Cultural area

A cultural area could be defined *a priori* as a geographical zone, most often of supra-national extent, and characterized by cultural elements such as language, religion, the family model, the lifestyle, the production style or the political structuring.

Bearing this definition in mind, what are the socio-cultural elements that characterize such an entity from another? How are delineations defined? Do cultural areas form a strict subdivision of the world space, or do they influence one another, do they overlap or even fit together? Is the areal approach still relevant in a world ever more structured by networks and connections, where the immediacy of communication tends to abolish distances?

This notion found its full meaning in the 20th century with the acceleration of globalisation, a systematic comparison of civilisations and the development of area studies after World War II. The study of cultural areas is necessarily multi-disciplinary and its links to strictly disciplinary approaches, following schools of thought and scientific policies, have varied enormously over time. The construction of the notion of the cultural area will be analysed here, as well as its evolution within the globalisation process and its contemporary scientific positioning.

-The construction of a spatial notion contrasting with the term civilisation

Cultural areas are variously distinguished from the notion of civilisation. According to Marcel Mauss, a civilisation is an area that exceeds nations and constitutes a sort of hyper-social system of social systems (1929). Fernand Braudel used the two terms indifferently in his *Grammaire des civilisations (*1963), whilst Joël Bonnemaison considered cultural areas as sub-entities of a civilisation (2001). Historically, the German idea of kultur, which gathers all the values of a people, is opposed to the French notion of civilisation as a universal outcome, where European civilisation was considered as the only superior civilisation in the 18th century (Bruneau, 2010). Ratzel defined cultural areas as a cultural circle (kulturkreis), following a dissemination logic from a given starting point (1882 and 1891).

Clark Wissler underlined the correspondences existing between geographical areas and cultural groups that share great homogeneity in lifestyles and mentalities (Kroeber, 1931). These characteristics result from a cultural dissemination, and, on the basis of geographical data, make a distinction between the area concerned and others. According to the geographer Carl Sauer, cultural landscapes are built on the superposition of several forms on physical landscapes (1926). He further developed Eduard Hahn's analyses (1897, 1909 and 1914), where plough-based agriculture (extending from China, Japan, and South-East Asia to Western Europe) was contrasted with hoe-based agriculture (from the mountains of South-East Asia and Indonesia to Oceania, Sub-Saharan Africa and America) and he also studied the origins of hoe-based agriculture. (1952).

Pierre Gourou completed his thesis on farmers in the Tonkin Delta in 1936 by publishing four years later a study on the cultural area of the Far East (1940), in which he set out to demonstrate its unity by the lowest common denominator: the agricultural and rural world, its landscapes, its lifestyle and its values on the scale of village communities. This intentionally a-chronic interpretation of the rural world recalls Marc Bloch's idea of the agrarian civilisation (1931). Pierre Gourou also underlined that China constituted the main origin of civilisation in the region, with Korean, Japanese or Vietnamese cultures as its sub-entities. His influence on Fernand Braudel's work and his historical study of world economies (1963 and 1979) were crucial. Following on from this, Samuel Eisenstadt carried out a study on civilisations in a comparatist perspective (2003).

The rise to power of the United-States and their omnipresence in the world during World War II and the Cold War encouraged the collection any data concerning the world's great regions. Area studies, which have been key elements for political and military action and have provided a multi-disciplinary approach in the social sciences – breaking in this respect with a European view that was initially more linguistic and literary (Edward Saïd, 1978) – have developed in American, and then European universities, and favour contemporary knowledge on the realities, the stakes and the protagonists in the cultural areas concerned (Szanton, 2004). Area studies have been unequally supported by their national institutions.

Cultural areas here extend beyond the scope of territories, putting more emphasis on the idea of outreach and influence based on a common cultural substrate, and they cannot be limited to political areas. Their scale is also superior to that of the large economic regions.

After a period of unpopularity, to the benefit of institutions of various disciplines and thematic approaches such as those of the *Centre National de Recherche Scientifique* (CNRS) from 1980 to 2000, studies based on cultural areas regained heuristic relevance in the 2010s in France. The CNRS thus adopted a scientific approach to the study of areas and created scientific interest groups concerning Africa, America, Asia, the Middle-East and the Muslim world generally, grouping the synergies, on a large regional scale, of the laboratories that had been initially structured according to disciplines or inter-disciplinary themes. The aim has been to reinforce the links between researchers working on the same area and to provide them, as research entities, with national, and especially international visibility. These synergies can also help to understand the complex transformations that are perceived, rightly or wrongly, as intertwined with geo-cultural realities as varied as terrorism, economic emergence or the re-definition of relationships with the environment.

-Have cultural areas become essential through the process of globalisation?

The creation of international institutions, such as the UN and its associated institutions, at the outcome of World War II led world states to commit to international programmes. Compounded with the acceleration of globalisation and the end of an ideological bipolar world in the 1980s, it gave large regional areas, defined on the basis of geographical proximity and cultural and historical internal coherence, the role of ensembles seen as essential to the articulation of the world space.

Beyond a capitalist and liberal viewpoint, fed by Western democracy values seeking to impose themselves as the only mode of development, globalised cultural worlds (Chaléard et Sanjuan, 2017) have become individualised beyond the former regional typologies. Although they reflect regional integration processes based on shared languages, values and histories, their re-composition is essentially based on contemporary economic and geo-political issues. The same applies to material and institutional integration in Europe, and commercial ties such as those linking countries in Mercosur or Asean. For eastern Asia, its integration into the world system, the maritime development of its economy and the coastal development of its national territories have enabled this ensemble to become a powerful regional area, without having been subjected to institutional integration. These evolutions have been today completed by development corridor projects on a national, international, even trans-continental scale.

They are also accompanied by new identity references. The stance taken by Singapore on "Asian values" in the 1990s promoted a cultural and regional model defined in opposition to [Western](#) values and lifestyles. Religious fundamentalism often defends conceptions of the world that clash with Western modern life, denounced as something that has been endured. The 1979 Islamic revolution was the cause of a profound religious and cultural transformation of Iranian society. Political life in India has been the scene of violent identity demonstrations. The so-called Islamic State has led bloody and barbaric actions in the name of a Muslim and Arab world.

Huntington's interpretation (1996) of the world according to regional subdivisions ([conflict](#)), where the main criteria are mostly religious-based, is however not really able to give an account of the complexity of cultural areas in a world that is today more and more reticular and connected. The current return to a multi-areal and multi-polar world, geo-politically sustained by the rise to power of China and the emerging countries in general, is also related to interdependence networks on various scales that go beyond – and outdate – the mere North-South distinction, also calling on structural links entertained by world metropolises one with another.

Finally, cultural areas are not – and have never been - homogenous. They are also made up of local cultures, of nested scales. Ultimately, as Amartya Sen (2007) recalls, the identity of an individual cannot be reduced to his or her religion. There is a plurality of identities that can be mobilised according to the moment and the context.

-Cultural areas : knowledge in the context of the planetarisation of the world

The post-modern approach and the "Southern turn" approach (Robinson, 2006) overturn the views on cultural areas, abandoning the West-centred positioning and placing the Western experience in the many trajectories with a cultural dimension. Modernity is no longer about the mere power relationships derived from the imperialisms of the past. It is also appropriated, re-shaped, produced and diffused by world poles that are outside the former industrialised countries. Cultural areas can no longer be the mere result of subdivisions decided on the basis of outside criteria, they are perceived via a comparative and therefore relative process, and demanded by the populations concerned – as well as by researchers in these areas. Thus we need to contextualise the production of our categories. Knowledge gained on the subject of cultural areas should from now on be repositioned in the context of

a planetarisation of knowledge, within "a history of the planetary outcome of histories" (Chevrier, 2008).

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