The (F)utility of a Culture Concept?
Conceptualizations of "Culture" From Evolutionism to Post-Modernism

Anh Ly
University of Calgary
Department of Anthropology

Abstract

This paper attempts to provide an historical survey and examination of the emergence, employment, and significance of the concept of "culture" in anthropological discourse from evolutionist frameworks to post-modern critiques. Arguably one of the most nebulous concepts within the discipline, "culture", and the discussion of it, has triggered an ongoing and somewhat contentious debate within the discipline. To understand the debate over the (f)utility of the culture concept, it is necessary to examine the theoretical context in which the concept has been used, defended or criticized and, subsequently, to situate that specific context within the larger context of the development of the discipline. The goal of this paper is to provide insight into the complexity of the debate over the centrality, utility, and politics of the culture concept in anthropological theory and practice. The evolution of the concept of culture within anthropology is an historical accretion of ideas and only by examining previous formulations of the concept and the specific historical context within which it arose can we engage with the concept more critically in our current and future anthropological endeavours.

Surveying anthropological theories from evolutionism to postmodernism, this paper attempts to extract and explore concepts of culture that have emerged throughout the discipline. Arguably one of the most nebulous concepts within the discipline, "culture", and the discussion of it, has triggered an ongoing and somewhat contentious debate. On the surface, it may appear to be simply over a matter of definitions or a vested interest in preserving the centrality of the concept within the discipline. However, one would be quick to abandon this view upon closer examination of the nuances and implications of the debate.

Those who wish to preserve the concept are being challenged by others on the very grounds that preservation of the concept entails the conservation and perpetuation of critically unassessed assumptions and ideals associated with the notion of culture.[1]

Certainly, this sort of criticism goes beyond the simple case of quibbling over definitions, for what is being called into question is not the way the concept has been defined in the last century, but rather, as Andreas Wimmer (1999:S19) notes, "the theoretical context in which 'culture' is related to 'society,' 'nature,' 'meaning,' 'practice,' and other master terms of the social sciences." What is really being scrutinized is the discipline of anthropology itself in terms of its complicity in the production of knowledge and the lack of rigorous reflection on the use of the concept of culture in attempts to understand and represent people's worlds.

To understand the debate over the (f)utility of the culture concept, it is necessary to examine the theoretical context in which the concept has been used (as well as defended or criticized) and then, to take a further step back so as to situate that specific context within the larger context of the development of the discipline. As Brightman aptly points out, "the term culture has a long history of meaning different things to different people" (1995:539). Hence, the debate should not be understood simply in terms of whether the concept is useful[2] or not; alternatively, it should be cast in terms of why the concept is deemed useful or not and exactly which aspect of the concept is being refuted or defended.

The perceived urgency of the debate is a result of the increased scrutiny that the very theoretical frameworks engendered by the discipline have undergone. Moreover, the sheer fact that the concept remains central to the discipline despite critics' attempts to dispose of it suggest that the concept is not going to go away any time soon. In fact, rather ironically, increased debate over the concept has only drawn more attention to it and, subsequently, has further entangled it within the very fabric of the discipline.

Evolutionism and the Emergence of the Culture Concept

E. B. Tylor quite famously introduced the concept of culture for anthropological consideration when he stated that, "Culture or Civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man [sic] as a member of society" (1871:1). Those debating over the concept can at least agree that it arose within evolutionist theory (Pasquinelli 1996:54). This agreement as to the historical origin of the concept

is important because it reveals how subsequent reformulations and refutations of the concept have resulted from various interpretations that Tylor set forth. What is being agreed upon is that the concept arose at this particular point in the history of the discipline, rather than there being a consensus as to what the concept refers to, how it adequately captures the complexity of human lives, or its utility in general. The varied interpretations of the concept since its inception could be attributed to the fact that Tylor's proposed definition of culture is actually quite broad and certainly leaves room for much interpretation.

Given the all-encompassing nature of Tylor's (1871) definition, it is interesting that the evolutionist formulation of the concept has been criticized for "mak[ing] the primitive thinkable, endow[ing] it with form, [and] mak[ing] its representation possible" (Pasquinelli 1996:57). Critics of the evolutionist concept of culture claim that it is a narrow one that problematically encourages the anthropological gaze at the "other." While the latter criticism may indeed be true, this view is only possible given the benefit of hindsight along with our contemporary understanding of the nature of colonial relations and the politics of representation. I would argue, in fact, that it was indeed not Tylor's intention to propose a narrow definition of culture that simply encouraged an examination of the "other".

In fact, the very objective of evolutionist theory was to propose a way of looking at "history at large, explaining the past and predicting the future phenomena of man's [sic] life in the world by reference to general laws" (Tylor 1871:4). More importantly, the broad concept of culture set forth by Tylor provided a framework with which to examine the diversity of cross-cultural phenomena – from the "primitive" to the more "civilized" – in order to understand "how the phenomena of Culture may be classified and arranged, stage by stage, in a probable order of evolution" (Tylor 1871:4). In this way, despite the undeniable flaws in the theories espoused by the evolutionists, evolutionism at least made steps towards the conceptualization of differences between cultures while maintaining at the same time the unity of the human species. Unfortunately, this important contribution to the discipline is often overlooked as a result of the eagerness to discredit the more questionable notion of evolutionary "stages" (see also Morgan 1877) proposed by the proponents of evolutionism.

Historical Particularism and the Politics of Culture

Although it has been pointed out that Boas and his students were not always in agreement over such issues as cultural integration or degree of cultural determinism (Handler 2004), they did agree on certain aspects of culture and together advanced a theory of culture that differed significantly from that of the earlier evolutionist perspective. What they proposed was a view of culture that allowed anthropology to contribute to the political struggle against racism, colonialism, and enforced social conformity (Rosenblatt 2004:459). Rosenblatt (2004:459) also points out how, "for Benedict, it was because culture is a claim about what it means to be a human being that it was necessarily a political term as well as a scientific one." He even credits Benedict for popularizing the concept of culture through the publication of her book *Patterns of Culture* (1934). Furthermore, Boggs (2004:191) declares that Boas "presumed that the culture theory he was assembling was immanently democratic, antiracist, and emancipatory." Taken together, these comments clearly illustrate the impact of Boasian anthropology in infusing the concept of culture with a distinctively political dimension.

Clearly dissatisfied with the evolutionist framework for understanding cultural difference and development among human populations, Boas insisted that cultures needed to be understood in their own terms. Hence, he and his students did much work to show "that although some Native Americans seemed to be racially similar, their cultures could be remarkably different" (Harris 1999:70). In addition, he also criticized his contemporaries in other disciplines for their ill attempts to understand the unique history and development of cultural forms:

Sociology, economics, political science, history and philosophy have found it worth while to study conditions found among diverse human populatons in order to throw light upon our modern social processes. With this bewildering variety of approaches, all dealing with racial and cultural forms, it seems necessary to formulate clearly what objects we try to attain by the study of humankind (Boas 1940:244).

Given this dissatisfaction with previous approaches to understanding cultural forms, coupled with the desire to refine the aim of anthropological research, Boas proposed a distinct methodology for the study of human cultures. He believed that "the

history of the development of the bodily form of man [sic], his physiological functions, mind and culture" should be the focus of anthropological studies, rather than the comparison of societies in terms of evolutionary stages (Boas 1940:244). After all, as Boas (1940:271) adamantly argued, "When we find analogous single traits of culture among distant peoples, the presumption is not that there has been a common historical source, but that they have arisen independently." This emphasis on the unique historical origins of cultures enabled Boasian anthropology to develop a conceptualization of culture that was at once politically engaging as well as theoretically appealing.

Boas saw culture as being both an historical accretion as well as a holistic system of integration. Indeed, it should not be overlooked that Boas was also concerned with the diffusion of cultural phenomena and how they were incorporated anew into different societies. Rosenblatt suggests there is a "resonance between the Boasian concern with the diffusion of ideas, institutions, and practices from one culture to another and contemporary interest in globalization" (2004:463). Of course this comparison should not be taken too far because the rate at which information, goods, technologies, and populations flow in our contemporary world is unprecedented. Nevertheless, the important point is that the Boasian focus on both history and cultural integration adds a further dimension to the conceptualization of culture, such that culture is not reduced to mere historical analysis, nor is it divorced from its complex history. Boas himself stressed that the "dynamics of existing societies" can be understood only by making "the interdependence of cultural phenomena . . . one of the objects of anthropological inquiry" (Boas 1940:254). Despite his interest in the historical origins of cultures, Boas suggests that anthropology's aim should also be the examination of current cultural phenomena. These two goals need not be considered incommensurable because knowledge of the historical development of cultures will certainly aid in the understanding of the 'dynamics of existing societies.'

One of the most foregrounded and contentious issues in the contemporary debate over the concept of culture is the issue of cultural boundaries. Given the current mistrust in the notion of boundaries, scholars often hastily distance themselves from the concept of culture. More significantly, the equation of cultural

boundaries with the concept of culture is also often attributed to the legacy of Boasian anthropology. Despite its recognition of the "complex history of migrations, diffusions, and intermixing" that has occurred throughout human history, Boasian anthropology has been criticized for its tendency to focus more on "the different aspects of life in a community [which] are often characterized by the recurrence of similar patterns and themes" (Rosenblatt 2004:465). Rosenblatt argues, however, that this wariness of the Boasian discussion of patterns and themes has led to the unfounded perception that Boasian anthropology endorsed the notion of cultural boundaries. In fact, according to Rosenblatt, "conceptions of boundaries that have been criticized are more those of structuralist-functionalism than of Boasian anthropology" (Rosenblatt 2004:464).

Bashkow (2004) recently offered an insightful commentary on the misconceptions around the notion of cultural boundaries by re-examining Boas' own views on the issue of boundaries. Bashkow (2004:444) emphatically insists that the idea of cultural boundaries should not be equated with the more questionable notion of "bounded cultures." He also suggests that the current mistrust in the notion of boundaries and the pointing of fingers at Boasian anthropology has actually more to do with the post-modern tendency "to emphasize the inadequacies of earlier anthropologists while accentuating its own disjuncture from it" (Bashkow 2004:444) than it does with any serious claim against Boasian anthropology. Moreover, Bashkow (2004:446) points out that the Boasians actually acknowledged the permeability of boundaries, that "even when proposing geographically based culture areas, Boasian anthropologists were careful to draw multiple boundaries reflecting diverse classificatory points of view." Whether or not one fully agrees with Bashkow's defence of Boasian anthropology or is prepared to declare himself or herself a neo-Boasian, Bashkow's article provides an insightful and critical revisitation of an important point in the history of anthropology. More importantly, his article illuminates for us how Boasian anthropology developed the concept of culture and how that conceptualization is still preserved in our present understanding when we conceive of culture as being "necessarily eclectic and expansive" (Bashkow 2004:446).

(Structural-)Functionalism and the Shift from "Culture" to "Society"

In *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, Malinowski (1922:24) states, "One may argue whether any proposition in the shape of "this is the outline of a culture" must necessarily be taken as a statement about the "final goal" of ethnography." While Tylor introduced the concept to the discipline so as to provide an outline for the study of human lives, Malinowski, in an attempt to offer a functionalist account of human lives, took the concept one step further by questioning the very goal of anthropological inquiry. The evolutionist goal, in other words, was to advance a working definition of culture so as to provide a focus for the scientific study of human lives, whereas the functionalist goal – already entrenched in what they believed to be a scientific endeavour – was to refine, or even redefine, the concept to reflect more accurately the nature of the functional interrelationships they observed in human societies. Malinowski's (1922:25) famous quote, "The final goal ... is to grasp the native's point of view, his [sic] relation to life, to realise his vision of his world" indicates a shift away from the conceptualization of culture as a purely analytical construct imposed on the native's world in order for anthropologists to understand it to the conceptualization of culture as something produced, understood, and engaged in by natives themselves. His statements suggest that he felt that "culture" was too vague a term to describe the actual inner workings of a human society. "Culture" was something that an anthropologist, from the position of an objective analyst, was able to sketch out only roughly from observations of people's lives, while the real desire was to produce, through participant-observation, more meticulously detailed accounts of the functional needs and components of human societies.

Despite his caution of the use of the concept of culture, Malinowski nevertheless proposed an organic analogy to the study of culture:

> [A]ny theory of culture has to start from the organic needs of man, and if it succeeds in relating (to them) the more complex, indirect, but perhaps fully imperative needs of the type which we call spiritual or economic or social, it will supply us with a set of general laws such as we need in sound scientific theory (1944:72-73).

Questioning the relationship between the culture concept and the anthropological enterprise, rather than mistrusting or abandoning

the concept entirely, Malinowski proposed a more rigorous examination and theorization of the concept. His theory of the organic nature of culture still places at the forefront the investigation of basic human needs and the development of institutions in order to achieve the functional integration of these needs. Malinowski's approach to culture ultimately attempts to push the concept away from abstraction while infusing it with a distinctively functionalist characteristic.

Differing from Malinowski in his rejection of individual needs, Radcliffe-Brown, interested more in social continuity, focused on the conditions under which social structures are maintained (Edwards and Neutzling 1999). Like Malinowski, however, Radcliffe-Brown also "established an analogy between social life and organic life to explain the concept of function" (Edwards and Neutzling 1999). Nevertheless, his desire to examine how social order is maintained led to his adoption of the organic analogy only insofar as it served to illuminate aspects of social life or, more specifically, the functional integration of institutions (social structures). Unlike Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown saw no necessity for the concept of culture as the guiding concept of anthropology because it was too nebulous a concept and did not provide an adequate framework for which to deal specifically with the nature of human interaction within social structures. In fact, he clearly stated, "We can observe the acts of behaviour of . . . individuals, including . . . their acts of speech, and the material products of past actions. We do not observe a 'culture,' since that word denotes, not any concrete reality, but an abstraction" (Radcliffe-Brown 1940:2; cf. Brumann 1999:S4). Hence, in the structural-functionalist view from Radcliffe-Brown's perspective, the notion of culture is seen as an abstraction that does not explain anything about the concrete reality of continuously unfolding social relations.

The structural-functionalist emphasis on actual, observable, social relations is perhaps the primary reason for its suspicion of the concept of culture. Within structural-functionalist discourse, "culture" was replaced by "society." "Culture" was seen as something that referred to the conscious or unconscious shared knowledge that resided in people's minds and, for that reason, was beyond the task of the anthropologist to decipher. "Society," on the other hand, referred to the actual interaction and social relations between people and

institutions. With this shift from "culture" to "society," structural-functionalists sought to establish a more empirically based approach to the anthropological study of human lives, one that would reject culture as a "fantastic reification of abstractions" in favour of "actually occurring social relations" (Radcliffe-Brown 1940:10).

Wimmer (1999:S20) points out, "In functionalist anthropology ...'society' was usually thought to be synonymous with an ethnic group (the Tallensi, the Zinacantecos, the Hopi). Culture, ethnic group, and society were conceptually perceived as congruent entities." I venture to say that the same argument holds true of structural-functionalist anthropology as well. A reading of Radcliffe-Brown's (1965) explication of the function of the mother's brother in South Africa gives one the impression that, although he is speaking specifically about the particular patterns of behaviour of different South African tribes with regards to the importance attached to the relationship of mother's brother and sister's son, he inadvertently equates "society" with the larger culture of the BaThonga people, the Bantu tribes, the Hottentots, and so forth.

Radcliffe-Brown's acknowledgement of the need for a comparative analysis of institutions across societies also implicitly alludes to the larger notion of cultural context. If his goal was to understand how social structures are maintained, he must necessarily treat societies in their own terms. Thus, a comparative analysis of the social structures in different societies is incongruent with this endeavour. How can an understanding of those institutions in one society be applicable to the analysis of those in another society without reference to the larger cultural context? A static treatment of society as an independent entity capable of reproducing social structures necessarily fails in recognizing the agency of social actors who interact with, maintain, or reproduce those structures.

The issue of comparative analysis within the functionalist paradigm has also been criticized for being one of its theoretical limitations. Edwards and Neutzling (1999), for instance, draw attention to "the difficulties posed by Malinowski's argument that every culture be understood in its own terms, that is, every institution be seen as a product of the culture within which it developed. Following this, a cross-cultural comparison of institutions is a false enterprise in that it would be comparing incomparables." This criticism suggests another reason why Radcliffe-Brown might have

wanted to avoid the discussion of culture in favour of "society." The structural-functionalist replacement of one term with another perhaps remains a matter of redefining terminology rather than fundamentally reshaping the anthropological understanding of culture or the goal of the discipline in general.

Cultural Ecology and the Advancement of a Theory of Culture

Cultural ecologists embraced the concept of culture by attempting to advance a theory of culture which looked specifically at the processes and technologies people used to adapt to their environment. White, for instance, proposed the scientific study of "the distinct order of phenomena termed culture" (1975:129). He believed that cultures should be explained, not in terms of psychology, biology, physiology, and more, but in terms of 'culturology' – in other words, in terms of itself (Smith 1999). This proposition is significant in the history of the discipline and offers a unique perspective from which to approach the debate over the (f)utility of the culture concept in anthropological investigations. For the first time in the discipline, an explicit theory of culture emerged as a result of an increased interest in analyzing the concept on its own terms rather than employing it as an overarching concept to refer to numerous other processes. White's proposal for the study of culturology is actually more inclusive than narrow because, while it attempts to delimit the elements of social life which fall under the category of culture, it opens up for further inquiry what processes are indeed associated with culture. This line of inquiry and attempt to refine the concept problematizes taken for granted notions of culture and, subsequently, urges for a more standardized treatment of the concept within the discipline. As Kuper (1999:247) suggests, "Unless we separate out the various processes that are lumped together under the heading of culture, and then look beyond the field of culture to other processes, we will not get far in understanding any of it."

White's ambitious proposal fails, however, in its over-insistence on the independence of culture, claiming for instance that "the autonomy of culture, its logical independence of its human carriers, has been sensed by scholars for many years: culture constitutes a process of sui generis" (1975:6). Absurd and unfortunate claims like this led to the disrepute of White's theory of culture. Certainly, even the most amateur theorist of culture should take into account

some degree of human agency, for how culture could possibly exist without human carriers is indeed a mystery. Nonetheless, if White's intention was to shock his contemporaries by putting forth a theory of culture that flew in the face of all previous understandings of the concept of culture, he most certainly succeeded on that point.

Like White, Julian Steward (1955) also embraced the concept of culture by introducing the notion of a culture core. This new concept not only enabled an examination of the features of a people's shared way of life that are most related to subsistence, but, more importantly, it served to "supplement the usual historical approach of anthropology in order to determine the creative processes involved in the adaptation of culture to its environment" (Steward 1955:30). Steward's astute description of his ideas as a "supplement" to the historical approach of anthropology is important because his approach is a dynamic combination of both diachronic and synchronic analysis. Steward was interested not only in the synchronic analysis of how features of social, political, and religious life of human societies are related to subsistence activities and economic arrangements, but also in seeking to explain how "over the millennia cultures in different environments have changed tremendously, and these changes are basically traceable to new adaptation required by changing technology and productive arrangements" (1955:37).

A frequent criticism of cultural ecology is that it assigns causal primacy to the environment in the exploration of the dynamics of culture. While it is true that cultural ecology certainly injected an environmental element into the conceptualization of culture, it did not intend to assign causal primacy to this element. In fact, concerned about such misinterpretation, Steward refined his arguments and sought to clarify the distinction between "causes, processes, and effects or manifestations" (1977:104). Steward maintains that "although processes may be considered causes in one sense," they can also be seen as "changes set in motion when more ultimate cultural and environmental factors are utilized by human societies" (1977:104). Although Steward's earlier work reveals his interest in how culture is affected by its adaptation to the environment, he does not advocate environmental determinism. He in fact explicitly acknowledges that "all aspects of culture are functionally interdependent of one another" (Steward 1955:37).

French Structuralism and the Universal Grammar of Culture

Like the Boasians who advocated cultural relativism, Claude Lévi-Strauss too, according to Kuper (1999:243), "urged anthropologists to demonstrate that the differences between people are not to be measured on a single scale, for values are culturally variable." At the same time, Lévi-Strauss asserted that "human differences are inscribed upon a common foundation [and that] the measure of human uniformity is our common ability to learn, to borrow, [and] to assimilate" (Kuper 1999:243). With this focus on the "deep structures" of the human mind, Lévi-Strauss proposed a radically different way of approaching the question of culture.

Culture for Lévi-Strauss was no longer an independent entity to be observed or described, for it actually resides in "the structures that lie beneath the surface of everyday behaviour" (Barrett 1999:142). In other words, Lévi-Strauss stressed that culture lies in the principle binary oppositions that characterize the deep structures of people's minds and, imbued with specific symbolic meaning, it is an expression of those underlying principles. Most people – even those intensely engaged in the debate over the concept of culture – would agree that Lévi-Strauss' theoretical contributions marked a significant shift in the conceptualization of culture, from a previous material phase to a more symbolic phase (Pasquinelli 1996).[3]

Another distinct feature of Lévi-Strauss' conceptualization of culture is his linguistic analogy, which radically differs from past conceptualizations which often employed organic analogies. Viewing structures through linguistic lenses, Lévi-Strauss, according to Ortner (2001:650), "sought to establish the universal grammar of culture, the ways in which units of cultural discourse are created (by the principle of binary opposition), arranged and combined to produce the actual cultural productions...that anthropologists record." Put simply, culture is seen as inextricably linked to structures of the mind and expressed through discourse. In establishing a universal grammar of culture, Lévi-Strauss could treat culture like a language and set about the task of decoding how various cultural institutions constitute codes or messages (Barrett 1999:143). This latter emphasis on how various cultural institutions constitute codes or messages is critical to the Lévi-Straussian goal of understanding the phenomena of culture. His interest in cross-cultural expressions of the deep structures and processes of the human mind inspired his rigorous

comparative analyses of myths in which he was ultimately seeking to discern the "deep unity" which underlies them (Lévi-Strauss 1960).

Lévi-Strauss' proposition that cultures are primarily systems of classification (Ortner 2001:650) was not only a tremendously important contribution to anthropology, but also to other disciplines such as literary studies. The emphasis on binary oppositional thinking greatly influenced others within and outside the discipline to recognize how cultural phenomena are both expressions of these oppositions as well as reworkings of them to produce culturally meaningful statements of, or reflections upon, order (Ortner 2001:651). More importantly, his "rather austere emphasis on the arbitrariness of meaning" (Ortner 2001:652) is perhaps the primary reason for his popularity with those looking for an alternative to the conventional notion of culture as a conglomeration of various institutions carrying fixed meanings. His insistence that "all meaning is established by contrasts [and that] nothing carries any meaning in itself" (Ortner 2001:652) is a refreshingly cogent argument as well as a philosophically intriguing one.

Barrett's claim (1999:144) that "one of the characteristics of structuralists has been their willingness to tackle deep philosophical problems" is appropriate, but perhaps even an understatement in Lévi-Strauss's case. Lévi-Strauss' conceptualization of culture was both unique and thought-provoking in that he pushed the limits of cultural inquiry by questioning the very basic structures of the human mind which we universally share. The appeal of his ideas rests on the fact that he did not simply make generalizations about certain kinds of cultures (such as the evolutionist generalization of characteristics of cultures as they progress from primitive to more civilized states), nor was he interested in treating cultures as discrete societies. Instead, he sought to make generalizations about what humans fundamentally share and how an understanding of that basic common foundation can enable us to understand more precisely cultural variations in the world.

Symbolic Anthropology and the Semiotic Theory of Culture

Although Geertz and Turner are both associated with symbolic anthropology, they certainly differ in their approach to the concept of culture. Turner, in fact, does not explicitly discuss the concept to the same extent as Geertz does. This difference may be attributed to

the fact that Turner was trained in the tradition of British social anthropology while Geertz was firmly entrenched in the tradition of American cultural anthropology. Despite their differences, the two share a common interest in symbols and human behaviour and their desire to understand how these symbols and behaviours mutually sustain each other as an integrated whole or as a cultural system (Sewell 1999:39). Geertz's interest resides in the question of how symbols shape the way social actors see, feel, and think about the world, or, in other words, how symbols operate as vehicles of "culture." In Turner's case, his interest lies less in how symbols act as "vehicles" of or "windows" into culture, but more in how symbols act as operators in social process and social transformations (Ortner 2001:645-647).[4] Despite these different views of the function of symbols, one can glean from symbolic anthropology a distinctive conceptualization of culture as a system of symbolic meaning.

For Geertz, culture is a semiotic concept and should be seen as "a text written by the natives, which the anthropologist must interpret...Culture, thus, becomes a system of signs socially constructed at the moment of their interpretation" (Pasquinelli 1996:64). This emphasis on interpretation is crucial to Geertz's theory of culture. Although Ortner (2001:645) claims that Geertz was responsible for giving the elusive concept of culture "a relatively fixed locus," and thus gave it "a degree of objectivity," one should not conclude that Geertz saw "culture" as an ontologically objective entity capable of being simply observed or recorded by anthropologists. In fact, in his discussion of the idea of ethnographic "thick description," he expressly states that "what we call our data are really only our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to" (Geertz 1973a:9).

The notion of interpretation is central to Geertz's approach to understanding the operation of symbols in cultural systems, for he recognizes that understanding (of a cultural system of signs) is built upon "constructions of others' constructions," and that interpretations are the closest anthropologists could possibly get to the meaning of cultural symbols (Geertz 1973a:9). Interpretation and understanding are made possible by the fact that the symbol systems that make up a culture "are as public as marriage and as observable as agriculture" (Geertz 1973a:9). His shift in focus away from meaning towards interpretation indicates what he believes to be a more adequate

approach to understanding how people themselves see, construct, and operate within culture. Interpretation thus enables anthropologists to read and decipher the codes inscribed in the cultural texts that people themselves write using the symbols and signs available to them.

Despite his emphasis on the primacy of "natives'" interpretations for an understanding of cultural phenomenon, Geertz nevertheless, in subtle and sophisticated ways, assigns authority to his own interpretation of natives' accounts, thereby making his interpretive approach to culture ironically similar to earlier descriptive accounts of culture. In his analysis of the Balinese cockfight (Geertz 1973b), for instance, he makes great efforts to describe his transition from being an invisible "intruder" and "nonperson" in a remote Balinese village to becoming "suddenly the center of all attention, the object of a great outpouring of warmth, interest, and, most especially, amusement" (Geertz 1973b:415). This description, intended to demonstrate his metamorphosis from the status of a "Distinguished Visitor" to that of a "covillager" also attempts to lend authority to his subsequent account of the Balinese cockfight. Having gained initiation into the village, Geertz supposedly acquires the ability and authority to access natives' interpretations. Hence, the initiation into the village is also a symbolic entry into the realm of culture where the possibilities of interpretation are greater than from his position as an outsider. By reinforcing the dichotomous notion of insider/outsider positions in ethnographic fieldwork, Geertz presents a picture of culture which suggests that a "cultural text" emerges only when analysts are better positioned to interpret it. Ultimately, the tone of Geertz's account of the Balinese cockfight is still one of authoritative recapitulation rather than interpretive description.

In spite of the theoretical limitations of his interpretive approach, Geertz's semiotic theory of culture is an important contribution to anthropology because, according to Ortner, "the focus on symbols was for Geertz and many others heuristically liberating: it told them where to find what they wanted to study. Yet the point about symbols as such was never an end in itself" (2001:645). The larger goal is to understand how people interpret their situations in order to act within certain institutional orders (Ortner 2001:645). Geertz's synchronic analysis of symbolic processes within a cultural system is a refreshing break from the discipline's earlier preoccupation with the

examination of cultural difference (Sewell 1999:49). Furthermore, Geertz himself claims that his theory of culture is "a narrowed, specialized concept of culture" because he sees it as "theoretically more powerful" (1973a:9). This acknowledgement suggests that the concept of culture was being recognized as a theoretically potent or evocative concept.

Critics of Geertz's conceptualization of culture point out his disregard of the relations of power and domination which inextricably link cultural products to their historical production (Sewell 1999:36). This latter point gives practice theory and its conceptualization of the political economy of culture an advantage over Geertz's strictly semiotic theory of culture.

Practice Theory and the Political Economy of Culture

Pierre Bourdieu shifts the anthropological focus on structures and systems to persons and practices. As Ortner points out, this shift can also be seen as "a shift from static, synchronic analyses to diachronic, processual ones" (2001:674). Bourdieu's focus on persons and practices evidently ascribes much agency to social actors themselves, who until then had been treated by earlier theorists as secondary to the social institutions which were presumed to be independent entities exerting influence over people's lives. Despite Bourdieu's emphasis on human agency, he nevertheless stresses the group embeddedness of individual action (Swartz 1996:76). Indeed, what gives practice theory much theoretical power is that, while it takes into account human agency, it does not over-exaggerate it to the point of losing sight of the larger social and cultural context in which individuals are embedded. The recognition of the ongoing relationship between actors and institutions is what enables practice theory to pose interesting questions such as those which examine why particular customs, behaviours, and social orders are reproduced over time.

For Bourdieu, culture is a meaning structure, inferring that it is not simply some static entity that shapes or restricts people's lives, nor is it something that is unproblematically, consciously or unconsciously shared. He saw culture as something that allows people to make sense of their lives and to make claims about social order. It is precisely this point about social order which makes Bourdieu's theory of culture most politically engaging. Bourdieu

addresses the important relations between culture, stratification, and power. Swartz (1996:76) confirms this view when he states that, from Bourdieu's perspective, "culture, then, is not devoid of political content but rather is an expression of it." Viewing culture as intricately entwined with stratification and power, "Bourdieu develop[ed] a political economy of symbolic practices that includ[ed] a theory of symbolic interests, a theory of cultural capital, and a theory of symbolic power" (Swartz 1996:76).

Bourdieu sees the struggle for social recognition as a fundamental dimension of all social life. According to Swartz (1996:73), "Bourdieu rejects the idea that social existence can be segmented and hierarchically organized into distinct spheres, such as the social, cultural, and the economic." Ultimately, for Bourdieu, so-called "culture" necessarily embodies these various dimensions. Although he explicitly avoided the term "culture" and preferred to focus on "practice," his explication of people's highly routinized daily lives (habitus), the maintenance of "fields of power," and the political economy of symbolic practices was a significant contribution to anthropology (Bourdieu 1972). His theoretical work introduced a way for anthropologists to conceptualize culture in terms of power and stratification, as opposed to previous notions of culture which overlooked the internal diversity within cultures and the vested interests of individual actors.

Post-Modernism and the Critique of Culture

While some authors argue that the idea of culture has been in crisis from the moment it began to take distinct shape (Herbert 1991:17), Pasquinelli argues that the debate over the concept is, more specifically, "an imported crisis, being a consequence of the violent impact of post-modern criticism on anthropological paradigms" (1996:54). It is in the hands of postmodernists that the concept truly became destabilized. With them, the concept is not simply criticized on the grounds that it inadequately deals with the complexity of human lives, but rather what is being questioned is the very connection between the concept, the nature of ethnographic research, and the goals of the discipline.

Lila Abu-Lughod (1991), for instance, is perhaps one of the most outspoken critics of the concept. Influenced by Edward Said's (1978) work on Orientalist discourses, she unreservedly equates the culture

concept with the colonialist enterprise, suggesting instead that "one powerful tool for unsettling the culture concept and subverting the process of 'othering' it entails is to write 'ethnographies of the particular'" (Abu-Lughod 1991:149). In addition, she claims that "by focusing on particular individuals and their changing relationships, one would necessarily subvert the most problematic connotations of culture: homogeneity, coherence, and timelessness" (1991:154). Ideal as this may sound, a shift towards the particular is not without its own set of problems, nor is such a focus the solution to the challenge of representation. Rather, it should be seen simply as an alternative way (among many) of doing research and one that, accordingly, produces different results from another approach. Certain research designs pose certain kinds of questions which require the conceptualization of "culture," while others can very well do without it. The concept may serve as a conceptual tool in order to ask certain questions, evoke particular responses from research subjects, or reveal important insights as to how research subjects themselves conceive of or understand "culture."

A shift towards the particular carries with it a whole set of other assumptions which beg further theoretical questions and considerations. For instance, an emphasis on the particular merely privileges the individual as a site of coherent meaning and, ironically, furthers the risk of taking the individual to serve as a metonymic symbol of the whole. Abu-Lughod (1991:154) acknowledges, however, that a shift to the particular necessarily entails capturing agents' "multiple, shifting, competing statements," which, in this case, suggests that agents are in fact not a site of coherent meaning. Nevertheless, the case then becomes one of treating an agent's shifting statements as still providing some coherent meaning in relation to the larger cultural context in which the individual is embedded.

Postmodernists contend that "culture" is a tool of modernist hegemony or, more precisely, "a malignant development of scientistic rationalism that wields truth as power in order to distance, control and oppress others" (Boggs 2004:190). Pasquinelli (1996:67) also points out that, because the concept has its roots in modernity, it has also been the instrument of master narratives which have enabled modernity to represent the other. The magnitude of these criticisms is much farther reaching than simply saying that the nebulous concept

of culture inadequately captures the complexity of human lives. What postmodernists are really attacking is the foundation upon which anthropology was built and the way it has continued to conduct itself over the last century.

Taking this into consideration, we can see how the culture concept is a convenient target for postmodernists as a result of its centrality within the discipline. After all, if the goal is to deconstruct or reinvent conventional ethnographic practices, why not start with a critical analysis of the very concept that enabled, from its inception, the discipline to take shape? This desire to break from the modernist tradition through attempts to destabilize the culture concept suggests that the larger issue at hand is perhaps not the concept itself, but rather its association with early modernist philosophy. If this is indeed the case, it suggests that the rigid post-modern view of the concept "assumes that analytic constructs such as culture do not and cannot change as they engage new insights, emphases and topics" (Brightman 1995:541). Brightman raises a cogent point here because, indeed, the postmodernist criticism tends to treat the concept uniformly as though its conceptualization in current research is not altogether different from its use within the evolutionist framework.

Counter-arguments to postmodernism suggest that there would, in fact, be no debate over the culture concept if the crisis of representation were not exaggerated. Geuijen, for instance, argues that "if this criticism [the crisis of representation] is taken seriously in anthropology, not only the notion of representation should be rejected, but anthropology as such has to cease existing in its present form" (1995:xvi). The real crisis appears to be the issue of representation in general and not necessarily the issue of the representation of "culture(s)" specifically. One could also argue that the post-modern emphasis on reflexivity actually suggests that one could offer better or more sophisticated representations of "culture" by incorporating techniques of stylized self-reflection.

Pasquinelli's (1996:69) description of the vacuum left by the crisis of the culture concept due to the clash between modernity and post-modernity is an accurate one which simultaneously brings into question the future of anthropological knowledge. Handler asserts that "anthropologists today do very little culture theory; rather, like their colleagues in cultural studies, they theorize race/class/gender/power, the state, the body, the gaze, hegemony, resistance, and so

on" (1997:77). If this is the case, it does not appear that the absence of a culture concept would significantly alter the shape of the discipline. In fact, one could argue that the work of post-modern anthropologists illustrates the discipline's lack of uniformity by demonstrating how the concept of culture is neither singular nor an invariable analytical category. On the other hand, if the culture concept is doomed to become a mere archaism, the future of anthropological knowledge is indeed full of uncertainty given the concept's long-standing centrality within the discipline.

The vacuum that would be left by the discarding of the concept would need to be filled if anthropology were to continue meaningfully with its projects. Suggestions such as Renato Rosaldo's calling for a "remaking of social analysis . . . with a view toward redefining the concept of culture" (1989:208; cf. Brightman 1995:510) is at best hopeful but is still rather vague in terms of suggesting a meaningful direction for the future of anthropological knowledge. The post-modern rhetoric which presents culture as a concept in need of redefinition or one that is an antiquity from the past to be transcended or replaced (Brightman 1995:509) is ultimately unproductive and remains simply within the realm of rhetoric while it does not actually bring to the table a more convincing, constructive, or practical replacement for the concept of culture.

While some postmodernists adamantly urge for the complete replacement of the culture concept, others like Clifford (1986) more moderately acknowledge that culture is "a construct valuable for its pluralism and relativism but seriously flawed in its primordialist assumptions" (Brightman 1995:528). In addition, Clifford even describes himself as "straining for a concept that can preserve culture's differentiating functions while conceiving of collective identity as a hybrid, often discontinuous inventive process" (1988:10). Such an admission from a key figure associated with post-modern anthropological thought is an important step out of the vacuum created by post-modern criticisms of the culture concept. Indeed, when Clifford (1988) argues that "culture" should be replaced, he does not do so flippantly with the sole goal of discarding the concept entirely because it has little worth. He maintains instead that "culture" should "be replaced by some set of relations that preserves the concept's differential and relativist functions" (Clifford 1988:274). Without this proposed direction for the future of the

concept, the debate itself over the concept will be doomed to recycling the same arguments and definitions while simultaneously reducing the complexity of the concept to mere rhetoric.

Conclusion: Recapitulation of the Debate

From its inception in the evolutionist framework to its debatable utility in the post-modern age, "culture" has proven to be a dynamic, complex, and engaging concept that has clearly demonstrated its staying power within the discipline. Despite claims that it is nothing but "a sort of proto-concept that anthropologists could do very well without" (Gellner 1985; cf. Pasquinelli 1996:53), it does not appear that the concept will go away soon judging from the volume of writing that scholars have dedicated to the topic. Wimmer suggests that, "instead of trying to 'save culture' on the level of definitions, one can do this by resituating the concept in a paradigmatic framework that avoids the pitfalls of functionalism and hermeneutics" (1999:S26). Put simply, one can certainly engage with the concept more critically by understanding previous formulations of the concept and the complex historical context within which it arose. As Brightman aptly points out, "When we encounter arguments today that the culture constructs should be abandoned, we must naturally wonder which of its formulations from among all the possible ones we should be rid of" (1995:527).

The development of the concept of culture within anthropology is an historical accretion of ideas. It would be negligent (not to mention impossible) for one to discard the concept entirely, thereby denying it of its complex history. Brumann argues, "whether anthropologists like it or not, it appears that people – and not only those with power – want culture, and they often want it in precisely the bounded, reified, essentialized, and timeless fashion that most of us now reject" (1991:11). This claim provides further reason for why anthropologists should be more attentive to the concept of culture because, as Brumann (1991) suggests, social actors themselves have a vested interest in the concept. Hence, its utility despite critiques of its futility, presents anthropologists with the unique challenge of continuing to reflect on its analytical use within the discipline while also considering the politics surrounding its employment in various contexts.

Notes

[1] See Robert Brightman's (1995) article titled "Forget Culture: Replacement, Transcendence, Relexification" for a detailed discussion of the objections to the notion of culture based on the oppositive pairs of meaning signified by the concept itself.

[2] I make a distinction here between "useful" and "relevant" because I believe that even those who argue that the concept is not useful would agree that it is still relevant. Even refutations of the concept necessarily entail a re-visitation and reexamination of the concept, which suggests that it is certainly not an inconsequential one.

[3] I borrowed this distinction from Pasquinelli (1996). She, however, also includes an additional abstract phase which she believes preceded the symbolic phase. In the abstract phase she discusses Boasian anthropology and the work of structural-functionalists. I purposely omitted this phase in my discussion here because it is irrelevant for the point I wish to make about Lévi-Strauss' theoretical contributions. Also, Pasquinelli does not actually mention Lévi-Strauss in the symbolic phase, yet I believe that, although himself not firmly planted within the tradition, his contributions at least paved the way for figures later associated with it.

[4] I mention Turner only briefly here and will focus my attention instead on Geertz because, for the purposes of this paper, I wish to illustrate how Geertz's explicit proposal for a semiotic theory of culture was an important contribution in the theoretical development of the concept. One could certainly argue, however, that Turner's emphasis on ritual processes and social transformations was a more important methodological contribution to anthropology because it enabled a better understanding of how culture is constructed and maintained through these processes. Nevertheless, I choose to focus on Geertz for his more explicit discussion of the concept of culture.

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