

Workshop 10

The Benefits of ‘Culture‘

Convenor:

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In recent years, the status of “culture“ - as a term, a concept, and an empirical reality - has been intensely debated within our discipline. While numerous anthropologists are worried about the essentialising and reifying implications they see in its definition and usage, the general public, not rarely including our informants, take it up readily, applying it to all sorts of phenomena even if in questionable ways. Some have suggested avoiding “culture“ or replacing it with another, less misleading term/concept, but it is doubtful whether any candidate captures all its nuances. Others have recommended capitalising on the prestige “culture“ has gained in neighbouring disciplines and outside academia, converting it into a foothold for spreading our insights more effectively. Whether “culture“ is still ours at all appears questionable, however, now that so many other disciplines use it or even name themselves after it. Contributions should address the quandary of “culture“ from a variety of angles: theoretical arguments and strategies for dealing with “culture“ or for getting rid of it; historical reflections on the intellectual paths “culture“ has taken; methodological ideas on how to responsibly and persuasively describe, delimit, measure, and explain the culture/s there are in empirical reality; and ethnographic analyses of what popular, political, and informant uses and abuses of “culture“ entail could all help to clarify what anthropology stands to gain or lose on account of “culture“.

Challenging New Frontiers

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As the boundaries of traditional disciplines become blurred and academics become increasingly interdisciplinary, cultural geographers, historians and literary critics have gained “street credibility on the cultural scene“. While many disciplines have “invaded“ the traditional preserve of anthropology, anthropologists have failed to reverse this process by challenging topics that are primarily associated with other fields. Citizenship, for example, has frequently been regarded as a „culture-blind“ concept of greater relevance to sociologists and politicians than to anthropologists. Yet the notion of citizenship – even in theoretically civic societies – is deeply rooted in the majority culture context. Although other disciplines may dwell on the concept of culture, their approach is different (often textually based) and can hardly replace anthropology, which employs a methodology that offers unparalleled insights into state politics, ethnic conflicts and everyday cultural contexts. This contribution

argues that anthropology, like culture, is a process rather than an object of study, and that anthropologists are uniquely placed to become proactive in subverting the traditional subject boundaries.

The Political Use of the Anthropological Concept of “Culture“

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Debating the benefits of “culture“ has different levels of reflection. One of these is the political discussion of the social use of the term. It becomes necessary to attempt to clarify the sense and position that “culture“ occupies in anthropological theory. Nevertheless, this effort will not avoid the social and political use of the term to exalt difference and to justify inequality among groups. The political use of an idea of “culture“ does not depend on how the anthropological practice is developed, but on the tendency of modern society to set up “scientific“ arguments to justify the social and political structures of capitalist society. In this respect, the current use of “culture“ is similar to the previous one of “race“ or “ethnic group“; all of them demonstrate how scientific and political discourses are developed simultaneously in western society. This political use of anthropological concepts is clearly present in nationalist discourses.

Identity, Culturality and Politics

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In the past decade I have been collaboratively working out a comprehensive analytical framework on identity and conflict. It distinguishes three levels of extension (the individual, the group, the community) where identity is construed in terms of personality, sociality and culturality dimensions. The model is deliberately non-essentialist, dynamic and multifaceted. It has been applied in the description of several cases around the world (France, Belgium, Siberia, Kivu-Rwanda, Bolivia, etc.). I argue that an analytical framework is needed, allowing us to speak with scientific rigour about the various dimensions of identity. The present paper focuses on the notion of culturality and its relevance as “one dimension of identity dynamics“. It is obvious that the notion of culturality has a markedly different and indeed more restricted meaning here than that of culture in most anthropological studies. I propose this particular notion of culture deliberately and consciously in a context where „culture“ increasingly appears to be replacing “race“ within the discourse of the extreme right in Europe. Hence, introducing a notion of culturality in identity discussions is a politically relevant move, proposed both on the basis of scientific rationality and on the basis of political choices. An example from the field of studies of our centre will illustrate the argument.

Kultur contra Culture? The Shaping of a Central Concept by Central Europeans, from Herder to Malinowski

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This paper takes up the Workshop's invitation to reflect on the past "intellectual paths 'culture' has taken" as a condition for understanding where we are today. The origins are shrouded in obscurity. In one popular account, Bohannan and van der Elst argue that 1871 was the *annus mirabilis*: the near simultaneous publication of Tylor's *Primitive Culture* and Morgan's *Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity of the Human Family* constituted anthropology's definitive riposte to Darwin's biological evolutionism. Yet further transformations took place a generation later as Boas and Malinowski moved decisively away from evolutionism. To what extent does the culture concept in the hands of these pioneers reflect the German-language milieu in which they were formed as scholars? Can modern anthropological relativism be traced back intellectually to German humanistic relativism, as expressed by Herder in the late eighteenth century? Or is it more important to move beyond a narrowly intellectual history by examining how "Kultur" became caught up in nineteenth century nationalist politics, and nowhere more virulently than in German-speaking Central Europe?

The answers could help us to recognise the extent to which twentieth century anthropology remained in thrall to nationalism; and to speculate on whether the current decline in the significance of the nation-state will lead merely to redefinitions of the concept of culture in anthropology, or to its demise.

Why Culture Is More than Symbols, Sharing, Tradition, or Identity

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This paper addresses four common misconceptions concerning the anthropological notion of culture. One is that culture is invariably symbolic. Much sharing of behavioural patterns, however, occurs with little awareness and symbolisation, yet it builds on social learning and imitation nonetheless. Second, culture is often assumed to be homogeneously distributed and also to be the only thing that specific groups of people share. Individuals differ in manifold ways, however, sharing some mental and behavioural habits with some people (e.g. colleagues) and others with other people (e.g. age-mates), making multiculturalism the rule. Also, culture finds its limits both in individual specificity and in pan-human commonalities. Third, culture is believed to be traditional and conservative. Yet for simply copying mindsets across generations, nothing can beat genetic transmission. Culture emerged because it enables individuals to profit from the innovations of others before these become genetically embedded; breaking with tradition thus ironically lies at its root. Fourth,

culture is often equated with collective identity and ethnicity. A lot of culture, however, is simply too banal to serve nationalist narratives. Also, ethnic groups are often less culturally distinct and uniform than they believe, and personal identity also needs neither be collective nor ethnic.