

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

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*Entering a cultural age is imperative if humanity is to come to grips with the complex and difficult problems encountered in the present age of economics, most notably climate change, global warming, the environmental crisis, growing shortages of natural resources and basic foodstuffs, vast disparities in income and wealth, conflicts between different genders, races, religions, countries, cultures, and civilizations, and especially the tendency to treat economics as “the whole” and everything else as a “part of the whole.” The key to dealing with these and other problems lies in adopting a holistic perception of culture and cultures and capitalizing on the rich legacy of insights, ideas, and ideals provided by generations of cultural scholars. Through this process, it is possible to piece together a portrait of the age of culture based on developing culture and cultures in breadth and depth, achieving balanced and harmonious relationships between the component parts of culture and cultures, situating culture and cultures effectively in the natural, historical, and global environment, living a cultural life, and achieving more peace, harmony, happiness, sustainability, spirituality, and well-being in life and the world. People in the arts, humanities, sciences, and education, governments, and the general public have proactive and seminal roles to play in bringing the age of culture into existence and enabling it to flourish in the years, decades, and centuries ahead.*

**Key Words:** *Age, economics, economies, parts, culture, cultures, the whole, wholes, ways of life, cultural lives, balance, harmony, happiness, spirituality, insights, ideas, ideals, cultural scholars, legacy, portrait, arts, humanities, sciences, educators, governments, general public, roles, responsibilities*

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 we are living in at present, or we can change directions and enter the age of culture in the future. The decision is ours to make.

It is not difficult to determine why this decision is necessary. A number of complex and difficult problems has emerged on the global horizon over the last few decades that threatens survival and well-being on the planet. Most prominent among these problems 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 the constant threat of nuclear, chemical, or biological warfare. It doesn't take a psychic to tell us how devastating these problems can become if they are not dealt with effectively.

What has brought this situation to a head is the environmental crisis. When the population of the world was much smaller than it is today, there were enough resources to go around, weather conditions were more stable, and there was less pollution, congestion, and waste. However, even back then there were signs that humanity could be in for a rocky ride in the future, especially when Malthus predicated population growth could eventually outstrip the means of subsistence.

Fortunately, an event occurred half a century earlier that was destined to have a much more positive effect on the world. It was the publication of Adam Smith's book *The Wealth of Nations* in 1776. This event triggered a series of developments over the next two hundred and fifty years that have had a very powerful effect on the world. This is because Smith demonstrated in theoretical and practical terms that people's and countries' standards of living and quality of life could be improved significantly through economics, economies, specialization, economic growth, and pursuing one's self-interests.

These beliefs were strengthened when David Ricardo contended that economics should take precedence over all other activities and constitute the main concern of countries. They were strengthened far more when Karl Marx created the economic interpretation of history. It was based on the belief that the affairs of nations can be divided into an "economic base" and "non-economic superstructure" because economics is the "cause" and "basis" of everything in life and the world. This belief was never seriously challenged because it was concluded that Marx had uncovered a "universal truth" through all the years he spent in the British Museum Library researching this matter. For Marx, the economic interpretation of history was true not only for all places in the world, but also for all times - past, present, and future.

Since that time, developing economics and all the various economies of the world has evolved to the point where it is accorded the highest priority in the world today. This has been achieved by creating a comprehensive system of economic theory and practice, as

well as developing a set of quantitative and statistical indicators that measure economic progress with exact scientific precision, especially gross and net national product, per capita income, and the rate of economic growth. Eventually, economics and economies became the principal concern of governments, largely through theories advanced by John Maynard Keynes and the Keynesians before, during, and after the Great Depression and Second World War. Much more recently, this system has been expanded from the western world to the entire world through the process known as “globalization.” (Schafer, 2008)

As a result of these developments, and many others, we are living in an economic age today that is based on making economics and economies the centerpiece of countries and principal preoccupation of municipal, regional, national, and international affairs. 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. These developments are so powerful and pervasive that it is impossible to call the present age anything but an economic age. This is important because, as the Chinese proverb states, “the beginning of wisdom lies in calling things by their right names.”

The economic age is predicated on producing as many goods, services, and 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 is now so deeply immersed in this age that it is taken for granted and ignored.

At least 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 the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change have caused some people to have serious reservations about the economic age. Others have concluded that “the status quo” is not acceptable because the risks and dangers are too great. And still others feel that 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. (Schafer, 2008) It is impossible to conduct this assessment without admitting that the creation and development of the economic age is humanity’s greatest achievement by far. 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 since the economic age was commenced in 1776. It has also contributed to countless advances in agriculture, industry, science, technology, education, communications, health care, politics, the arts, and a great deal else. As a result of this, it is tempting to conclude that 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 natural environment. What makes this problem so acute and potentially life-threatening is the fact that during the entire time the economic age was being developed in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, the natural environment was 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 or huge condominium on sand or mud. At some point, it is bound to collapse. In effect, the economic age is resting on faulty foundations, and has been for more than two hundred years. This, in itself, confirms that a different type of age is required in the future with new theoretical and practical foundations.

As difficult as this problem is, it is not the only problem with the economic age. 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. This is because the economic age is not designed to deal with problems like this.

But the greatest and most complicated problem with the age of economics of all is treating economics as "the whole" and everything else as "part of the whole." The problem here is that economics is not

the whole, regardless of how crucial it is to all people and all countries. 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.

This problem of what is “the whole” and what are “the parts” is the biggest problem in the world today because it affects everybody and everything. Since the whole is greater than the parts and the sum of the parts, humanity must be extremely careful about what it makes the whole and how it deals with this whole and the parts in the future.

A great deal of light was shed on this problem when anthropologists began travelling to different parts of the world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to study human societies and human behaviour in depth and on the ground. What they discovered was that people had words for all the various activities they were engaged in as they went about the process of meeting their individual and collective needs and wants. What they did not have, and needed desperately, was 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.

This is why 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.* (Tylor, 1958)

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. (UNESCO, 1997) Wole Soyinka, the African Nobel Laureate in Literature, also had this in mind when he said, “We need therefore to

constantly reinforce our awareness 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. (Soyinka, 1992) 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 is confirmed by the many ways “culture” and “cultures” have been seen and defined throughout history and manifest themselves in the world today. (Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1963; Schafer, 1998)

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, behaviour, worldviews, and lifestyles to come to grips with the environmental crisis because this has a great deal to do with culture and cultures as overall ways of life. And finally, it is needed to situate economics and economies in a broader and deeper cultural and environmental context. This is necessary to ensure that the development of all the diverse economies in the world are informed by environmental, social, ethical, and human values and not just commercial, financial, and technological concerns, and are therefore clean, green, shared, and humane in the future.

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. (Benedict, 1963)

What is true for the holistic perception of culture and cultures is equally true for the works of cultural scholars. They have also been largely ignored outside the cultural realm, especially in terms of their relevance and significance for public policy and decision-making. For just as economics has its “giants” in such scholars as Adam Smith, David Ricardo, Karl Marx, Alfred Marshall, John Maynard Keynes, and others, so culture has its giants as well, such as Voltaire, Jacob Burckhardt, Matthew Arnold, Edward Burnett Tylor, Johan Huizinga, Alfred Kroeber, Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, Pitirim Sorokin, Raymond Williams, Edward T. Hall, Joseph Campbell, and many others. It is regrettable that the contributions of these and other cultural scholars have been ignored outside the cultural field because they are filled with a great deal of knowledge, wisdom, insight, understanding, and ideals that are very germane to the world situation and human condition at present and prospects for the future.

The time has come to capitalize on the holistic perception of culture and cultures and the rich legacy of cultural scholars. Not only is this the key to addressing some of the world’s most debilitating and acute problems, but also it 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 - economic, social, religious, political, educational, recreational, spiritual, and so forth – to form a whole or total way of life. Regardless of what priorities they assign to specific activities 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 all the activities they are engaged in together 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. Not only is this what is required to enjoy a great deal of joy, happiness, and fulfillment in life, but also it is what is needed 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” in the first place. 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.”(Arnold, 1955) 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.”(Powys, 1929) This is also consistent with Goethe’s sage advice to “live in the whole, in the good, in the beautiful.” What makes this so essential is the fact that if balance and harmony are not achieved, disharmonies and imbalances will set in and compound over time that are inimical rather than conducive to good health, happiness, and well-being in life.

This is what makes the research, publications, and conferences of the Scientific Research Institute of Spiritual Development of Man and International UNESCO Chair “Spiritual and Cultural Values of Upbringing and Education” at Volodymyr Dahl Eastern Ukrainian National University so valuable and timely. They have been researching and writing about how people’s personalities and lives can be developed and enriched through culture, the arts, sciences, and spirituality for several decades now. In doing so, they are providing keen insights into what is required to prepare young people and future generations for living in a cultural age, as well as the inspiration and leadership that are required to enter this age and enable it to prosper.

What makes their work in this area particularly pertinent is the fact that there is a great deal to be learned from how people live their lives and cultivate their personalities that is relevant to the development, functioning, and flourishing of cultures in the all-inclusive sense. This was why Ruth Benedict believed that cultures are really “personalities writ large” because they are likewise wholes or total ways of life made up of many different parts.

To progress further in this area, it is necessary to turn to artists, humanists, scientists, architects, and similar types of people since they 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 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.” (Weintraub, 1966) This highlights one of the most important differences between the age of culture and the age of economics. In the age of economics, the focus is on developing the parts in breadth and depth. In the age of culture, the focus is also on developing the parts in depth and breadth, but much more importantly, *on achieving balance and harmony between and among the many different parts.*

This is what makes Huizinga’s insights into this area so valuable and illuminating. He put his finger on one of the greatest requirements

of the age of culture of all, as well as why it is so imperative to enter a cultural age. For the fact of the matter is that the “realities of economic life, of power, of technology, and everything conducive to man’s material well-being” are not being balanced by “strongly developed spiritual, intellectual, moral and aesthetic values” in the age of economics. In fact, serious imbalances and disharmonies exist between the material and non-material or quantitative and qualitative dimensions of development that are now threatening human survival and well-being on the planet. Indeed, it would not be far off the mark to say that 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 labour-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.

Focusing attention on the need to establish balanced and harmonious relationships between the material and non-material dimensions of development indicates how essential it is to develop other crucial relationships in the age of culture. This is true for the relationship 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, and all the diverse cultures of the world. Imbalances and disharmonies exist in all these areas, and others, that need to be overcome, especially the one between all the diverse cultures in the world as a result of basic differences in their values, worldviews, beliefs, and ways of life. This makes it imperative to achieve balance and harmony not only *within* cultures, but also *between* cultures.

Just as it is necessary to achieve balance and harmony within as well as between cultures, so it is necessary to position cultures effectively in the natural, historical, and global environment. Not only would this result in a great deal more environmental sustainability, but also it would make it possible to come to grips with the cultural baggage that 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.

It follows from everything that has been said about the age of culture that this age would not be an alternative to the economic age. Rather, it would incorporate the economic age along with a great deal else 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 era, as well as what Eleanora Barbieri Masini meant when she said, “culture in the future is the crux of the future.”(Masini,1991)

It is impossible to discuss the need for and nature of a cultural age without considering how this age can be realized in fact. In order to do this, it is necessary to examine the roles and responsibilities of the three principal participants in the creation and development of such an age: people and organizations working in the arts, humanities, and educational fields; governments; and the general public.

Unfortunately, people and organizations working in the arts, humanities, and educational fields are very diffuse and disconnected at present. This is because they are spread across many different disciplines and areas – all the various art forms, philosophy, ethics, the sciences, heritage of history, cultural industries, cultural studies, anthropology, sociology, ecology, and biology - and there is little or no communication or connection between them. Nevertheless, these people and organizations are the most essential of all because they are deeply committed to the prominent role culture is capable of playing in the world and must therefore provide the impetus and leadership that are required to move culture and cultures in general - and cultural development and policy in particular – out of the margins and into the

mainstream of society and the world as well as ushering in the age of culture as the next great epoch in human history.

They also have a responsibility to provide the educational and learning materials, resources, courses, and curricula that are required to broaden, deepen, and intensify knowledge and understanding of the complexities and intricacies of culture and cultures as wholes or total ways of life in both theory and practice, improve relations between the diverse cultures and civilizations of the world, enhance awareness of the dangers and shortcomings of culture and cultures and not just their strengths and benefits, increase appreciation and use of the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of humankind, and create the bridges, links, algorithms, artificial intelligence capabilities, networks, and platforms that are required to coalesce this group into a cohesive “cultural community” committed to espousing the best in human nature, conduct, and character as well as reducing violence, conflict, racism, and hate in the world.

Governments also have a proactive and paramount role to play in the creation and development of the age of culture. Their responsibilities in this area can be achieved by embracing the holistic perspective and integrative potential of culture. If this perspective and potential are not provided by governments they will not be provided at all, since governments, culture, and politics share one of the greatest ideals of humanity in principle and in common, namely the need to act in the best interests of all people and the whole and not just some people and privileged parts of the whole. If they don’t do this, it will not occur at a time when this is most needed in all parts of the world.

And this brings us to the general public. While it has the least pressing requirement in terms of ushering in the age of culture and making it operational, it could play the greatest role of all if it focused its energy, attention, and priorities on achieving culture’s highest and wisest ideals. Most notable in this regard are promoting peace, order, justice, civility, equality, and spirituality in the world, as well as making it possible for all people and all countries to enjoy reasonable standards of living and a decent quality of life without straining the world’s scarce resources and finite carrying capacity to the break point. To do this would be to make a remarkable contribution to the realization of the age of culture and a better world at a critical time in human history.

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