civilization has developed by hiding and taming more and more. Hiding: in medieval towns there were prostitutes, about which one did not speak in company. They were relatively scorned, but still possessed openly 'official' recognition, for example, when they ran races on festival days. Taming: the most uncivilised American boxing match is a trifle compared to the cruelty of medieval life, which manifested itself in Paris in the sixteenth century in the Midsummer's Day event where young men amused themselves by burning alive two dozen cats to entertain the many spectators. These instincts have not miraculously disappeared, but have been repressed or sublimated; and in my view Elias is entirely correct to conclude that the so-called looser morals of the post-War period show more for than against civilization, because such an increase in 'looseness' was only possible on the basis of a very strong self-constraint. From which one does not have to conclude that we have become better than our ancestors but we are, despite everything, despite modern methods of extermination, more domesticated.

This book, of which only the first part has appeared, does not moralise, but demonstrates; it is possible that the second part will contain a more sharply formulated conclusion; but already in this form it provides an extremely valuable documentation of the concepts 'civilization' and 'culture'. The writer shows how in Germany the sharp contrast between 'Zivilisation' and 'Kultur' arose because the 'civilised' court circles and the mature bourgeoisie remained almost completely separated, so that the middle class, excluded from the court and the aristocracy, developed morals and habits hostile to those of the court. He then also shows why this contrast did not emerge in France, how contact between the court and the bourgeoisie was never completely broken, and how in the eighteenth century (± 1770) the concept 'civilization' arose as the extension of the ideal of the French courtly *élite*: the "honnête homme" (gentleman). It was apparently Mirabeau who used the word first in his writings as a concept which was distinguished from barbarism on the one hand, and decadence on the other. Civilization is thus a dynamic concept! Because, according to Mirabeau, a good enlightened government must ensure that society remains in balance between barbarism and decadence, and he called that condition 'civilization'. What Elias says about this is certainly one of the more important things to be found in his book, because the fact that later this dynamic character of the concept has been lost. That the 'civilised' peoples started to appeal to their 'civilization' as something self-evident, and then came to be mocked by the 'dynamic' peoples, is certainly a very remarkable turn of events. One can only hope that at some time the dynamic concepts will end up as undynamic as 'civilization' today...appears to be. [\[1\]\[#N1\]](#)

Translated by Robert van Krieken

Note

1. ter Braak is here referring to the National Socialists as the ‘dynamic’ peoples, and National Socialist doctrine as consisting of ‘dynamic’ concepts – translator's note [\[#N1-ptr1\]](#)

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