

## TALKS WITH SOCIAL SCIENTISTS: Margaret Mead on what is a culture? what is a civilization?\*

DR. MEAD: Today we are supposed to be dealing with the difference between culture, or cultures, and civilization or what we mean by civilization. In the first place, it is important to clarify the difference between culture, which is the system of transmitted and learned behavior of all human beings everywhere on this planet, and what we mean when we say *a* culture. When we say a culture, we mean the particular forms of behavior that belong to a particular group of people. We might talk about French culture or Japanese culture. We might talk about the culture of a tiny little island out in the Pacific like the island of Tikopia. We might even talk about the culture of the people on the south coast of the Admiralty Islands that I wrote about in *Growing up in New Guinea* where there were only about two thousand people. Or, we can find even smaller cultures. I once worked on the island of New Guinea with a group of people where there were only six hundred who spoke the language and shared the customs that they had learned from their ancestors. When we use the term a culture we refer to a particular society—a society that has developed through history. Some of them may be thousands of years old; some of them may be only a few generations old. But, we have to realize that, however different these various cultures may be, they are all equally to be considered as cultures and part of culture itself. Culture itself is the peculiar way in which human beings have learned to pass on to their children things they, themselves, have learned. This is what distinguishes human beings from creatures like insects who have to pass on their behavior in very stereotyped ways because they don't have any way of storing information, of putting it away in any form, and of teaching it to future generations. So insect behavior has to be built in—genetically.

Now another important thing about culture is that it is shared by the human beings everywhere on this planet. All human beings are

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members of one species. This is something that we didn't know until a few years ago because we didn't know what other kinds of human beings we might find somewhere in the depths of the jungle, or on a high mountain peak, or on a tiny island. It was possible that there might be some earlier forms of man—some really primitive or archaic forms of man who differed physically in significant ways from modern man. However, we have now explored this whole planet. There seems to be no possibility that there are any survivals from earlier forms of man anywhere on this planet. We now know that all human beings, wherever found—in Asia, Africa, Australia, Europe, the Americas, or the islands of the seas—are all members of one species with the same potentiality for learning, for inventing, and for transmitting their cultures. This is quite new information. We couldn't say this for certain until we had explored the whole planet and many people have not yet fully absorbed this information and think of different races as representing earlier or later forms of man. But we have to say that we are all members of the same species, all dependent upon human culture to adjust in the world.

One of the striking ways of thinking about human culture is to realize that a single infant left alone would die at once. But this is equally true of a lamb, or a kid, or an infant monkey. An infant whose parents have not prepared some way to care for it and shelter it will die. But this is true of birds who need nests. However, to be a full human being a person has to grow up in a society with more than one family to care for him, to learn relationships to old and young, to both sexes, to people that are close and to people that are far away. It's only by growing up in such a society that we become fully human.

We can also say, in thinking about human cultures all over the planet, that there are certain universals. People in every culture have families; they all educate their children to behave as the adults have behaved; they have tools; they have language, they have some form of religion; and they have some form of relating people which is larger than the small family.

When we start to distinguish between cultures and civilization we come up against a quite different problem. Over the last ten thousand years and possibly longer—we don't know yet—there have periodically appeared in different parts of the world dense populations, a tremendous increase in the number of people and a corresponding increase in the ability to grow food and to store it. Under the impetus of people living with far greater density, we have developed—this has been developed several different times in different parts of the world—our capacity to manage such large groups of people. This means keeping accounts, keeping records. It means some kind of tax-

ation and revenue. It means a great deal of division of labor so that large groups of people can divide among themselves all the skills and tasks and knowledge that are necessary to manage a large civilization—like ancient China, like the civilization of the Incas in South America, or the civilization of the Maya and Aztecs in Mexico, like ancient Greece or Rome, and like our own complex civilization today.

One of the important things about civilizations in the past is that they have developed up to a peak and then have fallen, either because they were conquered by other people or because they disintegrated—they could no longer maintain the high pitch of activity that was true in their heyday and their days of glory. One of the very important questions that people are asking today is: What will happen to particular modern civilizations today? In the later forties many people were predicting that Europe was finished, that Europe was a dying civilization and would never again reach any kind of height. In 1964 we know that this is not true. Europe today is a thriving economic community moving toward a Common Market and, far from being a dying society, it is one that is perfectly strong and capable of challenging the United States on an exporting or industrial level and certainly on a cultural level. Then there are those who compare the United States to the Roman Empire. I always suspect we are rather like the Romans in our capacity for getting together a great network of peoples over a very large territory, building roads, managing the problems of plumbing and sanitation, and organizing life. But it is important to realize that when these other civilizations fell they were like solitary mountain peaks. Around them, for a great distance, people with much lower orders of organization and technology lived. Today, for the first time, this whole planet is in intercommunication. Every inch of this earth's surface is claimed—in different ways, of course, but claimed—by some group of people. We're now so interrelated that no group can be allowed to fall. We're past the time of empires that topple over, where the people around about would pick up the pieces, learn whatever interesting techniques had been developed, take a little of the art, and in due time develop a civilization of their own. Today we have instant communication between high civilization and lower civilization, very simple cultures where people are living as they have lived for thousands of years. All this communication means that what's available in a high civilization today can be made immediately available to people in very simple cultures. It means a good many other things too. It means that people who, when they are discovered by Europeans, are living in very small groups (as fishermen, food gatherers, hunters), knowing only how to scratch the ground with a digging stick—without even a hand-driven plow—

need not go through all the stages that men went through in developing civilizations in the past. We can give them immediate entrée into the best that we know of technology and knowledge, and they can skip all the intervening periods and pick up exactly where we are instead of going laboriously through all the stages.

We are now reaching a stage in human history where, if we can accurately estimate what any society knows that would be useful to any other society, this knowledge can be put in a form that can be made available to all. This is particularly important because many people in Europe and North America are worried about the capacity of people who have lived a much simpler life, technologically, to manage in the modern world. We see new nations struggling with problems of power and government and feel that they are not able to manage their society in the way that we manage ours. It is particularly difficult for us Americans, who are convinced that our method of political organization is better than any other, to realize that our kind of democracy is terribly old and is especially suited to our kinds of character structure, but is not a very exportable form. We have been attempting to export our kind of democracy to other countries for a long time, and we see in South American countries examples of the difficulty they have in using a form of democracy which is particularly suited to the English-speaking peoples but may not be as suited to the particular conditions of Latin American countries, or Asian countries, or African countries.

If we are going to deal with planetary problems in such a way that we have an orderly world—a world which will not, blow itself up in a thermonuclear war or destroy itself by other kinds of scientific warfare—we're going to have to use this network of interchange among advancing civilizations and newly emerging people as fully as possible. We are going to have to realize that our relationship to newly emerging peoples is not like the relationship of Greece or Rome, the Incas or the Aztecs, or the Babylonians, or the ancient Chinese empire to surrounding barbarians. Our relationship is quite a new one because of the invention of nations, of treating each nation as a unit with dignity of its own, as a member of the United Nations. We have made an invention which, from one point of view, puts us all on a par so we can have give and take in both directions—we can begin to learn from people very far away from us and very different just as they can begin to learn from us. We must realize that, if we start exporting some of our ideas, our items of manufacture, for instance, electronic devices, we can expect other people to take these, readapt them, change them around, and fit them into their particular form of society.

For example, in the United States we have mental institutions where we crowd people in by the thousands and then try very hard to get anyone to care for them. Millions of dollars are being spent to understand the relationships of the mentally ill to other people, and to include the families in some kind of therapy. We find in Nigeria an open hospital is being developed by a Western-educated Nigerian psychiatrist. Members of the family come with the patient and learn how to take care of him. They are developing an old African style of caring for the sick, combined with the most modern psychiatric insights that can be found in London or New York.

It is from this sort of interplay between ancient wisdom and ancient style of other societies and scientific and technical advances of our own that we can expect to build a quite different kind of world society. A society in which the great nations happen to be the largest and wealthiest can make one kind of contribution; middle-sized nations can make another, very small nations can make quite a different one because no one will be jealous of them in the same way that they may be of larger groups. We can begin to work on the problem of spreading the advantages of civilization over the face of the globe and at the same time attempt to keep the individual style of each particular culture. It would be most unfortunate if in the course of giving people the benefit of new forms of medicine, for example, or new forms of transportation and communication, we leveled them all out so there was no individuality left and wherever one went in the world one found identical types of people. This would be dull. It would cut off the possibilities of innovation and change. It might throw us all into a single system which had very few alternatives.

At the same time it is important to realize that there are some things in Western civilization that the people of the world crave very much. They crave modern medicine, which will keep their children from dying. They crave the tools that will keep people from back-breaking labor. They crave sufficient food so that their people will be well nourished. They also crave ways of balancing their population against their food supply, the size of their country, and the aspirations that they have for everyone who is in their country. We can draw upon both the willingness and the self-interest of the great powers to make their technical achievements available to other people, to give some of the results of their stored-up capital to other countries, and we have a corresponding desire on the part of the receiving countries for some of these things.

But, unless there is enough recognition of the individuality, strength, and pride of each group, there is danger that this inter-

change will not proceed in a way that will distribute the advantages of civilization, and still keep the unique historical heritage of each group. When we used to think of nations and talk about nationalism, we spoke of nationalism as an almost unmitigated evil. It was opposed to internationalism and it was spoken of as something that was wrong and inevitably brought conflict and war. But today we have a new phrase, and that is the phrase nationhood, which means that each nation has a part in a whole. Instead of each nation working for self-advantages, instead of each nation seeking to aggrandize itself at the expense of all other nations, today each nation is part of a whole. Each nation has an investment in maintaining the safety and welfare of each other nation. We do not dare to let any other nation sink below a certain level of health, of order, because this threatens the whole of the world. So, as we long ago spoke of things like statehood and learned in this country that each state had both a tradition of its own and an obligation to the whole, on a quite different level we are beginning to build a planetary society where each country can be proud of the contribution that it makes. Members of each race can be proud of themselves and glad of their own physique without downgrading the racial characteristics of different races. Membership in a whole—a variegated and diverse whole—can be substituted for an arrogant membership in any one group, nation, race, or ideology that thinks of themselves as superior to all others. With this new type of sharing the gains of civilization, on the one hand, and the recognition of the rights of each group, on the other, we recognize that one other new thing has happened; and that is, that each country has now become the keeper of the children of all other countries, whether they are friends, allies, or apparent enemies. The safety of each group is dependent on the safety of all.

Looking back on the whole history of civilization, we can show our indebtedness to ancient Egypt, to ancient China. There has been one long, cumulative rise of human invention in the world. And now this long, steady stream of invention is going to be put into a state where it can be made available to all the peoples of the world, including people in the center of New Guinea who have been isolated from all contacts with civilization for thousands and thousands of years so that when we find them they, who belong to the same species we do, are living under conditions that some of our ancestors lived under a hundred years ago, some a thousand, and some ten thousand years ago. I am now ready to receive questions.

*Wilberforce:* I recently read an article that you wrote called "Culture and Social Changes." You seemed to indicate that in Manus too much

emphasis was placed on early childhood experiences. I wondered if you would expand on that?

DR. MEAD: I don't think there's too much emphasis placed on early childhood experiences, but early childhood experiences do not cause political or social institutions. That is, Americans don't have representative government and a balance of power and a Supreme Court because they were bad or slapped in a particular way as children. But slapping and beating them and being gentle with them and playing with them are ways in which people who live in the United States under our institutions teach children to be the kind of people who can live under those institutions. So then, it is not that early childhood is not very important, but the early childhood alone is not responsible for the whole of our behavior. It is simply a very important time in which children learn to be like their parents and share in their whole society.

*Wilberforce*: When does a culture become a civilization?

DR. MEAD: Well, this is a matter of definition. Looking at the past we have called societies civilizations when they have had great cities, elaborate division of labor, some form of keeping records. These are the things that have made civilization. Some form of script, not necessarily our kind of script, but some form of script or record keeping; ability to build great, densely populated cities and to divide up labor so that they could be maintained. Civilization, in other words, is not simply a word of approval, as one would say "he is uncivilized," but it is technical description of a particular kind of social system that makes a particular kind of culture possible.

*Southern*: Is our concern today for foreign lands and people mainly a reaction to conditions created by World War II, or simply the manifestation of fear?

DR. MEAD: No, I think that World War II helped because so many Americans went all over the world. It is primarily our recognition that we live in one world today. If a plague breaks out in the center of Tibet it affects us here. In a matter of hours we can get from one side of the world to the other side of the world. We know that foreign lands are now part of the world we live in. This is, of course, greatly helped by television. People see programs based in many parts of the world.

*Southern:* As an anthropologist, do you always evaluate foreign civilization in terms of our own?

DR. MEAD: No. Anthropologists are trained not to evaluate other civilizations in terms of our own. The categories that we have built up, which we use in describing other cultures, have been built gradually from the study of other cultures. So, for example, we found in the South Seas that people had something called taboo. A large part of their behavior was related to things that were forbidden. The word taboo was added to our language. We look at other societies to see if they too have taboos and what kind of taboos. We build up an outline through which we can look at any society in terms of our knowledge of all other society. We are very carefully trained not to say that something is good or bad simply because we have it. At the same time, we can make the distinction between a society that is technologically complicated or technologically simple; a society that is rich or a society that is poor; a society that emphasized the arts or one that does not. But this does not mean that we are not treating each society as a whole.

*Le Moynes:* What are some specific effects that the introduction of a Western culture has on a primitive culture?

DR. MEAD: You must first consider that we have been having introductions from a high culture to a lower culture, in the sense of technical differences, for thousands and thousands of years. The Roman Empire, when it came to the islands of Britain, was bringing a high culture to a simple, or primitive, culture. It was bringing things like writing and road building and government and things of this sort. So this has been going on for a very long time. Not until the mid-twentieth century was there a complete clash or a complete meeting of the most advanced technical things that had ever happened in the world, like an airplane, with the simplest people still alive on earth. The contrast today is more dramatic than it has ever been before. The effects differ depending on who brings them. Sometimes they are brought by missionaries, sometimes by government, sometimes by traders. If the people are more interested in getting material things than anything else, their old culture may break up; if the government is interested in taxing them so they will work for plantations or something of the sort, this may wreck their old culture. On the other hand, if they are given a sense of dignity, if they are allowed to move rapidly under their own power, they may be able to retain a large amount of their



old style, but express it in new ways—new forms of tools, new ways of working with things, and new relationships with each other.

*Le Moyne:* Concerning the societies that you studied, what was it about them that made you decide to refer to them as cultures instead of civilizations?

DR. MEAD: Well, because they haven't any large population, they haven't any cities, they haven't any script, they haven't any complicated technology or complicated organization. Culture is the word that we apply to a little group of Eskimos or to the people of France. Every human group has a culture. We use the word civilization for these special, complex developments that have occurred at different times in history, such as in ancient Egypt. For a very long time afterward Egypt was barely a civilization at all. People became very poor, and there was very little concentration of organization in large cities. The people of Yucatan once had a great civilization, but the temples crumbled away, the cities fell apart, and the people today are quite simple peasants who are beginning to participate in a new kind of civilization that comes to them from the modern Western world.

*Le Moyne:* In our biographical information the statement is made that "Dr. Mead observed primitive people." Because of the differences in culture, were you able to be other than an observer? In what areas of their life did you feel that you were one with the people just because you were a human being? In what areas of life did you cease to be an observer?

DR. MEAD: When one enters the life of a group of people in New Guinea, although I *can* eat their food, I *don't* eat it most of the time, partly because they have very little food and adding three or four new people to a village may be more than the food supply can stand and partly because I have grown up in a different society and I might get sick, although they don't, from eating the same thing. So I cook their food somewhat differently or I may add more greens to it than they do and things of this sort. I wear more clothes than they do. They are usually interested in acquiring clothes, and, furthermore, I represent a community where the standards of modesty are different from theirs. I try to wear clothes they'll enjoy. I wear clothes, which are made from material with pictures on it and things of that sort that the children there will enjoy. I, of course, belong to another society, and I maintain the kind of social distance from people that one maintains toward people that one doesn't expect to marry, so I am very

often given a very large supply of relatives. For instance, when I arrived in Manus with my husband, the natives immediately said, "You can't live here all alone with a husband. This would be very dangerous. No woman can live alone with her husband, she needs a brother to run away to if her husband beats her." And so one of our friends in the village said, "I will be your brother." And, although I never had to run away to him, his wife, when I went back twenty-five years later, still called me sister-in-law. It is far easier for the anthropologist to participate in the life of the people he has studied, or she has studied, than for those people to understand the anthropologist's world. I learn their language; I hold their babies in my arms; I taste their food; I sit on the ground as they sit. They, on the other hand, have no clear picture of the world from which I come. I am far stranger to them than they are to me. But I found in going back after twenty-five years to the Manus that they have become part of the modern world. Now we talk to each other far more as people who understand each other. They now understand why I was studying them and so we talk much more as people who share a common understanding of what is going on in the world.

*Kansas Wesleyan:* What are the minimum conditions, in terms of culture for the establishment of a nation?

DR. MEAD: Today it is primarily accidental because it has been, unfortunately, in the interests of power politics to take old lines that were drawn by colonial powers in different parts of the world and treat these groups as nations. Sometimes they have been well prepared to be nations in that they have been bound together by sharing some language like French or English or Spanish; sometimes, on the other hand, they were merely accidental aggregations of people who felt themselves to be very separate. In this case it has been very difficult, and is going to be very difficult, for many leaders of countries in Africa, as it was in the past for South America, to hold these groups of people together. The minimum requirements for a nation are a shared language, a shared set of political institutions to which everybody gives allegiance and which they can place above their allegiance to their regions or their tribe or their religious group. When it is possible to do this, then the new nation has a long, difficult, struggling time.

*Kansas Wesleyan:* In *Age and Sex in the Social Structure* the author says, "The age of youth in our society is one of considerable strain and insecurity." Do you find this to be true in the various countries you have studied?

DR. MEAD: No. There is great variation. In some societies youth is hard and middle age is easy, in other societies youth is easy and age is hard. In old Manus the children had a lovely time and once they entered late adolescence they never had a good time again. On the other hand, in France children are very rigorously disciplined, made to study very hard, and are allowed very few pleasures until they've grown up. So societies differ enormously which period in life they make easy and which period they make difficult. Some societies make all periods difficult, and others make all periods relatively easy.

*Grambling:* During the early part of your lecture you made the statement that all human beings are limited to one species and have the same capacity for learning. Does the environment of your community have any effect on the mental capacity of an individual?

DR. MEAD: The environment has no effect on the inherent, or innate, capacity. But if you took a pair of identical twins, Eskimo twins for example, and put one of them among the Eskimos and the other among the French, when they grew up they would be enormously different. One child would have learned to read and write, to understand ancient civilization, to play the piano, to understand modern economics and things of this sort. The other child would have learned how to stalk a seal, how to build a snow house, but would have known very little of the civilization of the modern world. So as adults they would be enormously different although originally they started with absolutely identical inheritance.

*Grambling:* Since we are knowledgeable of the cultural differences of many countries, the density of the population, the need for expanding the resources, skills, and knowledge of other countries, what is causing the rejection by some countries of domestic aid from other countries? Are these political problems or cultural problems?

DR. MEAD: I think these are mainly political, although sometimes this occurs in very old countries where a new part of the population is rising to power, peasants, members of backward groups, other castes as in India. Sometimes the old holders of power want to reject aid from other countries because they are afraid that it will undermine their power. Sometimes they want to take it in order to keep their power. But I would say these are more questions of power and of relative allegiance to one political block or another, or playing one block against the other, than they are questions of culture as such.

DR. CARPENTER: Thank you, Dr. Mead. We have gained a great deal from this conversation. It has been quite up to our expectations and beyond. It was lots of fun having you with us.

DR. MEAD: Good-bye.