

The culture of CULTURE

by

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Snippets from overhearing a conversation about "Culture"

Preface

I have collected these definitions to sketch various approaches to the intuition that some aspects of what humanity as constructed over its life as a species requires a concept such as that of "culture."

This should be read in conjunction with my notes for an introductory [lecture](#) on the [paradigm](#) of "culture" in anthropology and social thought in general

This collection could someday lead to a new version of Kroeber and Kluckhohn's famous *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions* (1963 [1952]).

My sentiments are more sanguine than theirs may have been. The conversation about culture that anthropologists, sociologists, philosophers and others have conducted over the years and continue to conduct about whatever it is that makes "culture" necessary shows some sign of leading to greater precision.

At this point, this should be read as sign posts towards a theory of culture that would deal with pattern and variation, consistency and drift, acquiescence and resistance, or, unapologetically, *langue* and *parole* (the constructed self and the deconstructing 'I')...

Still, it could be that it would better to think of culture as a [paradigm](#) establishing a field of concern, than as a set of definitions.

For other compilations of definitions of culture see:

Definitions of "Culture"

The original

Edward Tylor (1871):

Culture ... is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. (p.1)

[this introduces the continuing confusing between trying to bring together under the word 'culture' both historical objects, and particularized internal properties of 'man']

Foundations: Pragmatic

[Franz Boas](#) (*The mind of primitive man* 1911):

Culture may be defined as the totality of the mental and physical reactions and activities that characterize the behavior of individuals composing a social group collectively and individually in relations to their natural environment, to other groups, to members of the group itself and of each individual to himself. It also includes the products of these activities and their role in the life of the groups. The mere enumerations of these various aspects of life, however, does not constitute culture. It is more, for its elements are not independent, they have a structure (p. 149)

Ruth Benedict (1934):

What really binds men together is their culture, -- the ideas and the standards they have in common. (p. 16)

Margaret Mead (1937):

Culture means the whole complex of traditional behavior which has been developed by the human race and is successively learned by each generation. A culture is less precise. It can mean the forms of traditional behavior which are characteristics of a given society, or of a group of societies, or of a certain race, or of a certain area, or of a certain period of time. (p.17)

see also [1951](#)

Foundations: Weberian

Max Weber (1904)

We have designated as "cultural sciences" those disciplines which analyze the phenomena of life in terms of their cultural significance. The significance of a configuration of cultural phenomena and the basis of this significance cannot however be derived and rendered intelligible by a system of analytical laws (Gesetzesbegriffen), however perfect it may be, since the significance of cultural events presupposes a value_orientation towards these events. The concept of culture is a value_concept. Empirical reality becomes "culture" to us because and insofar as we relate it to value ideas. It includes those segments and only those segments of reality which have become significant to us because of this value_relevance. Only a small portion of existing concrete reality is colored by our value_conditioned interest and it alone is significant to us. It is significant because it reveals relationships which are important to us due to their connection with our values. (p.76)

The focus of attention on reality under the guidance of values which lend it significance and the selection and ordering of the phenomena which are thus affected in the light of their cultural significance is entirely different from the analysis of reality in terms of laws and general concepts. (p.77)

(from *The methodology of the social sciences*. New York: The Free Press. 1949)

Classic attempts at integration

(with an emphasis on the internalization of historical conditions that are learned or "oriented to")

Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952)

Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiment in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other as conditioning elements of further action. (p. 357)

Talcott Parsons and Edward Shils (1951)

Culture has been distinguished from the other elements of action by the fact that it is intrinsically transmissible from one action system to another [by learning and by diffusion]. (p. 159)

[...]

A complex external symbol structure [...] can bring about roughly the same type to orientation in any or all of the actors who happen to orient to it. (p. 160)

The consistency of pattern of such a system will exist to the extent to which the same combination of value judgments [...] runs consistently through the actors' responses to different situations. (p. 172)

(from [*Toward a general theory of action*](#). New York: Harper and Row. 1951.)

Foundations: Structuralist

Claude Lévi-Strauss (1949):

Man is a biological being as well as a social individual. Among the responses which he gives to external stimuli, some are the full product of his nature, and others of his condition... But it is not always easy to distinguish between the two... Culture is neither simply juxtaposed to nor simply superposed over life. In a way, culture substitutes itself to life, in another way culture uses and transforms life to realise a synthesis of a higher order. (1969 [1949]: 4)

but see also his paragraph on ["a" culture](#)

Gregory Bateson (1960):

If I kick a stone, the movement of the stone is energized by the act, but if I kick a dog, the behavior of the dog may be indeed partially conservative--he may travel along a Newtonian trajectory if kicked hard enough, but this is mere physics. What is important is that he may exhibit responses which are energized not by the kick but by his metabolism; he may turn and bite. (p. 229)

[...]

... it is all a matter of the sort of modifications which could be expected among systems whose determinants are not a matter of physics in the crude sense, but a matter of messages and modulated systems of messages. (p. 233)

At various anthropological fringes:

John Dewey (1916)

Social efficiency as an educational purpose should mean cultivation of power to join freely and fully in shared and common activities. This is impossible without culture, while it brings a reward in culture, because one cannot share in intercourse with others without learning--without getting a broader point of view and perceiving things of which one would otherwise be ignorant. And there is perhaps no better definition of culture than that it is the capacity for constantly expanding the range and accuracy of one's perception of meanings. (p. 123)

James Baldwin (1955)

Culture was not a community basket weaving project, nor yet an act of God; being nothing more or less than the recorded and visible effects on a body of people of the vicissitudes which which they had been forced to deal (p. 140)

This is a reflexion on being mistakenly arrested and thrown into a Parisian jail. Baldwin had been trying to escape America and now found himself for days waiting for someone to pay attention to him. He reported beginning to long for a jail in New York where he would be beaten by white policemen in ways he could understand and perhaps manipulate.

Antonio Gramsci (1932)

One might say 'ideology' here, but on condition that the word is used in its highest sense of a conception of the world that is implicitly manifest in art, in law, in economic activity and in all manifestations of individual and collective life.

compare this to Tylor's definition [above](#). And note the contrast between the verb "acquired" in that definition and the qualifier "implicitly manifest" in Gramsci's. Of course this sentence is but a small step in Gramsci's discussion of [arbitrariness](#), [hegemony](#) and organic intellectuals.

Lionel Trilling (1955)

When we look at a people in the degree of abstraction which the idea of culture implies, we cannot but be touched and impressed by what we see, we cannot help being awed by something mysterious at work, some creative power which seems to transcend any particular act or habit or quality that may be observed. To make a coherent life, to confront the terrors of the outer and the inner world, to establish the ritual and art, the pieties and duties which make possible the life of the group and the individual--these are culture, and to contemplate these various enterprises which constitute a culture is inevitably moving. (p. 91-2)

[...]

[Freud] does indeed see the self as formed by its culture. But he also sees the self as set against the culture, struggling

against it, having been from the first reluctant to enter it. Freud would have understood what Hegel meant by speaking of the "terrible principle of culture." (p. 93)

Michel Foucault (1971)

un système d'exclusion (système historique, modifiable, institutionnellement contraignant) (p. 16)

Raymond Williams (1981)

[...] if culture is the 'whole way of life' there can be a crucial absence of significant relational terms beyond it. In practice, in most anthropology, the general relational terms are 'culture' and 'nature', and there are some simple societies in which these are reasonably explanatory... But in highly developed and complex societies there are [...] many levels of social and material transformation... It is indeed in the area of these complex transformations that the signifying system is itself developed and must be analyzed. (p. 210)

Developments: Cognitive

Ward Goodenough (1971)

The term culture [refers to] what is learned, ... the things one needs to know in order to meet the standards of others. (p. 19)

Therefore, if culture is learned, its ultimate locus must be in individuals rather than in groups. If we accept this, then cultural theory must explain in what sense we can speak of culture as being shared or as the property of groups at all, and it must explain what the processes are by which "sharing" arises. (p. 20)

Charles Frazer

Developments: Symbolic

Milton Singer (1968):

Most characteristic [of recent work on culture] is a shift away from a theory of discrete culture traits within a framework of universal cultural history or cultural evolution to a study of the functions, patterns, and structures of cultural forms within a plurality of organized contexts...

The definition of culture in terms of learned behavior ... seemed at first to promise a unified theory to social and mental culture. But with the failure of behavioristic learning theories to account for the differentiated processes and kinds of learning involved in the acquisition of language, kinship systems, and other aspects of culture, this promise has not been fulfilled.

Taken as a working hypothesis the cognitive conception of culture offers a promising program of research, the results of which should improve cross-cultural understanding. Taken as a definition of the nature of man or as a general theory of human culture, however, it seems just as narrow and one-sided as previous definitions and theories. (p. 540)

Clifford Geertz (1966):

[the culture concept] denotes an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life... (p.89)

[...]

The point is sometimes put in the form of an argument that cultural patterns are "models," that they are sets of symbols whose relations to one another "model" relations among entities, processes ... The term "model" has, however, two senses -- and "of" sense and a "for" sense... Unlike genes, and other nonsymbolic information sources, which are only models for, not models of, culture patterns have an intrinsic double aspect: they give meaning, that is, objective conceptual form, to social and psychological reality both by shaping themselves to it and by shaping it to themselves. (p. 93)

(from "Religion as a cultural system." in his *The interpretation of cultures*. New York: Basic Books.1973 [1966])

Contrast with a later statement expressing the fundamental problem with "meaning" theories of culture:

What do we claim when we claim that we understand the semiotic means by which, in this case, persons are defined to one another? That we know words or that we know minds? (1976: 225)

For various struggles within the Geertzian tradition see:

- [Michelle Rosaldo](#)

[David Schneider](#) (1968):

... a cultural system; that is, a system of symbols. (p. 1)

[James Boon](#) (1972):

"Culture" pertains to operations which render complex human phenomena communicable... What we might call the experience-as-conceived (or let us simply say the communication) of those phenomena is achieved by some sort of selection (implies reduction) and emphasis of some of the elements from each of the orders adduced. And these elements are themselves connected in a more or less traditional arrangement --i.e. in an arrangement which implicitly refers back to tradition either by being like it or unlike it. Most generally, some sort of selection of elements from posited orders which are evidenced in the phenomena, communicates the phenomena (or in effect is the communication of the phenomena) in complex conscious and/or unconscious ways to persons enacting the phenomena themselves... In sum, communicable experience is achieved through the process of selecting and inter-relating sets of elements from various orders of phenomena... This process we might call simply the operation of the analytically posited orders. (p. 227)

Developments: Psychology

[postmodernism or neo-pragmatism?]

Richard Shweder (1991)

"It is a presupposition of cultural psychology that when people live in the world differently, it may be that they live in different worlds. (p. 23)

Psyche refers to the intentional person. Culture refers to the intentional world. Intentional persons and intentional worlds are interdependent things that get dialectically constituted and reconstituted through the intentional activities and practices that are their products, yet make them up... Culture is the constituted scheme of things for intending persons (p. 101)

Developments: structural interactionism?

[Bruno Latour](#)

"the set of elements that appear to be tied together when, and only when, we try to deny a claim or to shake an association" ([1987:201](#))

This page was originally developed as background material for my course [Culture and Communication](#)

Source: http://varenne.tc.columbia.edu/hv/clt/and/culture_def.html