# Political Culture

1. Culture and civilization

In its broadest sense, the word *culture* (from Latin: *cultura* for treatment, maintenance, agriculture) denotes everything what human beings have brought about in a specifically shaping way - in contrast to **nature** that origins from itself without pattering influence of mankind. Cultural achievements are all products of human transformation, be it any technical or artificial way of transformation, be it any intellectual construction, such as morality, religion, law, economy, or science. Whether those achievements come into existence, may depend on a bunch of various preconditions and forces, amongst them cultural, political, economic and technical structures or processes.

Transformations of that kind usually proceed slowly, mostly advanced by social elites. That's why the word *culture* is often assigned to specific ways of advanced behaving respectively to small groups of humans that behave in an advanced way. Those discourses have often been elitist by the connotation of how to reach *high culture* respectively evolutionary led by the question how cultures develop and spread.

Figure 1: *The evolutionary concept of culture*

High Culture

Low Culture
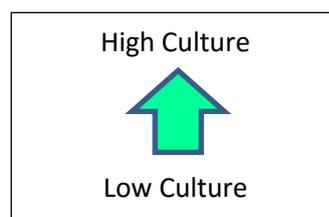
Similar assignments hold true for the term **civilization**: For long periods of time, only *advanced* cultures were supposed to be civilized in contrast to more barbarian, savage, or primitive cultures. In this sense, a civilization contrasts with non-centralized feudal or tribal societies, including the cultures of nomadic pastoralists or hunter-gatherers. The fundamental treatise to

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outline this meaning of *civilization* is Norbert Elias' *The Civilizing Process* (1939), which traces social mores from medieval courtly society to the Early Modern period as a process of increasing   Nobert Elias
social linkages and certain processes of centralization in Europe.[1]

This understanding of civilization may be underpinned and enlarged by references to the etymological origin of the word *civilization* from Latin civilis (civil), related to civis (citizen) and civitas (city): Accordingly in a civilization, civil rights of all members are, at least principally, guaranteed. Protected by these rights, the citizens are able to act in social and political affairs.[2]

Figure 2: *The comparative concept of cultures*
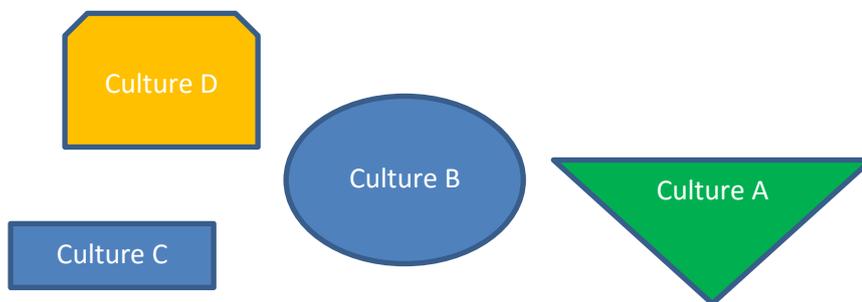
If, in contrast, different cultural patterns are perceived, a comparative usage of the word culture (as cultures) comes into existence - see figure 2. This discourse tends to elevate strict respect of cultural difference, equality, and sovereignty of any culture.

Meanwhile, also the term **civilization** is sometimes used in this meaning: Following Samuel Huntington's article *The Clash of Civilizations*, any big cultural formation is called *civilization*. Because Huntington associates every civilization with a certain predominant religion - such as the Western civilization with Catholics and Protestants, the Middle and Eastern European civilization with the Orthodox Christians, Arabs with Islam, Indians with Hindu religion, and so forth, civilizations seem to be cultural entities around certain religions - an image that is obviously at odds with cultural sources of civilization outside of religions, such the division of labor, scientific inventions, and philosophy, and at

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[1] Elias, Norbert: The Civilizing Process, Vol.I. The History of Manners, Oxford: Blackwell, 1969; The Civilizing Process, Vol.II. State Formation and Civilization, Oxford: Blackwell, 1982; The Civilizing Process. Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations. Revised edition. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000.
[2] Prittwitz, Volker von 2014: Civil Citizen: http://diberlin.info/civil_citizen.htm

odds with facts of progressing globalization, such as the encounter of different religions in certain areas and cultural learning processes.

Indeed, also apart from Huntington's ideology, the concept of different civilizations is reasonable. Here descriptive concepts of culture and civilization are linked with each other.

2. The political culture approach

According to Gabriel Almond's and Sidney Verba's book *The Civic Culture,* political culture is: ***The particular distribution of orientation towards political objects among the members of the nation***.[3] In general political culture is about the population's attitudes and practices towards politics:

It includes moral judgments, political myths, beliefs, and ideas about what makes for a good society. A political culture is a reflection of a government, but it also incorporates elements of history and tradition that may predate the current regime. Political cultures matter because they shape a population's political perceptions and actions… Political cultures vary greatly from state to state and sometimes even within a state. Generally speaking, however, political culture remains more or less the same over time.[4]
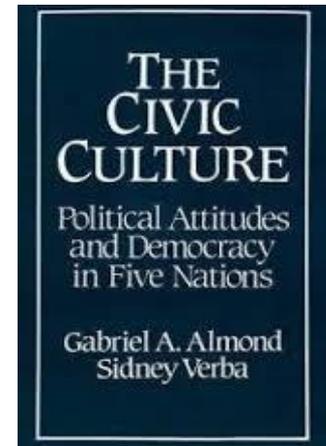
Almond and Verba differentiated three pure types of political culture:

- **Parochial** - Where citizens are only remotely aware of the presence of central government, and live their lives near enough regardless of the decisions taken by the state, distant and unaware of political phenomena. They have neither knowledge nor interest in politics. This type of political culture is in general congruent with a traditional political structure.
- **Subject** - Where citizens are aware of central government, and are heavily subjected to its decisions with little scope for dissent. The individual is aware of politics, its actors and institutions. It is affectively oriented towards politics, yet he is on the *downward flow* side of the politics. In general congruent with a centralized authoritarian structure.

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[3] Almond, Gabriel A. Almond/Verba, Sidney (1963): Civic Culture. Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations, Princeton, Princeton University Press, p.13.
[4] http://www.sparknotes.com/us-government-and-politics/political-science/political-culture-and-public-opinion/section1.rhtml

- • **Participant** - Citizens are able to influence the government in various ways and they are affected by it. The individual is oriented toward the system as a whole, to both the political and administrative structures and processes (to both the input and output aspects). In general congruent with a democratic political structure.

These types can combine to create the civic culture, which mixes the best elements of each.[5]

In the tradition of the political culture concept, some research has been done over the last decades. So the German political scientist Bettina Westle compared political cultural differences between population and elites over decades. She established that political cultures are distinctly more heterogeneous and flexible than stated by Almond and Verba in the 1950s. This alteration may have been influenced by different experiences made by different generations and induced processes of a value change (towards post-materialistic values). Processes of alienation between political systems and political cultures are possible, induced not only by long-term alterations, but also stimulated by certain events, such as wars, coups, or revolts. Additionally also new variables, amongst them normative orientations, are in the focus of research.[6]

The most significant follow-up of the Political Culture approach consists in diverse national and international surveys on the acceptance of democracy and democratic governments. Amongst the most cited surveys of that kind are the World Values Survey, the International Social Survey Program (ISSP), Eurobarometer, New Democracies Barometer, and Latinobarometro.[7]

3. Universalism and Relativism

Almond and Verba have been fundamentally criticized as proponents of a universalistic approach. The general objection of this critique is that any comparison requires applying one-sidedly constructed comparative concepts.

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[5] Almond, Gabriel A., Verba, Sidney The Civic Culture. Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1965. Text here following http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Political_culture

[6] Westle, Bettina 2002: Politische Kultur, in: Lauth, Hans-Joachim (Hrsg.), Vergleichende Regierungslehre. Eine Einführung, ps. 327-337.

[7] See: http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp; http://www.gesis.org/en/issp/issp-home/; http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/index_en.htm; http://www.cspp.strath.ac.uk/catalog4_0.html; http://www.latinobarometro.org/lat.jsp

Worldwide comparisons, hence, presuppose the worldwide usage of certain concepts that may miss the specific structures of cultures. So the German Sociologist Peter Weber-Schäfer writes:

The intercultural comparison cannot be deducted from any neutral standpoint. Because we cannot deny that the logic of a research and the definition of a research object cling to an individual perspective. We must not think that our own standpoint allows an objective evaluation of a strange culture (Translated from German*)*.[8]

A conclusion from this critique is a **relativist position**. According to this position, any culture can be understood only in its own frame; in contrast, one-sided intercultural comparisons are not arguable.

Figure 3: *Universalism and relativism*

Universalism
Ego-centric?

Relativism
Uncommunicative?
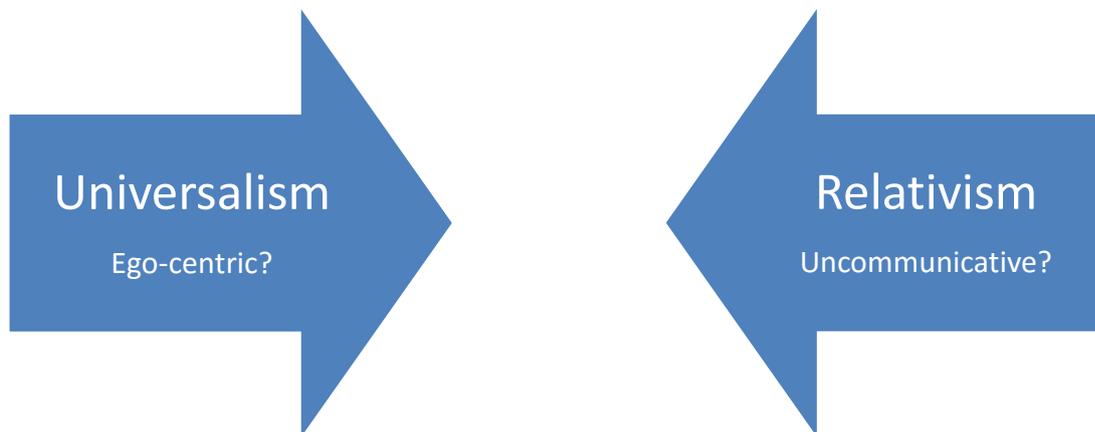
Both positions are strictly opposing.

Although there are some evidences for the relativist position, **also this position fails some challenges**:

1. If no intercultural comparison at all seems to be acceptable, the representatives of individual cultures tend to consider themselves as absolute. Hence they tend to build up and to strengthen absolutistic structures, such as absolutistic religious and political orders that tend to exclude any equal forms of communication. That's why a strict relativist position strengthens absolutism and saps opportunities of intercultural communication.

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[8] Weber-Schäfer 1997:..Eurozentrismus kontra Universalismus. Über die Möglichkeit, nicht-europäische Kulturen zu verstehen, in: Sukale, Michael (Ed.), Schriften zur Wissenschaftslehre, Stuttgart, Reklam, ps. 21-101.

2. The eschewal and blockade of intercultural comparisons contradicts basic interests and needs: Usually people that are interested in other cultures tend to compare what they are seeing and hearing in another culture. That's why science has to strive at rendering best possible ways of intercultural comparisons that may help to avoid short-handed wrong ways of doing so.

3. With the ongoing globalization, more and more often and routinely human beings of different cultures get in contact. Therefore orientation for encountering each other is increasingly significant.

4. In the long term, globalization leads to intensified challenges and processes of building a global culture, wherein comparisons of different cultures will become routine. Then the question routinely comes up how to design comparative research that is sufficiently open and fair to include all existing cultures.

4. Social Capital

A quite open concept of comparing cultures refers to social capital. Although different social sciences emphasize different aspects of social capital, they tend to share the core idea that social networks have value. Just as a screwdriver (physical capital) or a university education (cultural capital or human capital) can increase productivity (both individual and collective), so do social contacts affect the productivity of individuals and groups.

A crucial distinction of social organization is that between **bonding and bridging ties**: Ashutosh Varshney studied the correlation between the presence of interethnic networks (bridging) versus intra-ethnic ones (bonding) on ethnic violence in India. He argues that interethnic networks are agents of peace because they build bridges and manage tensions, by noting that if communities are organized only along intra-ethnic lines and the interconnections with other communities are very weak or even nonexistent, then ethnic violence is quite likely. Three main implications of intercommunal ties explain their worth: They facilitate communication in the community across ethnic lines, squelch false

rumors, and help the administration carry out its job and in particular peace, security and justice.[9]

Indeed, it may be argued that interethnic as well as intra-ethnic networks can serve various purposes, either increasing or diminishing social capital; but bridging capital is clearly in the focus of evolutionary theories of civilization, such as Norbert Elias, and also the comparison of (political) cultures may be stimulated by differentiating between bridging and bonding networks.

Robert D. Putnam was the forerunner to link social capital with the success of democracy and political involvement. So, in his book *Bowling Alone*, he made the argument that social capital is linked to the recent decline in American political participation. Putnam's theoretical framework has been firstly applied to different Italian regions. As a result from this comparative study he wrote:

A society that relies on generalized reciprocity is more efficient than a distrustful society. Trust lubricates social life. When economic and political dealing is embedded in dense networks of social interaction, incentives for opportunism and malfeasance are reduced.[10]

5. Pluralism

Classical political pluralism is the view that politics and decision-making are located mostly in the framework of government, but that many non-governmental groups use their resources to exert influence. The central question for classical pluralism is how power and influence are distributed in a political process. The US-American political scientist Robert Alan Dahl, who conceived of the concept of polyarchy with the leading idea of a pluralistic distribution of power, is considered as a classic of pluralism theory in that sense.[11] This theory, that has been figured out and discussed in close associations to decision-making processes in the USA, usually appears as a

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[9] Website Ashutosh Varshney, December 30, 2014: http://sitemaker.umich.edu/varshney/home; current research in Germany: http://www.wzb.eu/sites/default/files/personen/geys.benny.328/sociology_44_3.pdf; see a comprehensive and detailed overview at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_capital

[10] Putnam, Robert D. 1993: Making Democracy Work. Civic Tradition in Modern Italy, Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 3.

[11] Dahl, Robert Allan 1961: Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City, Yale: Yale University press.

normative approach of how political systems should be shaped.[12] May be that's why it hitherto does not appear in the comparative-descriptive discussion on political cultures.

Indeed, the question how far **socio-cultural pluralism** is given in a country or in any other entity matters: When smaller groups within a larger society maintain their unique cultural identities, and their values and practices are accepted by the wider culture, we speak of cultural pluralism. Multiculturalism, in contrast, lacks the requirement of a dominant culture.

The degree to which a society features traits of such socio-cultural pluralism distinctly influences how far a political system is able to realize its functions. In order to understand this influence in a comparative view, we have to remember the previously presented differentiation between anomy, autocracy, and democracy:

- Since a **vital democracy** operates with pluralistic laws and other normative institutions that comply with the existence of different socio-cultural forces, socio-cultural pluralism is no problem at all for democracies. In the contrary, the vitality of democracies usually increases with the degree of socio-cultural pluralism. In terms of Almond and Verba: Pluralistic democracies are characterized not only by democratic subjects, but also by participating actors.
- **Autocracies** usually have difficulty politically representing different ethnics, cultures, and so forth. That's why they are potentially endangered through too distinct socio-cultural differences. Hence they tend to suppress minorities, or even any form of socio-cultural pluralism. In contrast, high cultural homogeneity strengthens autocratic governments.
- **Anomies** correspond with a fundamental lack of joint values and bridging networks. They, on their part, strengthen those lacks and are themselves strengthened by them. If, for whatever reason, joint values and bridging interests come up, a sociopolitical pressure towards autocracy or democracy has to be awaited.

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[12] Traditional critiques on pluralism are rendered by Neo-Corporatism and Neo-Marxism: While Neo-Corporatism issues legitimate specific power networks between state and associations, such as trade unions and church, Marxism criticizes uneven power structures in society and government.

Figure 4: *Pluralism and political systems*
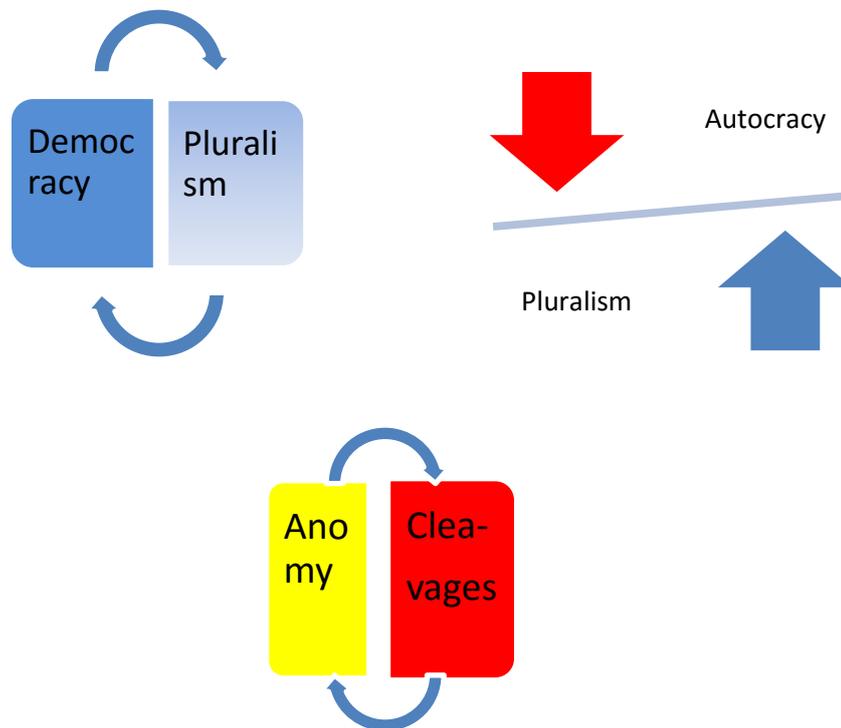
6. Political Religion - Civil Religion - Political Correctness

Since the cultural backgrounds of politics matter, they are object of institutionalized forms of influence up to certain forms of manipulation. Political religion, civil religion, and political correctness operate in this ambivalent realm of political institutions. Also regarding this realm we have to differentiate between autocracies and democracies:

- **Political religion** holds an aspect of sacralization related to the institutions held within the regime and provides the inner measures traditionally considered to be a religious territory, such as ethics, values, symbols, myths, and rituals. Because this sacralization injuries democratic principles of transparency and sovereignty of the people, political religions are usually parts of autocracies, particularly totalitarian systems, such as the Hitler regime, Stalinism, Maoism, or the current North Korean system. Also politicized authoritarian religions and so-called theocracies come within this category.

- **Civil religion,** as formulated originally by Jean-Jaques Rousseau (1762) and later described by Robert Bellah (1967), admittedly shows some

similar features as political religion, such as informal ethics and symbols. In contrast to political religion, however, civil religion refers to democracies with their specific requirements and institutions. It exhibits a kind of informal (quasi-religious) coherence for conflictual democracies.

- **Political Correctness** appears to be nothing else but a specific form of civil religion in the hands of actors that represent public opinion. In the thick of things here are usually informal norms of non-discrimination. These very norms are often subject of critiques by political right wing parties. In modern usage, the terms PC, politically correct, and political correctness are increasingly pejorative descriptors, whereas the term politically incorrect is used by opponents of PC as an implicitly positive self-description. Disputing this framework are advocates for ending discrimination and scholars on the political left.

7. Summary

Political culture is both, a traditional and current comparative research subject in the area of political systems. Diverse approaches of this research may be usable. Amongst these approaches, there are some transfers and linkages. A researcher of political cultures should notice these different approaches and should try to use them in the best possible way according to the specific context conditions of individual cases.