

# CIVILIZATION, CULTURE, AND CONSTRUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE

[Medeniyet, Kùltür ve Bilginin İnşası]

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## **ABSTRACT**

Barry Allen, the Canadian philosopher, defines knowledge as the superlative artifactual performance and places the knower in a distinct status compared the Ancient Greek philosophy. In contrast with the ancient understanding of knowledge that positions knowledge at almost a divine status, in defining the knowledge, Allen emphasizes that technical mastery, agriculture, mastery in the use of equipment, and an ability to adapt one's understanding to the demands of the situation play a crucial role in the definition of knowledge. Within this framework, this paper aims to cover the role of culture and civilization in the construction of knowledge and evaluates the nature of Allen's definition of knowledge as a superlative artifactual performance.

**Keywords:** Knowledge, civilization, culture, Barry Allen.

## ÖZET

Kanadalı filozof Barry Allen, bilgiyi insan ürünü üstün performans olarak tanımlamaktadır ve bilen özneyi antik Yunan felsefesinin konumlandığındaki farklı bir noktaya konumlandırmıştır. Bilgiyi neredeyse ulaşılmaz ve ilahi bir konumda gören antik anlayışın aksine Allen, bilginin tanımında teknik uzmanlık, ziraat, alet kullanımında uzmanlık ve koşullara uygun olarak şekilde kavrayışın düzenlenmesi gibi unsurlara vurgu yapmıştır. Bu çerçevede içinde, çalışmanın amacı bilginin yaratılması sürecinde kültürün ve medeniyetin rolünün ortaya konulması çabasıdır. Ayrıca, yine bu bağlamda kültür ve medeniyet boyutlarıyla birlikte Allen'ın bilgi tanımı değerlendirilmektedir.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** Bilgi, medeniyet, kültür, Barry Allen.

Ancient Greek philosophy has left two opposing images of knowledge behind. According to Plato and Aristotle, knower possesses the image of a theoretical contemplator. In contemplation, we avert from the various issues of daily life toward a thought focusing on what is changeless and eternal. Rouse (2005, p.416) claims that “Barry Allen draws attention to another, while more ancient image of knowledge, expressed in the mythical and literary characters of Prometheus, Odysseus, and Oedipus”. In Allen’s case, knower plays a very different role and is rather more skillful and active. In contrast with the almost divine image of knowledge put forward by the ancient Greek philosophers, for Allen, technical mastery, agriculture, mastery in the use of equipment, and an ability to adapt one's understanding to the demands of the situation play a crucial role in the definition of knowledge. In this sense, Allen refutes the traditional definition of knowledge and believes that knowledge has nothing to do with truth, belief, and its justification. Allen (2018, p.3) suggests that “knowledge is not belief-plus anything and belief is not simpler than knowledge, nor it is a mental power in terms of which it would be appropriate to “analyze” knowledge”. Allen calls this an epistemological bias and says:

Partially for the proposition, and especially its truth, is such a bias. Knowledge – or the philosophically most important knowledge – has to be true. Since a proposition, as logic understands it, is simply whatever admits of evaluation as true or false, knowledge...has to be propositional – knowing that such-and-such is true. On my argument, knowledge embraces more than propositions, more than discursive knowledge of justified statements, more than anything language can say. Knowledge runs the range of artefacts, its domain no less than technical culture in its widest sense (Allen, 2018, p.3)

Knowledge for Allen is an artifact, and knowing is an artifactual performance. He begins his book “Knowledge and Civilization” with the question “What was epistemology?” to consider the art of knowledge as artifact or a characteristic product of human activity. The word artifact comes from the Latin; *arte* literally means “skill” and *factum* means “doing”. Therefore, Allen argues that an *arte-factum* is a skilled doing or performance, and its outcome (a product or a work). Allen defines knowledge as “superlative artifactual performance”. He claims that knowledge is artifactual since it exists through our acts alone. Knowledge has sort

of reality that artifacts such as a bridge or a power plant has. Knowledge is superlative since it is an accomplishment and can be found in superlative instances. Knowledge is desirable and worth cultivating since it brings enhancement to artifactual performance. Allen (2018, p.5) argues that civilizations, civility, cities, urbanism, and urbanization describe overlapping artifacts and history. Their appearance dramatically alters the place of knowledge in the human ecology. Cities are not simply sum of artifacts and accomplishment of knowledge; city life and urbanism change the practice, the whole ethos and economy of knowledge. Thus, according to Allen, cities and urbanization are the main source of all achievements in the knowledge. Although the culture of knowledge is older than the city, it has been irreversibly altered by the city and cannot exist without it. Thus, it can be said that Allen embraces an ecological view in the sense that he argues that knowing is directly linked with human evolution – civilization – clearly evidenced in the growth of cities and “urbanization of knowledge”. In Allen’s model, the evolution of knowledge is “the contingent and cultivation of aesthetic preference”, but the conditions under which knowledge exists change with urbanization and the development of civilization. To this extent, when the density of artifactual mediation rises sharply...knowledge tends to become technological (Fell, 2004, p.46).

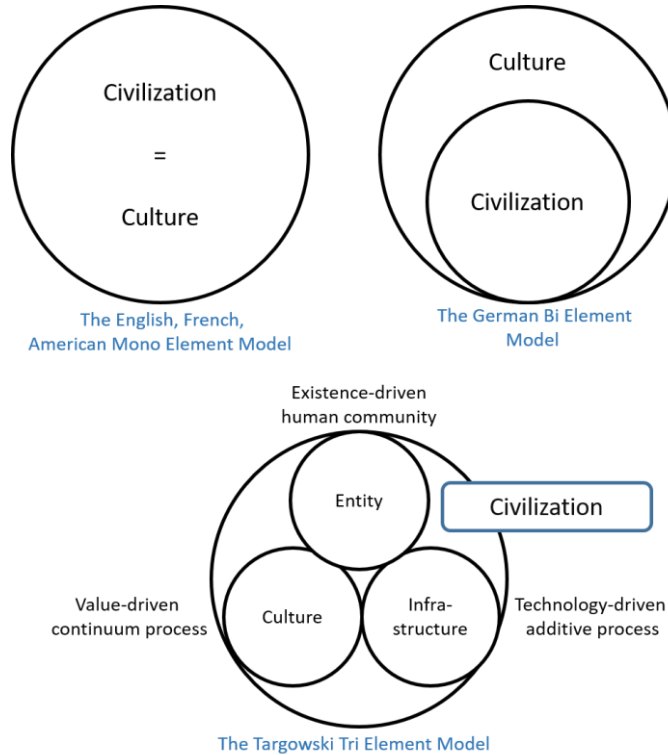
Within this context, it is important to define civilization. The concept of civilization came into existence only a few thousand years ago, and millions of years after the birth of human culture. Befu (1984, p.59) defines civilization as “an integration of all the physical equipment, devices and facilities built on land, as well as the entire culture transmitted in the society”. This transmission of culture may occur in a multidimensional way. All civilizations in the world are affected by the other civilizations’ cultures at different levels and in their long histories; they have been exposed to and to some extent accepted foreign cultural elements (Befu, 1984, p.61). On the other hand, it is important to distinguish civilization and culture. The term culture comes from a Latin origin of the word “*cultus*” that refers to cultivating or refining something, in such a way that it provides admiration and respect. Thus, culture is the way of our lifestyle and it is an expression of manner in which one thinks and do things. It could be said that the culture is the set of knowledge, experiences and behaviors and commonly shared by a group of people. Culture has three layers namely as the artifacts, espoused values and underlying assumptions. Within these three layers, culture includes

artifactual elements such as art, knowledge, festivals, and behaviors as well as less explicit elements such as beliefs, morals, and values. With all these layers and contents, culture is seen as the driving force or the "*meaning*" behind the network of formal relationships that we call society. In this sense, the concept of culture appears to be closely related to other over-all concepts in social science, such as Durkheim's "*conscience sociale*" or Sumner's "*folkways and mores*". Thus, as also mentioned by Allen, culture is everywhere where people exist (Cahnman, 1962, p.94).

On the other hand, civilization, as mentioned above, is derived from a Latin term "*civis*" whose meaning is "someone who resides in a town". The term "civilization" is not limited to town; it also refers to embracing better ways of living and making best possible use of natural resources. The reference here is to the increased consciousness of "the environment" in recent times, and the popularity of the ecological approach various disciplines of social sciences such as economics, sociology, philosophy, and anthropology. According to Kumar (2014, p.819), with Felipe Fernandez-Armesto's work "*Civilizations: Culture, Ambition, and the Transformation of Nature*", the ecological mode is welded to the civilizational. For Fernandez Armesto, a civilization is "a type of relationship to the natural environment, recrafted, by the civilizing impulse, to meet human demands" (Fernandez-Armesto, 2002, p.14). So civilizations can be understood as multiple attempts to reshape the natural environment in order to satisfy varying needs. Therefore, civilization is engaged to meeting the needs of the people. Further, "it stresses on systematizing society into various groups that work collectively and constantly to improve the quality of life, regarding food, education, dress, communication, transportation and other artifactual elements" (Pavlyshyn et al., 2019, p.237). At this point, parallel with the views of Allen, it is important to note that culture and civilization are quite different concepts. Pavlyshyn et al. (2019, p.237) implies that a "culture deserves to be called a -civilization- when it has reached a stage of advancement in which writing has come to be used to a considerable extent". Oswald Spengler, the German philosopher, viewed "civilizations" as decadent phases of highly developed cultures. Similarly, Allen (2018, p.219) suggests that culture occurs everywhere people exists, whereas civilization is a quality of culture peculiar to cities, where needs are explored and elaborated by pursuing and inventing possibilities of urban life. Alfred Weber distinguishes three elements in the experience of mankind: "social process, civilizational process, and cultural

movement”. According to Cahnman (1962, p.97) “social process shows itself in the network of interpersonal relations, but civilizational process remains utilitarian and materialistic in content and hence transferable and cumulative in nature, while culture is super-structural, ideational, unique, and creative. Although they are not referring to same concept, the two are seen as co-existent”. Similarly, in Nietzsche’s view, culture and civilization stand in tension with one another. In other words, they can neither be reduced to one another, nor reconciled. According to Nietzsche, civilization involved the denaturalization of the life instincts, as well as the de-intellectualization of culture. Nietzsche implies that “in pre-civilizational periods, the instincts of life were brutal, expansive and joyful. The advent of civilization did not so much re-channel and narrow the life instincts; it redefined them in a negative way, turning them inward against themselves and this redefinition occurred during the Greek enlightenment in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries BC, especially in the hands of Socrates” (Mennell and Rundell, 1998, p.15). Thus, for Nietzsche, civilization is synonymous with the invention of guilt and bad conscience during these periods (Mennell and Rundell, 1998, p.15). Although his views are much less aggressive against civilization compared to Nietzsche, Rousseau also holds a cynical view against civilization. Because, according to Rousseau, the development of manners and the increase of material welfare associated with civilization were obtained at a moral cost. Civilization corrupted the simple life. While there is no going backwards for Rousseau, we have enough and valid reasons to be critical toward the moral conditions introduced by the civilization. For some, civilization could be an enormous achievement of humanity; but for others it was at least “a double-edged sword”, where the gains could easily be surpassed by the losses. (Kumar, 2014, p.822). It seems like Allen has a much more positive view concerning civilization since he considers cities, civilization and urbanization as fertile grounds for arts and knowledge. Another opposite view against Nietzsche comes from Elias and Freud. Because according to them, when we remove culture or civilization to contemplate the naked human animal, we end up with an instinctual violence that culture must subdue. However, according to Allen (2018, p.228) “culture cannot be stripped away like layers of clothes to reveal the instinctual nature of the underlying animal. An unenculturated human being cannot exist”. However, in the recent models it seems like the direct relationship between the civilization and culture has been shifted. Figure 1.1. shows how this relationship has shifted among different approaches.

**Figure 1. Models of “Civilization” and “Culture”**



Source: Targowski, 2004, p.96

In the new Targowski Tri Element Model, civilization found in the German Bi Element Model was replaced by the Infrastructure. In the new model, each pillar has their own components. For instance, individual, family, ethnos, state, people, and etc. are the components of the “Entity” pillar. Second, knowledge, art, religion, language, etc. are the components of the “Culture” pillar. Finally, infrastructure that replaced civilization includes urban infrastructure, rural infrastructure, information infrastructure, knowledge infrastructure, etc. (Targowski, 2004, p97). With these categories, the relationship built between the infrastructure and civilization resembles what Allen understands from civilization. The main difference of the Targowski’s model with the *Mono Element* and *Bi Element* Model is that the Targowski’s new model is a more dynamic model compared to other static models concerning the concept of civilization. It also conforms to the new understanding of civilization that suggest that civilization and culture are different yet interconnected concepts.

As put forward by Allen, civilization is not of a condition or a finished state but of a process of becoming, in other words, a civilizing process. However, Kumar (2014, p.821) claims that “while the processual meaning of civilization gradually gave way to its meaning as a particular condition or state of being, the earlier meaning never entirely disappeared”. One of the most notable theories concerning the civilizing process was put forward by Norbert Elias. Elias’ book “The Civilizing Process” was first published in German in 1939. The book’s main purpose was to reveal how Europeans embraced the view that they were more civilized while others were barbaric or languishing in a savage past (Linklater and Mennell, 2010, p.385). Elias (1978) mainly interested in the sociology of the body and in the management of emotions. It is also important to note that Elias’ focus was also understanding the emergent potentials that exist in the ways in which humans are bound together (Linklater and Mennell, 2010, p.388). In Elias’ words, civilizing process change

the way in which people are bonded to each other. This is why their behavior changes, and why their consciousness and their drive-economy, and, in fact their personality structure as a whole, change. The circumstances which change are not something which comes upon men from outside; they are the relationships between people themselves (Elias, 1994, p.480)

According to Allen, this definition or understanding lacks certain points such as the urban artifacts that play an important role in building these relationships and consciousness. In consideration of the civilizing process, I think it is also important give credit to the radical rise in the introduction of new technologies as urban artifacts. Because the advancements in scientific technology have led us to greater achievements compared to the past. It would not be wrong to claim that our modern life is dominated by and under the influence of technologies as scientific art. Introduction of new technologies and the construction of new scientific knowledge are among the major driving forces behind civilization. Technology and scientific knowledge do not only cause shifts in the civilizing process, but they also have important impacts on the culture. Since the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially after the Industrial Revolution, Western civilization started heavily focusing on production and qualified engineering. Technical people including the engineers have become the major workers of knowledge and new creative cultural saviors of the Western civilization. They



made trains, aircrafts, automobiles, mobile phones, and many other countless technical artifacts. Spengler, a German historian and philosopher, kept these rapid technological advancements responsible for the society's loss of culture and its collapse into a machine civilization. In his book "*Man and Technic – Mensch und Technik*", Spengler (2015) refuses the idea that Western civilization introduces these new technologies for the sake and welfare of the people. Technology is rather developed and used to destroy the nature and play the God in a sterilized and machined environment. Spengler, although he has not written specifically in the area of aesthetics, thinks that aesthetics like culture is determined by a collective effort. As far as I understood from his views, he believes that aesthetics was also hold back in this race for technological advancement since it is not for the welfare of the people anymore. I have found that Spengler's approach to aesthetics in the artifacts is quite similar to that of Allen since he says:

Art and knowledge alike are rooted in aisthesis: prelogical preferences, prelinguistic sensitivity to felt differences; an aesthetic comprehension of performative possibilities conditioned by the ontogenetic interaction of neurology and artifactual ecology... It is generally true of any problem that those who feel it and need what knowledge does are able to recognize its accomplishment when they see it. I do not need to be able to say in advance and in interesting detail what makes a superior bridge or ship to appreciate that a given work is or is not done. (Allen, 2018, p.69)

Rise of the modern technologies has certainly changed the route of global civilization and the concept of knowledge. First of all, we could argue that, as Spengler suggested, introduction of modern technologies have led to the materialization of knowledge. Such developments also led to a sort of deterministic mechanism. In other words, as mentioned by Jacobs (2016, p.85), knowledge overlapped with predictability and certainty until the discovery of quantum mechanics.

As far as I understood, Allen is aware of this problem since he says:

It has been said that "progress in knowledge and power makes true civilization not easier but more difficult". Also that "knowledge is more effectively being used today to justify wrong than to prevent it". Administrative planning, modern architecture,

technoscientific agribusiness and medicine – the knowledge they mobilize and the disciplinary authority they wield over what counts as knowledge – would be impossible without an urban base (Allen, 2018, p.252)

It is clear that Allen has a more optimistic view concerning technologies as artifacts and as outcomes of scientific knowledge. Because he claims that cities, urbanization, and of course, urbanity and civility depend on sophisticated knowledge. In addition, he considers cities as accomplishments of knowledge that cannot be thought distinct from superior technical and artistic performance. Furthermore, this interdependence, technological development and, from my point of view, widely defined artifactual options and possibilities caused by the civilization and urbanity put cities in a distinctive position in regard to knowledge. Allen says:

The Stone-Age culture of Upper-Paleolithic Europe was the world's first great culture of knowledge and was at its height some 35,000 years before the first cities and civilizations. Yet when they do arrive, cities change the conditions of knowledge. Knowledge is, and is not, the same before and after the city. It is the same, because knowledge is superlative artifactual performance...whether practiced by prehistoric nomads or postmodern urbanists. Yet the conditions under which knowledge exists are changed with civilization. The density of artifactual mediation sharply rises and, as I shall say, knowledge tends to become technological [with a practically infinite density of artifacts interacting with other artifacts, and at the same time remodeling, with side effects and by-products, the physical and social environment in which they operate. (Allen, 2018, pp.88-89)

I agree with Allen in the sense that city and knowledge has an inseparable relationship. Knowledge can be considered as the main driving force behind the growth in a world where innovation and creativity are inevitable and these are currently and mainly possible in an urban setting or environment. Furthermore, as an integral output of knowledge, innovation has become an integral part of urbanization. In other words, urban setting, where knowledge activities occur continuously among people, has become tightly affiliated with the construction of knowledge and innovation. Therefore, we must accept that city itself offers a fertile ground for all sorts of knowledge activities. Allen's definition of knowledge as

“superlative artifactual performance” reminds me of the definition of innovation. Furthermore, I would not be hesitant to use the same definition for innovation since innovation is superlative, artifactual, and a performance. It is superlative because innovation must be totally or at least radically different from the existing practices. In other words, similar to Allen’s definition of superlativeness, innovation must be a best practice among other practices. Innovation is also artifactual because it is more than an idea or a mental act. Innovation is a solid outcome of creative thinking that delivers value for its users. It can be either a product, service or a process. Finally, innovation is absolutely a performance, an output of a series of processes, and a final result or outcome of creative and intelligent human behavior. It has been discussed since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that economic development and urban welfare cannot be possible without innovation or knowledge creation. New products, new services, new technologies, and new processes have become the defining characteristic of the industrial revolution. Thus, for urbanization and civilization, knowledge and innovation are two concepts intertwined with each other. I think the connection between these concepts are quite clear. The evolution of cities has led to the urbanization and civilization of the world. It can also be said that, especially after the World War II, as soon as the revival of the devastated cities began, cities contributed to the global environment, social life, and economy toward construction of knowledge, innovation, and, in return, wealth creation. Thus, I consider cities as the bedrock for knowledge creation, knowledge sharing, and innovation. Supporting this point of view, according to the United States Patent and Trademark Office, almost 95% of all patents granted to people living in the States are awarded to people living in the urban areas. Similarly, in their study, Wagner and Pavlik (2020, p.858) found that a vast majority protected innovations are done in urban areas. Furthermore, new products and services that include high levels of innovation and knowledge are launched by organizations located in larger cities while similarly new industries emerge mainly in urban settings. In short, when we think about knowledge creation, human capital, growth, and welfare, the role of the cities and urban settings in this picture is inescapable and cities are, themselves, could be considered as solid materials for innovation and knowledge construction.

However, at this point, I would like to suggest that although knowledge and innovation are closely linked and walks hand in hand, we could say that the knowledge is a “must” ingredient of innovation. In other words, knowledge is a crucial input of innovation. Thus, I

have serious doubts that whether both concepts must possess the same qualities or definitional parameters. In this case, I am critical about the use of word “*superlative*” in the definition of knowledge as an input. I think Allen is overloading the concept of knowledge by saying:

It is important that the performance be superlative, meaning not literally or uniquely the best, but of the best, among the best, at that rank. Knowledge, like art, can be found only in the best examples. Only superior performance necessarily implies knowledge. (Allen, 2018, p.62)

### **Conclusion**

The given definition by Barry Allen, from my standpoint, is in opposition with the widely accepted understanding of growth and knowledge creation process. By claiming that the knowledge can only be found in the best examples, overlooks the gradual or incremental advancements achieved in science and technology. Allen rejects to call counterproductive knowledge as knowledge. However, what I am trying to refer is not the counterproductive knowledge. What I am referring to is the learning process in the steps taken toward the construction of knowledge. A superlative performance would not be possible without trial and error. Allen’s open-ended list of examples concerning the superlative performances are the consequences of trials and errors. I think that each of these trials and errors serves as a step taken forward in the knowledge creation process while they, themselves, could be considered as *knowledge* toward a higher-order knowledge. Mobile phones, operating systems, and microprocessors are all solid examples of competence and knowledge enhancing innovations, and each step or building block in this knowledge construction process is itself *knowledge*. Thus, I think, defining knowledge as superlative, in other words, as the best among the best practices, strictly limits what we can call as knowledge and overlooks the creative and innovative process on the background that involves serious amount of knowledge.

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