

What is cultural evolution in the work of F. A. Hayek?

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This paper relates to the work of Friedrich Hayek (1899-1992), a leading figure of contemporary liberalism. In a more circumscribed way, my goal is to clarify the discourse which this author develops about *cultural evolution*. Like the large majority of researchers – in anthropology, philosophy, sociology, etc. – Hayek distinguishes culture from *nature*. The Austrian thinker uses, more precisely, these two terms to describe human conduct. He stresses that some of our answers to the external world are innate, or instinctive, i.e. “closely connected with the infinite number of ‘conditioned reflexes’ which the human species had to acquire in the course of its evolution” (1942 : 274). These can be called *natural*. A second, major, component of human behavior is not innate but is acquired after birth. It forms this part of us who is *cultural*, or *civilized*.

I will aim in this paper to understand which reality Hayek describes by the expression “*evolution of culture*”. Such a comprehension is necessary because Hayek ascribes to cultural evolution many positive properties: He considers it essential to the progress of humanity. But in order to appreciate the *relevance* or not of this last proposition, it is necessary, of course, to understand correctly the *meaning of the terms* which constitute it. However, I think that, among the various researchers who have commented on the work of Hayek, many misread him on this point: According to these criticisms, Hayek describes as cultural evolution *any change, any transformation, of cultural practices in one or more human groups, whatever the context* in which it is achieved. Thus, according to this interpretation, *everything that happens* in the cultural history of human beings, at every moment, *under any conditions*, belongs to what Hayek calls “evolution”. And since the Austrian thinker underlines the virtues of this evolution, he should consequently declare efficient – and thus accept – all its outcomes, even when they are not libertarian.

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I think that this reading of Hayek is false, because the concept of cultural evolution that Hayek exposes in his work, in particular in *The Constitution of Liberty*, describes a much more restricted reality: A modification of cultural practices is an evolution in Hayek's sense only if (1) it emerges *under certain conditions* and that (2) its content, i.e. its operating process, *conforms to these conditions*. These conditions are summarized in the concept of *freedom*, or *sovereignty*, which Hayek defines as absence of *coercion*.

As such, this interpretation enables us to understand why Hayek insists so much on the topic of cultural evolution while the only goal of his work is, as everyone knows, to demonstrate the merits of *liberalism*. In fact, when the Austrian thinker considers cultural evolution necessary to the progress of humanity, the reader must understand that this evolution is conditioned by *liberal* rules.

In order to prove the cogency of my reading, it seems essential to me to present, first, certain aspects of the *economic* thought of Hayek. This first stage is necessary because, by studying the market and its opposite, socialism, Hayek develops several key ideas which will directly influence his way of theorizing cultural evolution. In particular, in this study, the Austrian thinker advances arguments against *organization*, in favor of *economic* evolution, and affirms that the course of this evolution necessarily requires a non-coercive context. In the second part of my paper, I will show that cultural evolution is considered by Hayek in the same way, i.e. not as unstructured, but shaped by a liberal condition of non-coercion.

I – Organization and evolution in economics

In the 1930s, Hayek is involved in a debate with Taylor (1929), Dickinson (1933) and Lange (1936), about the possibilities of socialism. This controversy is very important, because this represents the first opportunity for Hayek to compare in details the operation of the market system and of central planning. From this moment, Hayek will conceive economic activity according to the alternative: evolution or organization, and will endeavor to demonstrate the superiority of the former over the latter, as a solution to the economic problem.

A – Organization

To achieve this, the Austrian author must, of course, first explain what the nature of the problem is according to him. His two papers published in *Collectivist Economic Planning* (1935) contain a recognition of this reality, described especially by Carlyle, that is the *scarcity of resources*. As noted by Kozinski and Schizer (1994), “economics, you will recall, has been called the ‘dismal science’ because it is about trying to satisfy unlimited wants with limited means” (1994 : 438). Hayek regards this matter as the main economic problem, that all societies must face. Since the quantity of available resources is not sufficient to satisfy all individuals’ desires, the goal is to find the most effective, the most resource-efficient regime, to bring about the widest possible satisfaction of needs. The performance of that task requires, of course, knowing what to produce with the available resources, which goods and services are desired, or *valued*, by the various members of society. The challenge is, therefore, according to Hayek, to create a maximum amount of value: “The omnipresence of this problem of value wherever there is rational action was the basic fact from which a systematic exploration of the forms, under which it would make its appearance under different organizations of economic life, could proceed” (1935a : 24).

Hayek thinks that a socialist regime is a very inefficient solution, for two reasons. Firstly, value derives from satisfaction, or utility, that a person obtains from a consumption bundle. This subjective conception of value is, according to Hayek, “one of the most important advances of social theory” (1941a : 22). And it implies that, to create a maximum of value, a socialist society must know the preferences of its members. It must, therefore, opt for a *democratic choice*. But such a procedure cannot create a lot of value, because it suppresses consumer’s *sovereignty* or *freedom*. In such a system, in fact, no one possesses a “reserved area”, or a private sphere, to adopt an expression used by Mill (1859), in which a person should be able to choose – e.g., which movie to watch this weekend, which kind of clothes to buy, etc. Each consumer is constrained in his choices by the obligation to come to an agreement with his fellows – by a simple or a qualified majority, or even unanimously, depending on the decision rule. Because of this forced compromise, the bundle of goods and services finally adopted would be far from reflecting the wishes of consumers. Except in exceptional circumstances as war, it is simply impossible, Hayek observes, that such a common bundle corresponds to individual preferences: “Central economic planning, which is

regarded as necessary to organize economic activity on more rational and efficient lines, presupposes a much more complete agreement on the relative importance of the different social ends than actually exists.² Therefore, in order to be able to plan the planning authority must impose upon the people that detailed code of values which is lacking” (1938 : 178).

The inefficiency of socialism is also a consequence of a second feature of economic reality, that all societies must face: the division of knowledge.³ This is a natural fact, which is a result of some cerebral and spatial limits of all human beings: *No one can be omniscient; each member of society possesses only small bits of knowledge.* This reality prevents socialism from creating a lot of value.

The information that is required to create value is, firstly, consumers’ preferences – this is the *qualitative* part of the economic problem: *What* to produce with the available resources. But the information also includes the best, i.e. the cheapest production methods, those which allow the largest possible production – this is the second, *quantitative*, part of the problem: “The question whether we have more or less to consume, whether we are to maintain or to raise our standard of life, or whether we are to sink back to the state of savages always on the edge of starvation, depends mainly on how we use our resources” (1935*b* : 216).

Economic knowledge, Hayek writes, is *local*, i.e. it concerns circumstances of time and place : “The knowledge which is significant here is not so much knowledge of general laws, but knowledge of particular facts and the ever-changing circumstances of the moment – a knowledge which only the man on the spot can possess” (1941 : 214). According to Hayek, the issue that should be addressed by the economist is thus to know how *non-omniscient* individuals can exploit a maximum of useful knowledge to create value: “The problem of securing an efficient use of our resources is ... very largely one of how that knowledge of the particular circumstances of the moment can be most effectively utilized” (1944*a* : 37).

A good method is not socialism, according to Hayek. In such a system, in fact, the global bundle of goods and services is produced *centrally*: The economy is organized like a giant

² In making this argument, Hayek anticipates Arrow’s theorem, formulated in 1951. This theorem affirms that it is impossible to make a collective decision which reflects individual preferences. This has been noted by Vaughn (1994*a* : 123) and Boettke (1995 : 20) in a brief note, and by Boettke and Leeson (2002) in a whole paper.

³ Several commentators, including Hoy (1984), have noted this duality of the economic problem in Hayek’s thought: “Two terms in Hayek’s vocabulary are extremely important for understanding his economic doctrines”, Hoy writes. These terms are: “knowledge (or information) and agreement” (1984 : 34).

company, directed by a planning board, which owns the available resources. This board plans the production for the whole population. Each member of society is then engaged in a cooperative with a specific task: “The concrete action of the different individuals, the part each person is to play in the social process of production – what he is to do and how he is to do it – is decided by the planning agency” (1939 : 9).

Later on in his work, Hayek specifies his terminology about this form of economic arrangement: “Such an order which is achieved by *arranging* the relations between the parts according to a preconceived plan we call in the social field an *organization*” (1963 : 4). A feature, which is important for my paper, of a socialist organization is the situation of the individuals on it, namely: *coercion*. In Hayek’s thought, this term, which is the contrary of *freedom*, designates “such control of the environment or circumstances of a person by another that, in order to avoid greater evil, he is forced to act not according to a coherent plan of his own but to serve the ends of another” (1960: 20). I have shown above that in socialism, consumer’s freedom is absent. It is also necessarily the case of producer’s freedom: If each entrepreneur was allowed to choose his activity, the global bundle of goods and services would not correspond to the bundle prescribed by the plan. In a socialist society, producers are thus necessarily constrained elements, who act for the planning board: “The individual would more than ever become a mere means, to be used by the authority in the service of such abstractions as the ‘social welfare’ or the ‘good of the community’” (1944*b* : 72).

An important consequence of this situation is that society will make a very inefficient use of knowledge. Let us assume, e.g., that the detailed code of values of the plan contains 100.000 watches. To produce them most efficiently requires knowing the best production methods. In other terms, Hayek says, the goal is to find the manufacturing method in such a way that “as many resources as possible should be left over for other purposes”, that is, for the production of the others goods and services (1935*a* : 6). This undertaking seems, *prima facie*, achievable. In fact, it is enormous. The planning board must know: the best production method of glass, enamel, leather, dial, the most qualified staff for these tasks, etc. But the achievement of these tasks also requires, in turn, knowing the best machines and tools to employ, which makes it necessary to know how to produce them efficiently, where are the raw materials: iron, copper, oil, and so on and so forth.

An efficient performance of the plan would have to satisfy this objective for all the goods and services: food, housing, clothing, furniture, pens, etc.⁴ It is certain, Hayek argues, that “the mere assembly of these data is a task beyond human capacity” (1935*b* : 211). Therefore, a socialist organization can create only little value. To sum up, it is a bad solution to the two parts, qualitative and quantitative, of the economic problem, as Vaughn (1999) highlights: “Only the coercive powers of a dictator can bring about the necessary “agreement” about ranked goals that permit the plan to be fulfilled. Even worse, this spurious agreement will still not achieve the planners ends because knowledge is limited and fragmented” (1999 : 135).

B - Evolution

Unlike socialism, an economy based on the *market* is, according to Hayek, an efficient method to create value. For the qualitative part, the market enables the production of goods and services in accordance with individual preferences. In this system, in fact, each consumer is *free*, or *sovereign*. This situation is a part of an *evolutive* economy. To make this clarification is important for the second part of my paper: As will be shown further on, consumer’s sovereignty is also the hall-mark of *cultural* evolution. In the economic domain, this sovereignty is ensured by a *private sphere*, in which “the individual’s system of ends should be supreme and not subject to any dictation by others” (1944*b* : 44). For instance, if a person chooses to write with a silvery pen rather than with a black pen, he or she will have promoted one brand as against another. Her choice has thus a social aspect. But it is her preference, society must respect it. As Barry (1979) says, “no individual can be outvoted in an economic market” (1979 : 186). Each person can thus consume the goods and services which he or she desires, which allows creating much more value than in socialism.

⁴ Regarding this last example, Kozinski and Schizer (1994) quote a significant passage of Read’s paper (1958), *I, Pencil*: “I, Pencil, am a complex combination of miracles: a tree, zinc, copper, graphite, and so on. But to these miracles which manifest themselves in Nature an even more extraordinary miracle has been added: the configuration of creative human energies—millions of tiny know-hows configuring naturally and spontaneously in response to human necessity and desire and in the absence of any human master-minding! Since only God can make a tree, I insist that only God could make me. Man can no more direct these millions of know-hows to bring me into being than he can put molecules together to create a tree” (1958 : 36). In a socialist organization, however, coordination by the top would have necessarily to take place.

For the quantitative part, then, Hayek shows that the market resolves much more effectively than socialism the problem of the division of knowledge, and thus enables a great abundance of goods and services. In a market system, the creation of these goods and services is *decentralized*. Each person can – in a legal sense – engage in a productive activity. This *producer's freedom* is, with consumer's sovereignty, the hall-mark of an *evolutive* economy. The one great advantage of that is, Hayek writes, that each person can “make full use of *his* knowledge and skills” (1946 : 14). This does not mean that all members of society will, *de facto*, use all their knowledge but that, thanks to the market, those who have the best knowledge, in different domains, will be *selected*.

In order to make this fact more understandable, let us take the example of the production of watches again. The goal of all producers is to make the maximum of profit. The achievement of this objective requires producing at the lowest possible cost, in order to sell a good at a low price. But this task, in turn, requires the best knowledge in the production of the good, because those who do not meet that condition will be driven out of business by those who meet it. In the case of the production of watches, those who know best how to produce glass will be selected, as well as the best producers of enamel, leather, and dial, of the machines and tools, and the best extractors of the raw materials.

A market economy allows this situation, Hayek observes, because it is based, contrary to socialism, on *competition*: “The force which in a competitive society brings about the reduction of price to the lowest cost at which the quantity salable at that cost can be produced is the opportunity for anybody who knows a cheaper method to come in at his own risk and to attract customers by underbidding the other producers” (1940 : 139).

My reference to the concept of competition requires detailed comments, because a correct interpretation of this term is indispensable to understand the notion of *economic evolution*. In a broad sense, competition refers to a rivalry, between people or groups of people. But when Hayek underlines the advantages of evolution as a solution to the economic problem, his notion of competition designates, of course, a much more restricted reality: A rivalry is an evolution only if it operates *under certain conditions*. As I have already said, these conditions are summarized in the concept of *freedom*, of both the consumer and the producer. To make this clarification allows excluding some alternative interpretations: For instance, an *anarchic*

– i.e. *unconditional* – economic competition is not an evolution in Hayek’s sense. The importance of this fact will be shown in the second part of my paper.

Although this idea is seldom explicitly stated by Hayek, it is clear that anarchic competition is, according to him, a bad solution to the economic problem.⁵ To demonstrate this, it is relevant to use Buchanan’s analysis, since this author has investigated far more thoroughly than Hayek this kind of competition. An anarchic economy, Buchanan (1962) writes, is characterized by a complete institutional vacuum, so that “trade can, obviously, take place, but, also, one individual can defraud the other, can rob the other of his possessions, can even make the other his slave if he is able to exert sufficient physical force” (1962 : 345). This kind of competition is, in fact, that which Hobbes describes in his book *Leviathan* (1651) and which he calls “war of all against all”.

In such a context, Buchanan (1975) observes, each individual seeks to maximize his own welfare, recognizing that, in Hayek’s terms, *coercion* is possible. It is therefore likely, according to Buchanan, that each individual, to satisfy his own needs, will devote his efforts to producing goods from the natural resources at his disposal, but also to stealing the goods produced by the others and to protecting his own goods against potential attackers: “The presence of B may prompt A to devote effort, a bad, to concealing hoards, and to defending and protecting these hoards from predation by B”. On the other hand, “if B is known to be producing, and storing, goods, A may find that locating and taking these stocks from B is more productive than producing similar goods on his own” (1975 : 56).

For reasons easy to understand, this kind of competition is inefficient: Since coercion is always possible, individuals are not strongly encouraged to use their knowledge to create value. In a market economy, the producer of glass is protected against coercion. As Hayek says, “he can act without having to fear that anybody will interfere with his plans” (1956 : 690). He can, therefore, apply what he knows in his domain, i.e., he can achieve maximum productivity, and realize a maximum of profit. The suppliers of enamel, of leather, etc., have the same goal. Ultimately, the producer of watches will have bought all these intermediate

⁵ As Dietze (1979) observes, “although freedom is the predominant value in Hayek’s social thought, Hayek is not inclined toward anarchy” (1979 : 80). The state is necessary to enforce some rules of the market, because, Hayek writes, “it would be in the interest to each individual to disregard them” (1963 : 8). These rules are a *public good*, as Baumgarth (1978 : 13), Heath (1989 : 110) and Perkin (1990 : 498) say. And in the absence of a state, no one has, individually, an incentive to respect them. According to me, Hayek describes here a prisoner’s dilemma kind of situation. It is also the opinion of Arnold (1980 : 350), Vanberg (1986 : 96) and Voigt (1992 : 471).

products from the best and most qualified people. And the final good, which will contain all this knowledge, will create value, since it will be bought – thus desired – by consumers.

However, in an anarchic economy, this division of labor and this use of knowledge are disturbed by coercion. In this context, the owners of glass, leather, etc., are not necessarily the best producers. They can be the strongest individuals, the most courageous, or the craftiest. A crucial sort of knowledge comes into play: military intelligence. It is, in a large part, the best people in this domain that will be selected. Nevertheless, this sort of knowledge is not productive of goods and services desired by (civilian) consumers. Moreover, it is certain that there will be far fewer exchanges in this kind of society.

That being said, a second possible interpretation of the concept of competition must also be rejected: that of *democratic competition*. This kind of rivalry is, according to Hayek, an inefficient solution to the economic problem. Unlike anarchic competition, it should be noted that democratic competition is not unconditional, since it takes place in a specific institutional context: that of the ballot box. In this context, of course, not every action is possible. Rivalry must operate without physical violence, by means of *voting*. However, when it is not *limited* by a constitution, this kind of competition, in certain aspects, looks like the anarchy described above.

It is this *unlimited* democracy that Hayek considers as inefficient. In fact, the private sphere of each individual, which is guaranteed in a market economy, enjoys no such guarantee in this kind of competition. This sphere is, Hayek observes, constantly threatened by popular vote: “The omnipotent and omnicompetent single democratic assembly, in which a majority capable of governing can maintain itself only by trying to remove all sources of discontent of any supporter of that majority, is thereby driven to take control of all spheres of life” (1979 : 138). Let us assume, e.g., that a majority agree that companies must pay a tax of 50 per cent on their profits. This means that the producers of glass, enamel, leather, etc., are no longer complete owners of their resources: One half of their profit is now handed over to the collectivity, and this sum will be redistributed to various individuals.

This description shows how democratic competition shares a common ground with anarchy: the ongoing possibility of expropriation – at least partial. Of course, the means are different – physical violence in one case, and voting in the other. But this possibility also discourages the individuals from using their knowledge to create value. In fact, Hayek says, “in such a

society, to have political pull becomes much more rewarding than adding to the means of satisfying the needs of one's fellows" (1979 : 138). Part of the knowledge which, in a market economy, is devoted to value-generating activities, is, in democratic competition, wasted on unproductive ones. In anarchy, unproductive activities are military, in democratic competition, they are mainly lobbyist. In this context, the people who are selected, those who are the best remunerated, are not necessarily the best producers. They are the persons who are the better organized to influence government: "Such claims will in fact be met only when such groups are large enough to count politically and especially when it is possible to organize their members for common action" (1976 : 142).

On the quantitative level, it is, according to Hayek, certain that this kind of competition is inefficient. Since it endangers the private sphere of individuals, these individuals are not incited to be the most efficient possible in the production of goods and services: "Wealth just would not be there or would rapidly disappear if the ordering by the principles of the market that now guide its production were replaced by some others which would give to each that to which he imagines himself to be entitled" (1983 : 93).

My classification of these various kinds of competition is, at this stage, sufficient for the remainder of my paper. To conclude this first section, it should be noted that market economy is also described by Hayek as evolutive for a second reason: The outcome of this economy is, at every moment, *unexpected*. Hayek uses the adjective "*spontaneous*" to express this idea: "The spontaneous actions of individuals will under conditions which we can define bring about a distribution of resources which can be understood as if it were made according to a single plan, although nobody has planned it" (1937 : 52). I have, in fact, already mentioned this idea, by saying that in a market economy, producer's freedom is allowed because the production is unplanned. It is therefore obvious that in these conditions, the global bundle of goods and services, as well as the retributions and consumptions of each individual, can only be unexpected.

However, and this is the most important thing, the unexpected character of a competitive outcome *is not sufficient* to make competition an evolution in Hayek's sense. According to me, unpredictability is a necessary *but not sufficient* condition: To be evolutive, competition must operate in a liberal, non-coercive framework. This clarification is crucial to understand Hayek's work. It prevents some misinterpretations that various authors seem to make, e.g.

Gray (1980) and (1982), Dube (1990) and Voigt (1992). According to their reading, Hayek judges all the unexpected outcomes of human action to be efficient. And since democratic competition does produce – like market economy – this kind of results, Hayek should also approve them.⁶

With this wide interpretation, it is quite normal that Voigt (1992 : 466) finds it strange that Hayek is critical of the democratic competition. But this interpretation is false. There are numerous examples where Hayek explicitly looks at the *harms* of some *unexpected consequences* of human action. As Lepage (1980 : 431) and Schmidtchen (1987 : 118) rightly state, Hayek devotes an entire book to this topic: *The Road to Serfdom*. In its first chapter, Hayek observes that “the pursuit of some of our most cherished ideals has apparently produced results utterly different from those which we expected” (1944b : 8).

The results Hayek refers to are collectivists. According to him, democratic competition unexpectedly produces an interventionist spiral: “The more governments try to realize some preconceived pattern of desirable distribution, the more they must”, Hayek writes, “subject the position of the different individuals and groups to their control” (1976 : 68). But to protect it from this result, as Brough and Naka (1985 : 85) as well as Baird (1989 : 226) state, societies must not abolish competition but modify its *institutional context*, context which can be summarized in the liberal rule of non-coercion: “The powers of the majority”, Hayek says, “must be limited to the enforcement of such general rules as will prevent the individuals from encroaching on the protected domains of their fellows” (1979 : 76).

The reader must keep this idea in mind to properly understand the Hayekian theory of *cultural* evolution. The cultural theme, in fact, seems to me to be thought by Hayek in the same way as the economic one. That is what my second part will endeavor to show.

⁶ In unlimited democracy, Gray (1980) observes, “a specific distribution of forces emerges which no one intended” (1980 : 129). But since this outcome is, in this case, inefficient, Gray (1982) describes it as a “spontaneous disorder” (1982 : 57). The comment of Dube (1990) is similar: “While he (Hayek) seems to assume that spontaneous orders – *the results of human action but not of human design* – are naturally benign, the spontaneous growth of sinister interests in government argues against their necessarily being so” (1990 : 87).

II – Cultural evolution

In what follows, I will argue that a cultural competition possesses, according to Hayek, many positive properties, but only if it operates within a certain context, allowing an evolution. We will eventually see that, as in economics, an unexpected outcome cannot be described as evolutive if it does not occur in – and does not respect – liberal conditions.

A – Evolution as a solution to the cultural problem

Before demonstrating the advantages of cultural evolution, Hayek must, of course, explain which efficiency standard seems to him to be relevant. According to my reading, cultural evolution is efficient, in Hayek's sense, because it creates a lot of value. And this notion must be, as in economics, understood in subjective terms. That is, a thing has value only if it is *desired* by one or several persons. Having clarified this norm, Hayek thinks that a cultural competition, shaped by a liberal condition of non-coercion, is an effective system.

Unlike *economic* competition, it should be noted that *cultural* competition does not generate a global bundle of goods and services but a set of traditions: ways of doing things, ideas, and skills, institutions and habits, tools. Often, Hayek summarizes these cultural practices by the term “*rules of conduct*”, knowing that these rules are not innate but learned: “The term ‘rule’ is used for a statement by which a regularity of the conduct of individuals can be described, irrespective of whether such a rule is ‘known’ to the individuals in any other sense than that they normally act in accordance with it” (1967 : 67).

To explain the evolutionary thesis of Hayek, it is relevant to separate, as in the previous section, the – now cultural – problem in two parts. On the qualitative level, a competition creates a lot of value only if it guarantees consumer's sovereignty, so that each person can – in a legal sense – live as she wishes. However, since cultural evolution does not concern goods and services but *rules of conduct*, the word “consumer” may seem inappropriate. For this reason, I will rather use the concept, notably used by Vanberg (2000), of *citizen's* sovereignty.

Although it is rarely explicit, Hayek suggests that this sovereignty is a part of cultural evolution. This can be discerned when Hayek affirms that “it is this flexibility of voluntary rules which makes gradual evolution and spontaneous growth possible” (1958 : 236). This idea is made clearer in the famous postscript of *The Constitution of Liberty*, where Hayek disapproves conservatism on various topics, including imperialism: “The more a person dislikes the strange and thinks his own ways superior, the more he tends to regard it as his mission to “civilize” others – not by the voluntary and unhampered intercourse which the liberal favors, but by bringing them the blessings of efficient government” (1960 : 406). These passages are important,⁷ because they contradict many commentators, who understand cultural competition in Hayek’s work to be *unconditional*, i.e. anarchic, and thus potentially aggressive. I will discuss this interpretation in more detail below.

For the moment, let us emphasize the importance of these passages. They prove that when Hayek discusses the cultural theme, he reasons as in economics. In other parts of his work, Hayek also highlights the notion of citizen’s sovereignty, analogous to consumer’s sovereignty, by mentioning *imitation* of rules of conduct,⁸ or, sometimes, individual *migration*.⁹ This reading of Hayek allows us to understand that, according to this author, cultural evolution creates value, provided that rules of conduct are not *imposed* upon citizens: “In a society whose members were still free to choose their way of practical life...” (1958 : 239). In this bit of sentence, we find the expression of one condition necessary, from the point of view of the liberal Hayek, for cultural competition: non-coercion.¹⁰

⁷ My first quotation – which dates from 1958 but which is repeated in *The Constitution of Liberty* – is quite well known. It is mentioned by Vanberg (1991), Heath (1992) and Gaus (2006). This is not the case, however, for the second one, which is rarely quoted in the secondary literature. It seems to me, however, clearer than the first one, since it explicitly disapproves imperialism.

⁸ In cultural evolution, Hayek says, “the decisive factor is not the selection of the physical and inheritable properties of the individuals but the selection by imitation of successful institutions and habits” (1958 : 233). For a comment on this point, see Manin (1983), Steele (1987), Heath (1989) and Dupuy (1992) and (1996).

⁹ Migration – which is mentioned by Gray (1984 : 77), Nadeau (2003) and Witt (2008) – is rarer in Hayek’s work. It is found maybe for the first time in *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, where Hayek says that traditions have spread “because some practices enhanced the prosperity of certain groups and led to their expansion, perhaps less by more rapid procreation than by the attraction of outsiders” (1979 : 159).

¹⁰ We can also quote this extract of the third chapter of *The Constitution of Liberty*: “Those people may not wish to adopt our entire civilization, but they certainly want to be able to pick and choose from it whatever suits them” (1960 : 51), as well as its fifth chapter: see Hayek (1960 : 79). Gissurason (1987) is among the first commentators to have noticed the existence of this sovereignty in the Hayekian cultural evolution – see (1987 : 65) and, also, Vanberg (1991), Petroni (1995) and Macedo (1999).

Then, on the quantitative level, cultural evolution allows, according to Hayek, for the creation of value. Hayek's thought here is very close to his economic thought. To demonstrate the merits of cultural evolution, Hayek again stresses the *division of knowledge*. However, since the problem is no longer economic but cultural, the character of this division is modified. It is no longer a question of the best utilization of resources and raw materials in the production of goods and services (e.g., machines, tools, glass, enamel, leather, etc., in the case of watches). It concerns now the best rules of conduct, the best cultures.

According to Hayek, this knowledge is divided because no one is able to construct a set of efficient rules by logical deductions: "The conception of man deliberately building his civilization stems from an erroneous intellectualism that regards human reason as something standing outside nature and possessed of knowledge and reasoning capacity independent of experience" (1960 : 24). Admittedly, it was possible for man in Neolithic times, e.g., to observe what was happening around him and to succeed in making a tool, a weapon, and other things which made his life much easier. But it is completely erroneous to think that this same man could have invented, by a deduction of the "premises-consequences" type, the rules of conduct which exist in our societies today. And this truth applies both to primitive man and to modern man. Hayek (1966) agrees with Mandeville's view of laws and regulations: "Among the things I hint at, there are very few that are the work of one man, or of one generation; the greatest part of them are the product, the joint labor of several ages" (1705 : 493).

We can see therefore that the cultural problem is, according to Hayek, similar to its economic counterpart, since its solution requires overcoming human ignorance.¹¹ Once again, the solution suggested by Hayek is competition which he considers to be efficient because the search for good social rules is *decentralized*. Each person can – in a legal sense – create his or her own rules. This *producer's freedom* is, as in economics, a necessary condition of evolution: "It is in fact often desirable that rules should be observed only in most instances,

¹¹ It is relevant to use an image of Buchanan and Vanberg (1991), by saying that the problem of economic ignorance is *vertical* – how to find the best information for the resources allocation *in given rules* – while the problem of cultural ignorance is *vertical* – how to know the best rules. The separation of these two plans is important in Buchanan's work. It is more often implicit in Hayek's thought, but significant also: See, e.g., Hayek (1960 : 37) and, for a comment, Crowley (1987 : 62), Baird (1989 : 227) and Voigt (1992 : 471).

and that the individual should be able to transgress them when it seems to him worthwhile to incur the odium which this will cause” (1958 : 236).

As in economics, this producer’s freedom does not mean that all people will, *de facto*, use all their knowledge but that, over the decades and centuries, the best rules of conduct will be *selected*. Thus, Hayek states, the members of a human group will observe rules which will have proved their worth in the course of a long cultural competition, rules which will “embody the experience of many more trials and errors than any individual mind could acquire” (1965 : 6).

This selection of cultures operates spontaneously, i.e. unexpectedly. In Hayek’s work, the term “spontaneous order” therefore designates two different realities. The first is about the production of goods and services, *via* economic competition, within given rules, whose global content is not planned by anyone. The second is about the production of rules, *via* cultural competition, whose outcome is equally unexpected. This is what Hayek calls a cultural evolution: “The evolutionists”, Hayek observes, “made it clear that civilization was the accumulated result of a hard school of trial and error” (1958 : 233). Hayek refers here to the Scottish Enlightenment thinkers, such as Ferguson (1767). The major contribution of these philosophers is in showing “that an evident order which was not the product of a designing human intelligence need therefore not be ascribed to the design of a higher, supernatural intelligence, but that there was a third possibility – the emergence of order as the result of adaptive evolution” (1958 : 232).

As in my first section, it is important to clarify the meaning of the word competition in this context. I have said above that this term refers, for Hayek, to a *conditional* rivalry – to use the vocabulary of Arnold (1980) and Vanberg (1994). That is, it is structured by a rule of non-coercion. My paper therefore excludes other possible interpretations made by many commentators according to which the rivalry recommended by Hayek would be unconditional. It is now the moment to comment on this interpretation in detail in order to show why I consider it to be false.

B – Disapprobation of unconditional competition

In unconditional competition, by definition, anything goes. In this context, liberal rules are not a *condition*, which shapes the course of cultural evolution, since there is no condition. They are simply a particular culture, which competes with others, in an anarchic manner.¹² Such an interpretation means that *everything that happens* in the cultural history of human beings is an act which is a part of this competition. Since the nature of these acts may be, of course, many and varied, I will give only two examples.

Firstly, a human group can invade another by force, and thus, in Hayek's term, use *coercion*. Hayek talks at various times about this kind of competition, e.g. in *The Road to Serfdom*, when he distinguishes between “powerful and armed states, subject to no superior law” and “the rivalries which between individuals had to be decided without recourse to force” (1944b : 164). One can observe that Hayek disapproves this kind of competition. His sentence about imperialism, quoted above, proves it alone. However, it is useful to complete it, by explaining in more details which are the harmful consequences of an aggressive cultural rivalry.

When producers of rules compete within a liberal framework, each of them can focus on attempts of innovation, without fear of coercion. Throughout these trials, human beings discover – often unconsciously – the successful rules, i.e. rules which form an *order of actions* which serve their interests best. These rules are thus, Hayek observes, adopted by various groups, because they create *value* for their members: “The existing order of actions will in the first instance simply be a fact which men count on and will become a value which they are anxious to preserve only as they discover how dependent they are on it for the successful pursuit of their aims” (1973 : 104).

However, in an anarchic competition, rules can be *imposed*, and therefore infringe on sovereignty, both of citizen and of producer. Part of the individual knowledge which, in unconditional competition, is devoted to value-generating activities, is, in unconditional competition, wasted on unproductive ones. The success of a set of rules is thus no longer a

¹² It is with such an understanding of competition that Miller (1976) affirms that “Western civilization is but one of many traditions of mankind” (1976 : 392), and that Gray (1980), by the same token, distinguishes cultural competition “against the background of a liberal order” and “competition *between* political orders” (1980 : 128).

clear proof of value, since it is, above all, the military competent groups which survive.¹³ Moreover, if, as some commentators think, Hayek recommended this kind of competition, then his apology of the market would be inconsistent, since he stresses at various times the fragility of this system in a military context: “Even the most fundamental principles of a free society, however, may have to be temporarily sacrificed when, but only when, it is a question of preserving liberty in the long run, as in the case of war” (1960 : 217). Such an interpretation of Hayek is thus questionable.¹⁴

The reason that, according to me, makes this interpretation false should be stressed: The fact that competition is *coercive* interferes with the course of cultural evolution. It is important to make this clarification, because we cannot, on the other hand, remove military conquest from the scope of evolution on the ground that it is not *spontaneous*. In a broad sense, in fact, *everything is spontaneous*. Admittedly, a war by a tyrannical regime, or, on the intra-national level, a political insurgency is more voluntary than, e.g., the development of language. But the difference between these cases is not in *nature* but in *degree*: The man of Neolithic times could not have predicted the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, as he could not have predicted the language spoken today by people of Quebec.¹⁵ Therefore, when authors such as Gray (1980) and (1988), Kolm (1985 : 18) and Paul (1988) argue, against Hayek, that the Soviet Union is, after all, a product of evolution, according to me they are wrong, not because this institution has emerged in a completely conscious manner *but because it infringes the conditional cultural competition*. As in the economic domain unpredictability in cultural matter is not what is important for speaking of evolution. Competition must also operate in a liberal, non-coercive framework.

¹³ Steele (1987) rightly states that the military success of a culture “shows only that it was good, or at least not hopelessly bad, at military conquest” (1987 : 176). This outcome does not increase value, as Ogus (1989 : 404) and Hoppe (1994 : 88) also emphasize.

¹⁴ Therefore, when Gordon (1981) asks: “If survival is the test, would Nazism would have met it by winning the Second World War ?” (1981 : 479), the answer is negative, because the competition recommended by Hayek is pacific. I support, on this point, various commentators, including Sugden (1990) and (1993) and Macedo (1999). Other sentences about the military vulnerability of market are available in Hayek’s work, notably in *Law, Legislation and Liberty* (1976 : 111) and (1979 : 64).

¹⁵ In this very broad sense, we can thus say, as Arnold (1980) observes, that “all institution-orders-outcomes might be said to have emerged” (1980 : 343), i.e. everything is spontaneous. See also Galeotti (1987 : 177) and Sciabarra (1995 : 40).

Secondly, in unconditional competition, the diffusion of *ideas* can be decisive. In this context, the intellectual is, as Tomlinson (1990 : 49), Bottke (1992) and Witt (1992) observe, an important actor of cultural change. Hayek often mentions this kind of competition, generally to deplore the spread of socialist ideas in the West: “So long as the people who over longer periods determine public opinion continue to be attracted by the ideals of socialism, the trend will continue. If we are to avoid such a development we must be able to offer a new liberal program which appeals to the imagination” (1949 : 432). As in the military domain, Hayek does not think that the success of liberal rules is certain in this context.¹⁶ On the contrary, it could be argued, as Radnitzky (1987) says, that a totalitarian regime possesses some advantages in this domain, because “it controls all its mass media; it can infiltrate the mass media of liberal democracies” (1987 : 34).

It should be noted, however, that non-liberal ideas may spread in a group without the use of coercive methods. It is conceivable, and even probable, that a person or various persons approve illiberal ideas without being constrained. Unlike the military domain, we can thus say that ideas – and the rules of conduct they promote – may 1) *emerge* in liberal conditions. *But* 2) if their *content*, i.e. their operating process, *does not, in turn, conform to these conditions*, they violate the cultural competition recommended by Hayek.

To recognize this second clause is necessary to ensure that the concept of cultural evolution is not misunderstood. Hayek mentions this second clause at various times, e.g. when he considers it likely “that the free growth of ideas [first clause] which is the essence of a free society will bring about the destruction of the foundations on which it depends [second clause]” (1949 : 432). Similarly, in a little-known paper, published in *The Freeman*, Hayek affirms that we cannot guarantee “that a free society will always and necessarily develop values of which we would approve, or even, as we shall see, that it will maintain values which are compatible with the preservation of freedom” (1962 : 41).

The combination of these two clauses summarizes the meaning of cultural evolution according to Hayek: 1) Rules must not be imposed upon anyone who does not want them and 2) these rules must not prevent anyone from abandoning them one day if he or she wants. Specifically, this evolution recommended by Hayek means that people are free to

¹⁶ Hayek thinks that “if today the preservation of the present order of the market economy depends, as Daniel Bell and Irving Kristol (eds), *Capitalism Today* (New York, 1970) in effect argue, that the people rationally understand that certain rules are indispensable to preserve the social division of labour, it may well be doomed.” (1979 : 206). This comment of Vaughn (1984) is also interesting about the evolution of ideas: “There is no physical (unintended?) constraint on the production and dissemination of political ideology that will automatically select those ideologies which serve individual long-run purposes” (1984 : 139).

have, e.g., a collectivist way of life, as long as they do not use coercion. The liberal, Hayek says, “demands for a strict limitation of all coercive or exclusive power. Its opposition, however, is directed only against the use of *coercion* to bring about organization or association, and not against association as such” (1946 : 16). Hayek rarely gives examples in this domain, but we can mention the Israeli kibbutz, Cistercian monastery, or the Amish community. According to Hayek, these kinds of groups do not infringe cultural evolution as long as they do not form an “all exclusive, privileged, monopolistic organization” which use “coercion to prevent others from trying to do better” (1960 : 37).

To understand this last sentence, one must know what Hayek exactly means by coercion or exclusive organization in this context. A group, with its culture, is coercive if it gives itself, by *law*, the single right to create rules, and imposes to all, by *law*, obedience to these rules. Let us assume, e.g., that 50 million French people freely adopt socialist ideas and write these ideas into *law*. This action implies that this culture is coercive, that it infringes the second clause of cultural competition: “An evolution is possible”, Hayek writes, “only with rules which are neither coercive nor deliberately imposed – which, though observing them is regarded as merit and though they will be observed by the majority, can be broken by individuals” (1958 : 236). On the other hand, if the 50 million people do not obligate, legally, the whole French people to follow their rules, their socialist culture conforms to evolution. It preserves sovereignty, both of citizen and of producer, in two ways. First, the 15 million non-socialist persons are free to follow or to produce other rules. Second, the 50 million can, at any time, *leave* the group if they want, and emigrate to another. This freedom allows a *flexibility* of evolution, because, as Vaughn (1994b: 236) rightly says, if the socialist culture proves ineffective, i.e. does not create a lot of value for its members, the harm will be minimized by the possibility to switch quickly to other rules.¹⁷ In other terms, an evolution can happen only if cultures are *contestable*.¹⁸

¹⁷ Hayek clearly expresses this idea when he says, in an important passage for my paper, that a “group or nation may also destroy itself by the moral beliefs to which it adheres”. But “there would be little danger of this in a society whose members were still free to choose their way of practical life, because in such a society such tendencies would be self-corrective : only the group dominated by such "impractical" ideals would decline, and others, less moral by current standards, would take its place. But this will happen only in a free society in which such moral beliefs are not enforced on all” (1958 : 239).

¹⁸ Hayek rarely use this adjective, but it is certain that the free competition he recommends – both in the economic and cultural sphere – is characterized by the condition of contestability, and therefore it proscribes *legal monopoly*: “A state monopoly is always a state-protected monopoly – protected against both potential competition and effective criticism” (1944b : 146). In this sentence, Hayek refers to the domain of goods and services. But his opinion is the same about rules of conduct: “All monopolistic government limits the possibilities of evolution” (1978 : 66).

According to Hayek, it is precisely this contestability which, historically, has *initiated* the process of cultural evolution. Over millennia, this condition of evolution was absent. Human groups were *closed*, Hayek says, i.e. their members were *forced* to follow certain rules, or commands: “The small, tribal group, is what I would like to call a purpose-connected group. Professor Michael Oakeshott in London has invented for this kind of society the name of a telocratic society, a society which is kept together by the pursuit of common, particular or concrete purposes” (1968 : 39). Evolution began when some men *deviated* from the rules of their group: “The first time some member of some little savage tribe left a piece of salt at the boundary of its tribe, in the hope that a member of another tribe would find it and would leave some other gift, something new arose” (1968 : 40). By doing this, these entrepreneurs discovered market rules, which generated a new order of actions, far superior to its predecessors. This growth of value *could not have happen without the infringement of the old rules*, i.e. without *producer’s freedom*. According to Hayek, if human beings want, today, to *continue* cultural progress, they must preserve this condition of evolution: “Eighteenth-century individualism”, of which Hayek approves and which refers to the Scottish’s Enlightenment, “aimed at understanding as well as possible the principles by which the individual efforts combined to produce a civilization in order to learn what were the conditions most favorable to its further growth” (1951 : 335).

It is precisely these conditions that are lacking in socialism and in all other *imposed* set of rules. Today, what has the force of law is decided by *government* – which may be democratic or not. I said before that Hayek is not an anarchist. But according to Hayek, the role of government should be to guarantee, by law, the liberal *condition* of evolution. However, when a government legalizes a monopoly for *a group* and its culture, it *blocks* any evolution: “There is surely as much justification to speak of the wisdom of culture as of the wisdom of nature – except perhaps, that, because of the powers of government, errors of the former are less easily corrected” (1979 : 155). In this sentence, Hayek refers both to complete socialism and to moderate socialism such as the welfare state. As the former, this latter set of rules is coercive since its obedience is a legal obligation. The fact that the welfare state spontaneously *emerged* does not make it a product of evolution in Hayek’s sense – contrary to what is maintained by Giroux (1989), Lagueux (1989), Barry (1994) and Sechrest (1998).

A conclusive proof of the cogency of my reading is found in an interview that Hayek gives to the neo-Keynesian Leijonhufvud, in November 1978. Leijonhufvud makes the following observation: “You have referred to the development of democratic government into omnipotent government, and certainly the trend has been in that direction. Is that not a

process of social evolution?”¹⁹ Hayek’s answer supports my interpretation: “It’s an inevitable consequence of giving a government unlimited powers, which excludes experimentation with other forms. A deliberate decision by a man has put us on a one-way track, and the alternative evolutions have been excluded. In a sense, of course, all monopolistic government limits the possibilities of evolution” (1978 : 66). Hayek often repeats this claim in *The Fatal Conceit*: “Nothing is more misleading, then, than the conventional formulae of historians who represent the achievement of a powerful state as the culmination of cultural evolution: it as often marked its end” (1988 : 33)

Since Hayek disapproves legal monopoly for all sets of rules, we can, at the end of this section, wonder which kind of political constitution might be appropriate so that human beings conform to this condition. Although Hayek never mentions him on this topic, I think, as Shearmur (1979) and (1996), Liggio (1982) and Vanberg (1998), that the society imagined by Nozick in *Anarchy, State and Utopia* well corresponds to the ideal context of the cultural evolution recommended by Hayek. In his last chapter, Nozick writes that his utopia is “a place where people are at liberty to join together voluntarily to pursue and attempt to realize their own vision of the good life in the ideal community but where no one can *impose* his own utopian vision upon others” (1974 : 312).

Admittedly, Hayek is against the existence of a world state that would enforce this kind of society: “Until the protection of individual freedom is much more firmly secured than it is now, the creation of a world state probably would be a greater danger to the future of civilization than even war” (1960 : 263). However, as Gray (1984 : 77) and Shearmur (1999) rightly observe, the Austrian thinker approves, in various texts, political federalism – see, e.g., Hayek (1946 : 28), (1960 : 184) and (1979 : 132).

This stance is consistent because in a federal world, if the laws of a specific government give to a culture a monopoly, anyone can *leave* it, and emigrate to another. This mitigates the possibilities of coercion on cultural competition. It should be noted that these possibilities are not completely abolished, because it remains conceivable that the 50 million French, e.g., write their socialist culture into law. But if the country is divided into various federations, the remaining 15 million people are free to leave the socialist part of the country. Political federalism is, therefore, an appropriate arrangement, albeit an imperfect one but less dangerous than a world government.

¹⁹ Because of an *unconditional* interpretation of competition in Hayek, various commentators answer this question in the affirmative: See, in particular, Barry (1979 : 200), (1981 : 104) and (1982 : 46), who considers that the sovereignty of the British Parliament is a product of evolution, and also Bellamy (1994 : 438).

Conclusion

The goal of my paper was to explain which kind of cultural competition is called by Hayek an evolution and which is regarded by him to be essential to the progress of humanity. My opinion is that the rivalry recommended by Hayek must conform to a liberal condition of non-coercion. Hayek disapproves of the institutional tendency of many nations today, precisely because they are not engaged in this kind of competition. On the contrary, they *block* it. Such disapprobation is consistent, since Hayek does distinguish what is good – cultural evolution – and what is bad – distortion of evolution. In other terms, given the competition that he recommends, it is normal that Hayek is not a *Panglossian*,²⁰ contrary to what is maintained by authors such as Viner (1961), Buchanan (1978) and (1984), Lepage (1983) and Gray (1994).

Consistency should involve being Panglossian if Hayek would consider as efficient an *unconditional* cultural competition. In this case, in fact, Hayek should logically declare all the outcomes of this competition to be efficient, since these outcomes, regardless of what they are, should be considered as the best possible ones. But, as I have shown, it is not this kind of rivalry that Hayek recommends in his work.

Let us recall, in conclusion, that my goal was to clarify the *discourse* which Hayek develops about cultural evolution. This is essential, because, in order to evaluate the thought of an author, we have to understand, first, what this author *means*. A second step, which is necessary to appreciate Hayek's thought, must be to evaluate the *relevance* of his discourse. That is perhaps for another paper. I just wished in this text to carry out the first step, essentially in order to refute the unconditional interpretation of Hayek, which is widespread in the secondary literature.

²⁰ A good definition of this term is given by Buchanan (1978): "By Panglossian I refer to those views that imply, directly or indirectly, that there is really nothing that can be done to improve matters; hence, we live in the best of possible worlds" (1978 : 274). This term comes from the novel *Candide ou l'Optimisme* by Voltaire (1759 : 154).

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An evolutionary social theory, properly understood, can form part of a liberal theory of politics. Improperly understood, it has been employed to form defenses...
ABSTRACT: Herbert Spencer and F.A. Hayek developed bodies of liberal political thought that stress the importance of evolutionary social adaptation as a type of spontaneous order. An evolutionary social theory, properly understood, can form part of a liberal theory of politics. Improperly understood, it has been employed to form defenses of the modern nation-state, and nation-states are not products of spontaneous social evolution but rather are destructive of it. Hayek and Spencer both regard social evolution as a process that is progressive in nature, producing large, complex industrial societies. Friedrich August von Hayek's theory of cultural evolution is usually regarded as a crucial contribution to an analysis of the institutional | Find, read and cite all the research you need on ResearchGate. for the related concept of institutional change. The evolutionary role of entrepreneurship. in the market process pinpoints the matter of search, experimentation and discovery. Despite its rather implicit character in Hayek's theorising, entrepreneurship then. provides Hayek's theory of cultural evolution with constitutive arguments on the. interplay of individuals, groups and institutions in the evolutionary process of economic. development. The underlying line of reasoning ranges from entrepreneurial behaviour in. Hayek developed his theory of cultural group selection over the course of almost three decades and, although his thinking refined on the issue, his views were very consistent. The theory was explicated mainly in *The Constitution of Liberty* (1960:54-70), an essay titled "Notes on the Evolution of Systems of Rules of Conduct" (1967:66-81), the first (1973) and third volumes (1979) of *Law Legislation and Liberty*, a 1983 lecture on the "Origins and Effects of our Morals" given at the Hoover Institution (1984). In the last decade of his life Hayek honed his theory of cultural evolution and was more explicit about how cultural evolution differs from organic evolution. Building upon the work of William Hamilton (1964), Williams criticized the idea of altruistic behavior towards non-kin. Indeed, in its endeavour to explain and predict particular events, which it does so successfully in the case of relatively simple phenomena (or where it can at least approximately isolate "closed systems" that are relatively simple), science encounters the same barrier of factual ignorance when it comes to apply its theories to very complex phenomena. In some fields it has developed important theories which give us much insight into the general character of some phenomena, but will never produce