

WHAT'S CIVILIZATION?

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We established this institute seven years ago. It's been seven years and time passes by so fast. Here, in this institute, we introduce a new concept: Civilization Studies. This concept is brand new in Turkey. Outside Turkey, there are like Islamic Civilization Studies, Near-Eastern Civilizations, African Civilizations, etc. But rarely you find civilization studies in general. It's very rare. Usually you have a focus. But here we don't have a focus. So this institute is dedicated to the study of civilization. There is "cultural studies" but here we have a different approach: Civilization Studies (Medeniyet Araştırmaları). So this brings to mind the pressing question: Then, what's a civilization? It's the most important question. What is it that we are studying? What is it that we are trying to understand? What's our subject matter? I'm going to address this chal-

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lenging question. It's a very challenging question and many great philosophers, thinkers, scholars, academics, intellectuals addressed this question. I'm here, in front of you to address this question in the first lecture of the first semester.

So, what's the civilization? There is no single answer for this. There are so many different answers. Let's look at this variety of answers. According to some people, some thinkers, scholars, civilization means big monuments like pyramids. This is civilization. For some thinkers, civilization means science. For some people civilization means technology. They say this is civilization. And for some scholars, thinkers, it is society, the social order. Don't be confused or alarmed or perplexed because this is a contested concept and there are so many conflicting views about what is a civilization. Because almost every concept in social sciences is contested, debatable. So, when you ask, "what is society?" you get hundreds of answers that conflict with each other. If you ask "what's a human being?" again you get different answers for it. If you ask "what's culture", same way, divergent answers for that as well. So, the fact that civilization is a contested concept and there are many definitions of civilization, this should not panic you, because it's the same for everything else social sciences study. This debate is good. It is thought provoking, instigating your mind. So, you study all these different answers and at the end you make your own choice or come up with your own definition. And this is how social sciences progress.

If you look at the world civilizations you will also see that each civilization promotes a particular kind of definition for civilization. Chinese civilization has

a different understanding of civilization, Hindu civilization has a different understanding of what a civilization is about and Western civilization has its own understanding of civilization. Same thing for Islam. But at the same time, these civilizations, they change over time. So, the concept of civilization they denote or they promote, also changes over time. The best example is the shift from the concept of civilization in the middle ages to modern times. Then, now we are moving into post-modern times. So, the concept of civilization changes parallel to these radical cultural shifts in every civilization. So there isn't a unique understanding or a single understanding of civilization for Western Civilization, because there is a great diversity in a particular time and it also changes over time. It goes through transformations over time. The same thing for Islamic civilization. Our understanding of civilization then through shifts, transformations, in Islamic history.

Is Islamic Civilization a Western civilization or an eastern civilization?

There is classical period of Islam, what we understood from civilization during that time is very different than what we understand today. Today we are under the influence of westernization and modernization. Let me illustrate how our self-understanding has shifted as Muslims. Let me ask you: Is Islamic Civilization a Western civilization or an eastern civilization? Today usually Muslims identify themselves as an eastern civilization. Do you know when Muslims did start perceiving themselves as Orientals, easterners? In the 19th century. Before that, they did not see themselves as Orientals. Fatih Sultan Mehmet, the conqueror of Istanbul, he called himself

“Emperor of Rome”, he called himself “Caesar”. So, this self-identification shifted. In the classical period Muslims did not identify themselves with any geography. They called themselves Muslims, not eastern or western. But in 19th century such a thing happened. And in my humble view, if we were to classify Islam geographically, Islam should be classified as a western civilization. Why? Because if you take history of religion books you will see that they classify religions into two categories: Western religions and eastern religions. What are the western religions? Islam, Christianity and Judaism. And what are the eastern religions? Buddhism, Hinduism, Shintoism, Confucianism. So, this is well established in the history of religion as a field. You’ll find this in all text books and other books. Then I’m saying that if Islam is a Western religion then how come Islamic civilization is an eastern civilization? Isn’t this a contradiction? But you can see that self-definition of a civilization also changes over time and sometimes there are inconsistencies involved. Our dear friend and student Vahdettin Hodja, he’s writing a PhD thesis on how did Muslims started perceiving the world as east and west as opposed to Dar’ul-Islam and Dar’ul-harb and identify themselves with the East. So, it’s a big shift in our civilizational understanding. You see that it’s a very fluid concept, changing over time, and there are many factors influencing our understanding of what a civilization is as well as what’s our own civilization. Same thing apply for Western civilization and the self-perception of westerners about their own civilization. Again, there are shifts and conflicts. Again it’s a fluid concept, changing and getting redefined, by every philosophical school and by every generation.

The illusion of fascist ideology

One of the important discussions in the field of civilization studies is about whether there is a single civilization with capital C or there are civilizations. So, some thinkers argue that there is civilization with capital C, there is a human civilization evolving from the beginning of history until the end. And this civilization with capital C is now represented by Western Civilization and all other Civilizations, cultures, religions, nations, societies should follow footsteps of the West. Because the West; Europe, America... it represents the civilization with capital C. And most of the social sciences agree with this including our dear friend Marx. He says that nonwestern societies see their future in Europe in western societies. Because he is very deterministic and he has this single understanding of civilization. For him, history is a single process running from the beginning of history until the end and all societies will go through this evolution, and the latest stage of evolution is represented by Western societies. So, all the Muslims, Africans, Indians, Chinese... they see their future: "This is how we are going to be in the future." This is what they should see. But if there is a single civilization and if this civilization is represented by a group of nations who live in a small geography in the world and if we tell the rest of the world "You should follow the pattern of this group of nations because this is how you'll be in the future," this is an effort to homogenize the whole world, destroy all other civilizations and turn the world into a single civilization. This project is called "westernization". And it's been in process for the last three centuries. But I should tell you that there has been always many civilizations in the

world and all the efforts to make a single civilization dominant all over the world always failed. And if history repeats itself, that means the effort for westernization to make the western civilization the single dominant civilization in the world will also fail. Because we always had many civilizations in the world, many cultures and many religions in the world. This will also continue. So, this brings to mind whether we can eliminate civilization diversity. Civilization diversity is an essential part of human societies in the world, can it be eliminated? The extremists, they say that the diversity can be eliminated and we can make the whole society, the whole world the same. This is an illusion on which extremist ideologies, fascist ideologies are based. Because their purpose is to eliminate diversity, make everyone the same. But a more realistic view is that diversity is God given and there is no way to eliminate diversity, so we should take it as given and work on diversity management of different civilizations as to how can they live together. This is also another important debate in the field of civilization studies but we as Alliance of Civilizations Institute, as is understood from our name, accept that there are many civilizations in the world and these civilizations should live in peace with each other.

Can you change a society's civilization?

Our country suffered a lot from this understanding because this is not an intellectual, an abstract idea. As I said it's being implemented. Turkish society was forced to westernize, to abandon Islamic civilization and westernize. So this brings to mind: Can you change a society's civilization? Can you make a society which belongs to Islamic civilization belong

to western civilization? Is this a realistic, feasible project? Our leaders believed that this is possible and this is inescapable. Because they believed there is only one civilization in the world and we should join that civilization. "If we don't westernize, we will be excluded from civilization process. Now that we are an honorable, respected nation in the world, we should become a part of the civilization with the capital C. We should abandon Islamic civilization and join this western civilization because all human societies will at the end come to that point anyway. So, let's make our society move faster and become civilized as soon as possible." They took lots of military measures, political measures to transform the Turkish society and make it western but it failed. I don't know if you agree with me or not but in my view it failed. Actually, it failed everywhere in the world. You cannot show me any nonwestern society which is truly westernized after going through two or three centuries of westernization. Look at Africa, look at Latin America, look at India, Pakistan... Most of these countries, they lived as colonies of western powers and they were subjected to the process of westernization but today they are not westernized, they are not western. This makes me suspicious whether or not these westernization policies were sincere. I'm suspicious. It seems that the policies of westernizations have been used like a future dream. But those societies they were never pushed to westernize, they were kept at the periphery, they were kept as dependents of the West. Otherwise, if they truly westernized, they would become equals. Equals with France, UK, Germany... So why should they want all African countries to be equals to them? Otherwise how can

they would exploit the natural resources of those countries? But they always talked about westernization and modernization of those countries the same way we did in Turkey. But you cannot show me any country where westernization became successful and that country became equal to western countries in every aspect.

So, you can see that these debates, they are not just intellectual debates, they have ramifications, practical implications in policy making, in the history of nations. They determine destinies of many societies, many countries. One of the recent examples of how a debate on civilization influences international relations, life of nations and individuals is the idea of clash of nations. “Clash of civilizations”, this book had great impact in international relations, even on relations of individuals. So, it influences lives of many people. That’s why you should not see what we are doing in civilization studies as an intellectual exercise. Because as I illustrated it has ramifications that impact on policies, cultural policies, international relations and even education. And many other aspects of our lives. So, I believe that it’s very important issue, very important subject to study, in particular today. Why? Because today inter-civilization relations became very important than before. And the reason for it is that our world became a very small village. In the past the only civilizations which were geographically adjacent to each other interacted with each other. Chinese civilization interacted with Indian civilization and perhaps Japanese. But today Chinese civilization has interaction with all civilizations in the world. There is no country, there is no civilization which has no relationship with China.

You see there is a structural change in the network of relations. And the same way European civilization, it interacted only with Africa and Asia minor. But today Europe influences and gets influenced by all what's happening in the world. So this is a very important change in the inter-civilization relations and this is what makes civilization studies more important than ever.

Communication of civilizations in the new age

I was invited to check science academy to give a talk and after my talk, a gentleman, respected academician or statesman, asked me the following question: Sir, can you tell us how you can protect Europe from the problems happening outside Europe? I said, "Sir, this is old paradigm. It's over. This is not possible anymore in the world today. So everything that happens outside Europe will influence Europe and everything that happens in Europe will influence outside world." Because, I said, we entered a new era in the history of humanity and I call this new era "open civilization". So, in this new era, all civilizations interact with all other civilizations. There are no walls, no windows for civilizations. There is no way to build walls around any single civilization or in a country. So, they all interact with each other. And this is due to the fast developing transportation and communication technologies. It's very easy for people to travel. In the past we had very famous travelers like Ibn Battuta, Marco Polo, Evliya Çelebi and others, because they travelled. But today almost all of us are like Ibn Battuta, Marco Polo and Evliya Çelebi. It's so easy to travel around the world. Even if you don't travel you get to see it over the Internet, on TV... So easy. Just buy a book

and you'll see all the pictures. You can easily watch on TV, see on the Internet. What was exceptional during the middle ages is ordinary today. Alliance of Civilizations Institute, for instance, we have now here students from more than 40 countries. After most recent arrivals and new students I don't know what's the exact number at the moment. But more than 40 countries... Such an institute, bringing students from all over the world was impossible two centuries ago, even a century ago. You couldn't imagine this group of people coming from different parts of the world in a particular institute to study something but today this is something common. People travel everywhere. You never know where is your neighbor from. You get people from different parts of the world. And even classrooms are transformed. This is multi national at the moment. Business became international. Distance died. Distance is no longer a constraint in inter-civilization relations, inter-personal relations. Only time is constrained. I cannot call America because my friend in California is sleeping when I'm up. This is the only constraint. Distance is not. I cannot call Japan because my friend there is sleeping when I'm up or he cannot call me because I'm sleeping when he's up. So, time is the constraint, not the space in this new age. In this age I think we have entered a new era which I call open civilization and in this era the structure of international relations, politics, business, education, even religion has changed. If you are not aware of this radical change you will be loser, you'll be erased. But if you are aware of this shift and you configure your international relations, your politics, your education, your business, your religion, then you'll be successful, you'll survive.

Let me illustrate this with an example. In our border there's a problem in Syria. Who are the actors involved in this conflict? People who live in Syria? No. Almost every country is there. Russians is there, Americans is there, German is there, French is there, China is there. Almost all countries are there. This shows that there is no more local problem. And if you want to solve this problem, are you going to ask Syrians who live in Syria: What kind of solution do you want? No. Maybe they will be the last people to be asked. So we'll ask what Americans want, what Russians want, what Chinese want, what EU wants. This is a very good illustration of open civilization. And in this era you cannot think local. You have to think globally and act locally and take all these changes in the structure of international relations, economics, etc, into consideration. So this –I believe- makes civilization studies one of the most important disciplines today. Today we need people who are literate in civilizations. You can understand other civilizations. You can communicate with other civilizations. Because today there is no longer homogenous societies. Almost all societies are composed of people who belong to different cultures and civilizations. Look at Europe. It was homogenous in the past -or just Christians. Italians lived in Italy, in Germany only Germans lived there. But today there are so many Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Africans... It's a mixture. Different civilizations getting together everywhere and composing a new type of society but politics is not transformed accordingly. Government is not transformed accordingly. So, we're now going through the pains of the old system and the new society. In the old system, it's assumed that you

have a homogenous nation. But society changed. The nation changed. So today Islam is the second religion in Europe, it's no longer homogenous Christian. And there are so many Buddhists and Hindus and many other religions. In the past Europe was just white, now we have lots of African people and people come from other races. So, I believe in today's world the most important problem is diversity management. Managing civilizational diversities. At the micro level between individuals who belong to different civilizations and at the macro level between or among civilizations. So, if this diversity of civilizations is not seen as given, if people think this is an epiphenomenon, as an accident –we can eliminate it, we can make all civilizations the same- then you will have conflicts. And if you don't develop a very effective and fair diversity management system then you'll have lots of conflicts in your society.

Ibn Haldun in the new civilization

So, last year in America thousands of people were killed –blacks in the conflicts. Why? Because they don't know how to manage the black and white diversity. Same thing in Europe. They have this Islamophobia growing, also rising hate against the immigrants coming from Africa and also from Middle East. So these problems, they emanate from the lack of a diversity management system. Because those states they still assume they live in the 19th century, they have a homogenous nation. They believe that they can maintain their nation as a homogenous unit which is no longer possible. You have to accept that people move into your country, there will be different religions and colors in your country and you have to learn how to manage this. So we need to

move from single civilization with capital C to civilizations and build a new world order, a new political order, a new economic and educational order based on this understanding. In that conjuncture I believe Ibn Haldun will help us greatly. How? Because according to Ibn Haldun there is no society which is outside civilization. All societies are civilized societies. Because Ibn Haldun says in the Muqaddima, that there are three words that are synonyms. Ictima-u besheri, madaniyyat and umran. Madaniyyat, most of you is similar with, is a concept we are using, it's an Arabic concept. But today Turks use it and Arabs abandoned it. Very interesting. But in classical Arabic it was used to meet civilization. And Ictima-u besheri, it means human society, and umran has the same meaning. And Ibn Haldun says Madaniyyat is used by Huqema. Huqema are Farabi, Ibn Sina, Ibn Rust, and people like them, philosophers. So, they use the word Madaniyyat. And they say el insanu medeniyyun bittaben. Every human being is naturally civilized. Naturally a civic being, a social being. Sometimes they translate it as political animal. But medeniyyun bittaben cannot be reduced to politics. Politics is part of being a medeni. Medeni means social. According to Muslim philosophers every human being is by nature civilized. So you don't need to force any human being to become civilized. And he says the word or the concept Ictima-u besheri is used by fukaha or mutaqallimun. Muslim jurists and theologians. They use Ictima-u besheri in their discussions to prove the need for prophethood, that God sending a messenger. Or explaining why a law is necessary, why ethics or morality is necessary. So, the jurists and theologians, they use the word Icti-

ma-u besheri, and he says “I’m using umran”. But they all have the same meaning. So sometimes you hear some people claiming that the word madaniyyat in Turkish is a translation of civilization, from French. You can see that this is baseless. Because Ibn Haldun uses this concept long ago. Six centuries ago he used this and he also stated that the philosophers like Farabi, Ibn Sina, Ibn Rushd, they used this concept. That means this is a very old concept, it’s not invented by the Ottoman intellectuals to correspond the concept of civilization. It’s a very old concept. Perhaps the word civilization was invented in 17th century to indicate the meaning of madaniyyat. Because madaniyyat is an older concept than civilization. So I leave this discussion to our etymologist friends, they can continue with this.

The first person, to my knowledge, who established study of civilizations as a discipline is Farabi. He has a book titled *Al Ilmul Medeni*, which means “Civilization Sciences”. That’s why Ibn Haldun dislikes him. Actually, I shouldn’t say dislike, he sees him as his rival. Always criticizes him. Or maybe rival is not a good word. Maybe I should say “significant other”. Always keeps him in mind. Our psychologist friends can explain who the significant other is. He always keeps Farabi in mind and always tries to go beyond Farabi. He says, “Okay, he talked about civilization sciences but he talked about how a civilization should be. He did not talk about how a civilization behaves. He was not objective. He was normative.” This is how Ibn Haldun criticizes Farabi. So, in the understanding of Farabi, civilization is society. In the understanding of Muslim theologians and fukaha, civilization is society. And in the understanding of

Ibn Haldun civilization is society. And there are some western thinkers, they also confirm the same idea, they also see civilization as society. This is the approach we adopt in Alliance of Civilizations Institute. But it doesn't mean that our students can have their own understanding or they can adopt something different. And Ibn Haldun divides civilizations into two categories: Nomadic civilizations and sedentary civilizations. People who live as nomads, in the wilderness, in the deserts and mountains and move on all the time, immigrate. And people who live in the cities. Because I believe that Ibn Haldun makes this distinction as a response to those people who question whether or not nomads are civilized. Usually nomads, badawis, are seen as uncivilized. But Ibn Haldun says they are civilized. Why? Because they have a society. They have a social organization, they have high-rankings, they have economic life, they have religious life, they have norms. So, if they managed to organize a society, a social order, that means they are civilized. This is Ibn Haldun's view. From this perspective all societies are civilized. This is the reason why I think Ibn Haldun's view of civilization is suitable with the era of open civilization. Because he sees all societies as civilized and equal in becoming civilized. But if you think only a society or a group of society are civilized and the rest is uncivilized, this is not suitable for the era of open civilization. And the same way that the civilizations evolve and create a kind of high-rankings among civilizations, this is also not suitable with the era of open civilizations. Ibn Haldun refuses all these kind of stratification of civilizations and the idea of single civilization. All societies are civilized and they inter-

act with each other. So that's why I think it's very important for us to promote Ibn Haldun's understanding of civilizations in today's world. Ibn Haldun sees civilizations as a living organism. Civilizations are born, grow, and then eventually die. So it's a very fluid, very dynamic understanding of civilization. It is not stagnant, it's not a fixed understanding of civilization. This allows us to explain changes in any civilization using internal dynamics. He also talks about conflicts between different civilizations. But these are not deterministic. So, he's kind of outlined the stages. If you let a society without any intervention this is what going to happen. Ottomans used Ibn Haldun's view of five stages in the life of a civilization as a warning, not as deterministic rules. Ibn Haldun says if a society gets rich, wealth will corrupt this society. So, they took measures to protect their society from the negative impacts of wealth and welfare. They adopted Sufism as an antidote against the negative impact of wealth and luxury. Because the Sufism promotes simple life. This is how Ottoman Empire survived for seven centuries, protected itself for a long period of time from the negative impacts of being a rich society. Ottoman Empire reached its most rich stage during the time Suleyman the Magnificent. And he was a sufi himself. He spent one third of his reign outside the palace. He ruled for forty years and more than ten years he was outside the palace. And even he died in Europe. His age was more than 80 when he died. This is -I believe- an effort to protect themselves and their society from the negative impact of rising welfare and wealth Ibn Haldun warned about.

We can discuss this more but today Turkish society

as well as most of the societies in the world, they are challenged by the negative impact of welfare and wealth. Especially the European and American societies. And I believe that Ibn Haldun's view is very important today to protect the Turkish society. Because in Turkey national income is rising. So, Ibn Haldun's theory tells us that rising level of income will corrupt Turkish society morally, intellectually and relations in the society will be weaker. And the same thing is happening now in the modern world, in Europe and in America. So, Ibn Haldun can help us in understanding the illnesses caused by this rising wealth in Turkish society or in other modern societies and what kind of measures we can take against it.

I want to conclude and sum up. The question I raised was what's a civilization. You can see that there isn't a single answer for this. There are many answers. But as someone who follows Ibn Haldun in my view civilization is society.

Thank you.