



## Dialogue key to bridging divide

by Sigurd N Skirbekk

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**Regardless of how we define civilisation, and regardless of where we draw the borders between an eastern and a western civilisation, we all know that there are differences between East and West, and also that these differences might form a basis for conflicts as well as for dialogues.**

Conflicts are most likely to occur when one civilisation regards itself to be superior in all respects, so that its supporters see no reason to be critical to ones own position and see no reason to learn from other civilisations.

Not only differences in political views and economic interests can lead to conflicts. Also civil matters, such as different ideals about family formation and the morality for regulating relations between the sexes, can lead to antagonism.

When seen from a liberal Western point of view, the traditions of Eastern civilisation - particularly Muslim traditions, but not only these - are often regarded as outdated, paternalistic and suppressive to women.

The customs of arranged marriages are frequently mentioned, as are other customs in contrast to Western ideals of romantic love and of free choice of mates. A special concern has been paid to the tradition of female circumcision.

Besides, a strict segregation of sexes for jobs has in some countries led to an ineffective use of its potential working force.

When seen from the point of view of a typical Eastern tradition, the perspective might be turned around. The West has been accused of immorality, and this is often seen as a cause leading to an abuse of women as mere sexual objects.

Some have also mentioned statistical data from Sweden, which indicates that only one half of contemporary young Swedish girls will ever get married.

With reference to Britain, it has been said that half of those who get married will eventually be divorced. And with a reference to demographic data from Italy, it has been said that women in many parts of southern Europe only get half as many children as is necessary for keeping reproduction of the population at its present level.

We are here facing accusations from two sides, and we could then perhaps have expected some sort of dialogue between them, to find out if the two sides had something to learn from each other.

An understanding of the relativity of ones own cultural ideals could lead to less one-sided arrogance - and also to less self-confidence in superficial declarations of tolerance, supposing that all civilisations are equal, in strength as well as in weaknesses.

### SELECTED COMMENTS

**"This question which has to be asked is: Would the newspapers that published the offensive material about Islam also print cartoons mocking the Nazi holocaust or the destruction of the World Trade Centres? I think not".**

Kevin Martin, Scotland

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It is difficult to find neutral measures for comparing civilisations. During a long history of mankind we have made several experiences about how a civilisation might rise and fall. The reasons for this might differ.

Some researchers will focus on external challenges, from natural disasters to military opponents. Others will see the weakening of a civilisation as caused by internal processes.

### **Family and civilisation**

Among the internal processes leading to the weakening of a civilisation, there are reasons to focus on changes in family formations and the ability or disability of families to fulfil its functions for reproduction, biologically as well as culturally.

Some years ago, the American sociologist Carle C Zimmerman published a book titled Family and Civilisation. Here he presented several systematic comparisons of changes in contemporary Western families and changes in family related customs that had contributed to a decline and fall of ancient civilisations.

As for the Greek and Roman civilisations, he felt there were good reasons for claiming that the decline of these nation-states was due to fairly similar changes involving the institution of the family.

Zimmermann listed several hallmarks of the decline, among others: (1) the spread of quick divorces; (2) a decline in family birth rates coupled with an overall decline in population; (3) the elimination of the true significance of getting married; (4) support for negative interpretations of heroes and virtues of the past; (5) the spread of theories which claimed that comradeship or looser family forms would solve the problems; (6) people who had been married under older family traditions were not allowed to continue these traditions, while younger people shirked the obligations of their elders; (7) the spread of anti-familism by urbane and pseudo-intellectual circles.

Several data indicate that contemporary changes in Western patterns for moral regulations and family formations have similarities with what was going on in an earlier period. This indicates that Western spokesmen of modernity should be quite critical about their own notions of what cultural ideals are most future oriented.

### **Women's liberation?**

In recent years Western countries have witnessed a dramatic fall in reproductive rates, far below a reproductive limit.

Calculations based on birth developments up to 1992 caused European demographers to predict an average childbirth rate of approximately 1.5 for the younger generation of women in the 12 EU countries of that time. Even more disheartening was the fact that there was no realistic political plan for increasing the birth rate.

It is against this background that we must understand what the former prime minister of Luxembourg, Gaston Thorn, said when he claimed that Europe was committing collective suicide.

Normally, a fall in the birth rates to a level of two-thirds of what is necessary for a population to survive over time would cause alarm bells to ring.

When this has not happened in Western countries in recent years, at least not to a considerable degree, this can be explained by a widespread ideology making diagnosis of cultural crisis a taboo.

The fall in birth rate is being explained as a result of women's liberation, and all critique of the processes is then labelled as an expression of reactionary and anti-feminine attitudes.

There is reason to doubt this explanation. There are reasons to say that the fall in birth rates has more to do with commercial ideals for love and family and with a deinstitutionalisation of family formations than with primary preferences among modern women.

In 1975 I had the Gallup institute in Norway do a pilot study, asking a representative sample of Norwegian women to say whether their low level of reproduction was due to some sort of primary

preference.

To the question how many children they thought was appropriate for a Norwegian family, less than 1% of all those polled answered "no children," 2% responded one child, 44% two children, 41% three children, 10% four or more children, and only 4% responded "don't know".

This distribution of responses showed already at that time that the primary desire for children was above the number that women could be expected to have. To the degree that there was a mismatch between ideals and reality, this ran counter to propaganda, although in some cases there was a match.

Another study of the same question was carried out in the 1980s in a number of Western countries. It showed the same trend, to an even more marked degree. The ideal number of children for European women at that time was about one child more than they could expect to have.

At the same time, comparisons showed that while the number of realised births in all the countries that were studied, with the exception of Ireland, were under the reproductive level, the ideals in every country were higher than the reproductive limit. The reason Europeans had not reached the reproductive level cannot be explained on the basis of women's primary wishes.

### **Dysfunctional civilisations**

This kind of data, and there are many of them, indicate that contemporary Western civilisation does not represent a model for a universal modernity. Nor should eastern spokesmen be too self-confident that they have the final solution to a future oriented way of life.

Instead of a competition among spokesmen from east and west about who represents the strongest and most future oriented civilisation, we should hope for an atmosphere of dialogue among spokesmen who admit that their present civilisations are in many ways dysfunctional.

But they may not be dysfunctional on the same fields. Therefore they could have something to learn from each other.

*Sigurd N Skirbekk is a sociology professor, University of Oslo, Norway. He has recently published a book, **Dysfunctional Culture: The Inadequacy of Cultural Liberalism as a Guide to Major Challenges of the 21st Century**, where some of the issues in this article are being elaborated.*

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