Sense variability and typology of cultures

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Abstract. The article is concerned with the problem of justification of cultural (civilizational) typological diversity, which is being analyzed in the framework of variant types and meaning-making methods. Authors attempt to prove the leading role of these methods in shaping cultures’ idiosyncrasies, as well as a specific course of their evolution, and sustainability as culture-transforming programs. In the article, the criteria of distinguishing historical culture types set in the XIX-XX centuries by the most influential civilizational concepts are analyzed, and a new criterion is proposed. This is the criterion of the meaning-making method which is considered the most applicable to describe the core of any culture as an integrity of both experimental and textual ways of human existence re-examination. A number of culture (civilization) types were used as examples; the article observes how the key meaning-making model sculpts the civilization as a unique entity and defines it.

Introduction

The civilization approach in history, in theory and philosophy of culture allowed us to point out quite a few comparative aspects allowing detailed comparison and generalized juxtaposition of their idiosyncrasies. Today, in the context of growing cultural interaction, which means not only competition of civilizations and their interinfluence, but escalation of conflicts and collisions, it is important to realize what lies behind those differences that not only have brought about the vast variety of civilizations but also have ensured their qualitative diversity. To what extent are they mutually irreplaceable and, consequently, can they make possible alternative patterns for human and social development? What is it that makes them different as cultures, in the first place, not social civilizational systems? Are there any criteria of distinguishing cultures avoiding the specific conditions of their emergence, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the idea of any culture’s unsearchable psyche, mentality or fate? To put it another way, the question is not simply about reasons for comparing cultures, but is about constitutive grounds for understanding culture types. To approach the question, the system theory cannot be applied, its incompleteness considered, though a number of valuable hypotheses have been advanced to adapt it to this field of expertise. The majority of recent researches referring to the typology of cultures lie within modernization and globalization paradigms, where the aspect of perspective cultural interaction comes to the forefront [1,2]. However, there are new works that explain the diversity of culture types through relativism and essential pluralism [3, 4].

The term «cultural-historical type» was introduced in the 19-century, and a century later, was extended by the idea of «civilization». The word «civilization» is used to name many different phenomena, but here it is referred to as the whole of all aspects of a certain community’s life, including the impacts of geographical and natural conditions. Such generalizing definition comprises both the culture type, and the socio-economic and geopolitical characteristics of the culture’s development. Among the other equivalents are also «socio-cultural supersystems» (P. Sorokin), «great cultures» (N.Berdiajev), «cultures as organisms» (O. Spengler), «cultural systems» (F. Northrop), or «world cultures» (A. Toynbee). Behind each of these, there normally stands a criterion model of justification, distinguishing, and juxtaposition of culture types.

According to N.Y. Danilevsky, every culture’s development is based on certain goals, or, in his words, «spiritual missions» of cultural creating, that determine the nature of the process. O. Spengler distinguished a number of main cultures describing those as completely different cultural worlds genetically rooted in «praseyms» and «pre-phenomena». M. Weber builds up his typology of cultures by discerning various, inspired by religious ethics, types of the activity approach to the world, and advances the criterion of configuration of the values driving the ideal goal setting process. The religious aspect plays an important role in A. Toynbee’s and S. Huntington’s models of cultural typology, as well. S. Huntington regards religions as supernatual and

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superstate communication bases, instruments of unification and integration stimulating the emergence of vast cultural communities [5]. P. Sorokin relates to socio-cultural systems, each of which is based on a particular phenomenon of consciousness. To consciousness, he ascribes the power that modifies the natural environment and defines the essence of every culture. He calls this power «superorganic». The main criterion of typological differentiation, as stated in P. Sorokin’s theory, is people’s concept of reality.

Culture types are mostly regarded from the viewpoint of binary oppositions like the notorious “West” and “East” concepts.

F. Northrop’s typology of cultures is based on methods of cognitive activity. In terms of the eastern culture, intuitive and irrational worldview, as well as the value-based approach to work are typical, while the western culture relies on science-based knowledge [6]. The cultural concepts of «West» and «East» used to be highly generalized and all about binary oppositions like collectivism – individualism, intuitivism – rationalism, traditionalism – dynamism etc. However, the structure of cultural variety, yet to be defined by the cultural theory, is obviously more complex than that. Besides, behind each of these pairs there is a contradiction of civilization and barbarism as a faded sound of presence-absence logic. It should be noticed, however, that the category of tradition here does not have the idea of difference: it conveys the idea of cultures’ identity and continuity, but is not used as a criterion for distinguishing their differences. To explain the difference in traditions, more precise criteria are needed. The tradition as such should be viewed on as a means of conveying cultural patterns and senses, a way of maintaining identical culture types, not as a source of new types or an entity conditioning their idiosyncrasy.

Materials and methods

We suggest culture be considered as a program and experience of understanding and re-examining the natural human and societal existence, of supernatural meaning-making. Yet how could one justify and realize the sense variability, in other words, discern a potential difference in the uniformity of the category under consideration? It is possible, provided one recognizes the meaning as a constructive event, when the integrity is considered? It is possible, provided one recognizes the difference in the uniformity of the category under the sense variability, in other words, discern a potential meaning-making. Yet how could one justify and realize natural human and societal existence, of supernatural experience of understanding and re-examining the self. We suggest culture be considered as a program and methods of cognitive activity attains its integrity. Hence, we can state the variety of cultures rests on the variety of forms of meaning-making. We have to accept that the sense is not a matter-of-fact, but an event of meaning-making process, of realization (or a discourse event, an event of meanings juxtaposition, as it is in this case). Its structure is relevant to the reflexive nature of consciousness, which is represented by the phenomenal «own» – «other» correlation. In a realization event, the meaning-making process can be focused both on the «own» and the «other», «I myself» becoming meaningful in the light of this «other» superior sense. Also, the complementarity of the «own» and the «other» can develop, in which case both are evaluated as equally powerful sides in terms of the specific, meaning-making, function of their interconnection and complementation.

Three main methods of sense realization can be pointed out: rational, aesthetic and mystic. These are found in the three intellection types: active-cognitive with the rational method dominating, imaginative-meditative with the aesthetic aspect of sensation being prevalent), and religious-ascetic and conscientious-ethical based on the intuitiveness of the meaning-making «other», i.e. on the «other-dominance» («heteronomous») of sense. The rational modus of meaning-making conveys the principle of consciousness as of self-assertiveness, the aesthetic modus the principle of self-replenishment, the mystic modus the principle self-renewal. These modi are equal in value, one should not be preferred to the detriment of the others. Yet they are not equivalent, as each of them offers different possibilities of perception (and existence). The modi complement one another, but at the same time, they are in a constant conflict and can extrude the competitors out of a human’s consciousness, as well as out of the space of cultural diversity.

The approach we offer is very strict in terms of methods: it enables us to consider the culture as the experience of realization, whose foundation is a variant meaning-making structure and which, in its active existence, is a meaning-making discourse where different modi of meaning-making interconnect, compete and complement each other in relatively stable combinations. The hypothesis states, every one of the original civilizations qualified as world civilizations, roots in a peculiar cosmos of sense, which as such is a specific hierarchical interconnection between the main meaning-making modi.

We carried out a comparative study of well-known civilizations, in the aspect of their most essential
achievements which stand out as most prominent, and were borrowed by other civilizations. We succeeded in establishing a correspondence between these achievements and culture forms of different, meaning-making modalities. It should be noted that there were also certain forms found where every civilization lagged behind and which were compensated by relevant borrowings. The study also revealed the factors of mentality characteristic of any of the cultures under analysis, demonstrate a relatively stable structure of meaning-making discourse. The structures are revealed both in key philosophical, religious and aesthetic ideas, and in value priorities reflected in examples of conventional wisdom.

**Results and discussion**

The analysis has allowed establishing the correspondence of the main world civilizations’ culture types, on the one hand, and, on the other hand - of the meaning-making systems which are not only based on a dominant meaning-making modus, but also on a hierarchical structure in the three modi’s interrelations: the rational, the aesthetic and the mystical one. One could state that the system of culture types is a system of hierarchical logical interrelation of the main meaning-making modalities. It should be noted that there were also certain forms found where every civilization lagged behind and which were compensated by relevant borrowings. The study also revealed the factors of mentality characteristic of any of the cultures under analysis, demonstrate a relatively stable structure of meaning-making discourse. The structures are revealed both in key philosophical, religious and aesthetic ideas, and in value priorities reflected in examples of conventional wisdom.

In South Asia (India) rationalism is intertwined with mysticism, pushing aestheticism aside. In Indian culture, the mystical contemplation is subjected to the rational lying at the heart of the superior knowledge that gives power and enables to rule both the material and spiritual aspects of the subjective world. Hinduism and its New Age variations emphasize the superiority of esoteric knowledge as opposed to faith. The most essential creation brought into life by the synthesis of the rational and the mystical is magic, which is manifested in Brahman’s competence to control gods, and in yogis’ ability to control their body and spirit.

5. Christianization brought forth a new culture type in East Europe. For the Byzantine Empire and later, for Russia and other countries of the Orthodox civilization (as A. Toynbee called it), the hierarchy inside the compound of sense and values (axiological) looks as follows: mystical-aesthetic-(rational). The primary sense of a human life, as regarded in the discourse of this civilization, is in unity of man with God achieved through spiritual deeds, i.e. righteousness, prayers and penitence. The technological rationality is considered an important part of life but not a value in itself. As a rule, the constant lack of the rational factor is compensated by historically significant borrowings, primarily, from the nearby West.

A specific culture type is represented by the Near East. In spite of the impressive diversity of ethnoses and civilizations, it has a peculiar hierarchy of values and notions which has been reigning here for thousands of years: mystical-rational-(aesthetic). Hinduism and Islam belong to this class of semantic (notional) phenomena. The freedom of art is severely curtailed, some genres being prohibited by the religion. The mind is focused on scrupulous expounding of the mystical revelation, and as its extension, shapes the specific character (mix of rationality and legalism) of the mystical component, and the culture type as such.

This theory allows understanding that there exist various culture types with the same meaning-making model dominating; still, they will differ in the hierarchy of other meaning-making motives, as a result, preserving their sense uniqueness. It will depend on the proportion of the primary meaning-making modus with the secondary one, the proportion forming as a specifically constructed semantic discourse of the culture. The aesthetic meaning-making component dominates in both ancient Greece and traditional Chinese culture, but that does not keep them from being completely different from each other in their main features.

The mysticism-oriented cultures of the Orthodox and Islamic worlds are also partly alike, but the mystical
introduction is different in these cultures. In Orthodoxy, it is
reinforced by the phenomenon of the God loving and
merciful, which results in the specific relationships
between Him and a man, the relationships that by nature
are close to sympathy and compassion. In Islam, the
mysticism rests on practical rationalism that manifests in
the strict moral spreading into the law and revealing the
God’s imperious and willed essence.
Distinguishing reason as the meaning-making basis
of Indian culture may seem counterruitive, the mystical
reputation of India taken into account. But a closer look
reveals an astonishing connection between religion and
magic which differs from that in Taoism, for example.
The major part of Vedic texts is incantations and rituals
descriptions, and the Vedas deliver first of all
knowledge, not worship. Referring to Vedanta’s
doctrine, its world outlook developed in Upanishads one
will be surprised how close the key correlation of Atman
and Brahman is to what we have defined as a
phenomenal disposition of the rational type of
consciousness. Of course, we cannot deny the meaning
of art in Indian or any other culture. But we should pay
our attention to the fact that the phenomenon of tragedy
with its semantic commotion is not known to the Eastern
cultures, it is extremely far from the traditional Indian
culture.

Another example is Buddhism, the fruit of Indian
culture, which spread to the East – China and Japan.
Buddhism is rationally magic; it rests on the intuition
of reason rather than mysticism. The culture type of China
and the whole East Asia is different: it is the feeling of
wonderful Dao – invisible and inexplicable source of all
the emergences, merged with mysticism, but filling it
with its own meditative-aesthetic contemplation. Thus,
Zen-Buddhism (the Buddhism of East Asia) is a
significant transformation of the Indian prototype.

But is the birth of identical semantic types on
different historic grounds possible? An answer can be
given by a closer look at one of the youngest
civilizations known, i.e. Latin America. Some scientists,
including S. Huntington, identify it as a separate
civilization.

First and foremost, it is its cultural-typological
difference, which is so crucial that a communication gap
between representatives of this culture and others is quite
noticeable. We can state that Latin American civilization
exists not merely as a geopolitical area, but as a culture
type taking its own place among other civilizations,
provided it reproduces the described structural-
hierarchical model. Explicit cultural identity, reflected in
O. Paz’s characteristic of the semantic world of Latin
American civilization [7] takes place. We should admit a
significant inversion of meaning-making variables that
occurred in Europe orientated culture of Latin America.
The analysis of meaning-making motives of the culture
leads to the following structural-hierarchical model:
aesthetics – reason – mysticism. This confirms that
logical possibility of the culture type, the possibility of
the phenomenal-semantic structure, lying at the root of
culture types, exists and can materialize regardless of the
direct historic translation impact. This also confirms that
emergence of similar semantic models of culture in

Conclusion
The given structural-phenomenological theory of culture
as «semantic cosmos» allows us to draw the following
conclusions:
1. The existence of culture types means the
existence of semantic types of intellection and activity
which are relatively stable. The meaning-making
structure resembles a system of coordinates with a strict
hierarchy of meaning-making modi, which is supported
by the semantic system of language and communication
stereotypes, and agrees with characteristic models of
social relations.
2. The theory particularizes the principal
approach to culture types as to those of equal value but
not really equivalent, they are regarded as logically
supplementing each other, while their competition in
history is not taken into consideration as a matter of
priority.
3. The theory described can be called a theory
of «semantic worlds», but it does not isolate these
worlds. Moreover, it allows finding out the logic of
cultural exchange which is as follows: every culture
tends to compensate the aspects of realization and
creation that are not considered foremost within its
dominant discourse, but that nevertheless are vital for a
stable and competitive development of the civilization.
It is done by means of borrowing achievements from
cultures which prioritize these exact aspects and succeed
in their realization. These “export” and “import” of
cultural values has a long history. In the context of
global integration these processes are developing.

The theory allows us to concretize the logic of
communication and interaction between civilizations. In
contrast to the extreme concept of non-interpenetrating
cultural worlds we reveal the configuration of culture
types’ complementarity. The willingness to compensate
lack of achievements in the fields, taking peripheral
position within the meaning-making structure
encourages the cultures to communicate and borrow
from one another. At the same time, they are ready to
transmit not only their own outstanding achievements
but corresponding meaning-making samples. Permanent
inner discourse allows and even encourages involving
typologically alien senses as familiar ones in the field of
culture and finding place in the own semantic order for
the borrowed samples.

In addition, the theory allows us to avoid the other
logical extreme which states that cultures are capable of
producing new synthetic entities all the time. The
synthesis is carried out by every culture type on the basis
of their meaning-making matrix.

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