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“The Concept of Culture”

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EXAM QUESTION:

The Concept of Culture

In the last 10-15 years, the concept of culture has been debated, attacked and “deconstructed” by numerous scholars doing cultural analysis. Outline and discuss some of the main arguments in these debates focusing on two or more contributions to the debate.

Introduction

All contributors to the field of cultural analysis inevitably encounter some intriguing questions: what does ‘culture’ mean? What is the locus of culture? By which means can ‘culture’ be isolated and become the object of investigation? Accordingly it seems that no matter how one chooses to go about, this term tends to elude definition. From a methodological viewpoint fuzzy concepts and vague terminology question the very foundation of cultural studies.

One of the main reasons for ‘culture’s’ intangibility should be sought after in the very meaning of ‘definition’. As most scholars agree, the solution to a more confined notion lies in drawing up the boundaries of the term and thereby the concept it denotes (cf. definition= demarcation).

This paper deals with the challenging concept of culture and present recent suggestions how to avoid some of the pitfalls contributed by a wide array of fields within humanities itself. In the first paragraph I will deal with different historical positions within cultural studies. The prime reason for this being that an understanding of the present complexity of the notion yields a diachronic view on its evolution and thereby former positions. Then I will change focus and give an account of some of the contemporary approaches that challenge the surviving connotations from the past. By applying headings as “**ethnography of the particular**” (Lila Abu-Lughod), “**complex societies**” (Frederik Barth) and “**multiculturalism**” (Gerd Bauman) recent attempts have been made to establish new scientific paradigms that contest the traditional view. Finally I will discuss, conclude and hereby contribute with some personal remarks.

‘Culture’ – a complex notion¹

Kluckhohn & Kroeber’s seminal work, “*Culture. A Critical Review of concepts and definitions.*” (1963), often serve as an illustration of the severe trouble associated with an exhaustive definition of ‘culture’. A total number of 164 explicit interpretations of the concept are offered here – but maybe even more striking is the fact that these definitions solely represent the scientific anthropological and sociological literature written in English.

To reach an understanding of how this multiplicity has arisen, a brief look through the history of the term and the scientific framework within which it has been engaged might prove helpful. One should bear in mind that what has actually changed is not as much ‘culture’ (whatever that is) as the ontological premises of different schools and scholars through time. Roughly one could sum up the life of the concept of culture by distinguishing the idea of ‘culture’ in its singular form from ‘cultures’ in the plural. But eventually threads of interrelated discourses (scientific and everyday debate) all contribute to the complex web that encompasses ‘culture’.

From culture to cultures

Culture in its singular form refers to a holistic worldview in which culture is depicted as a linear development from primitive to sophisticated. According to this understanding civilizations could possess more or less culture, the attributes of which were single-handedly determined by western ideals. Closely related to this view is the idea that travelling in space would resemble travelling in time as e.g. African tribes were considered to be situated on a cultural level that European nations had already transcended. Studying ‘primitive’ societies and comparing them to more developed ones would help solve the riddle of evolution condensed in the question: “what triggers human evolution?”

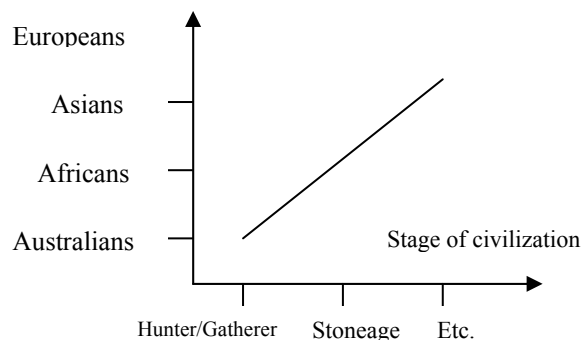


Fig. 1
EARLY UNDERSTANDING OF ‘CULTURE’

The idea that ‘culture’ was best observed in ‘primitive’ societies was, although very persistent, eventually replaced by the new concept of ‘cultures’ in the plural. This approach allows cultural diversity and acknowledges that cultures are not necessarily based on the same logic². Each culture is now seen as a self-contained unit irreconcilable with other cultures. Culture is very much thought of as a physical thing that can be possessed but according to its uniqueness it cannot be measured by means of parameters and ideals with origin in another culture. Among other problematic issues ‘cultural relativism’ invites the question: “how is it possible to uphold a view of a world consisting of concealed entities each applying different logics and still have universal concepts as “right” and “wrong”? (More problems concerning cultural relativism and the essentialist view are considered in the subsequent paragraphs). In the past century a wide array of theoretical positions have replaced

¹ In “Kulturbegrebets Kulturhistorie” (The cultural history of the concept of culture), Hauge et al. (eds.)1988, Fink defines the concept of culture as ‘hyper-complex’ and gives the following elaboration (paraphrased from Danish): “A word can be defined as ‘hyper-complex’ provided that it has a semantic pool containing components of meaning that are in mutual conflict if seen in isolation or properties that exist on inconsistent levels of interpretation, but still has an indelible air of unity and an indisputable inherent coherence.” (Fink p. 22 in “Kulturbegrebets Kulturhistorie”)

² The idea of cultural diversity is most often associated with the German/American linguist and anthropologist Franz Boas – often entitled “the father of American anthropology”. By collecting narratives in the original languages combined with a translation from the Indian and Eskimo communities in North America, Boasian activities have contributed with collateral information concerning oral folklore, cultural issues and native theories of origin.

each other; structuralism (Claude Levi-Strauss), ethnoscience/enculturation (Goodenough), marxism (Leslie White), symbolism/semiotics (Geertz) or co-existed in an ceaseless mutual battle over hegemony ending in post-modern approaches borrowing whatever suitable for explanation, without the concern of a consistent and full-fledged 'theory of man'.

Intertwined discourses – mixed connotations

Apart from having a scientific history, the word 'culture' can of course be looked upon etymologically and from the perspective of laymen. Inevitably connotations of earlier interpretations and folk use mix up and echo regardless of enthusiastic attempts to rethink and reissue the subject in question in the academic world.

Judged by the extensive use, 'culture' has become a very successful and almost omnipresent concept in everyday political and public discourse. With reference to 'culture' a wide array of issues are 'explained'. Though often plausible to a certain extent, the folk use is rarely question marked; the everyday sense of 'culture' and familiar words are employed without reflection – a shared understanding is taken for granted.

As opposed to this, contemporary cultural anthropology, most frequently giving 'culture' as its subject matter, has become very cautious during the last decades in concerning the use of the term. Rarely do anthropologists try to explain something with reference to culture as such. For long time anthropology had prided itself on having successfully introduced the concept into the debate. Today it sometimes seems that anthropologists are not that happy about this success. Frederick Barth suggested a ten-year break in using the word – serious or not this gives an idea of the increasing uneasiness in dealing with the 'term'.

This is by no means an exotic dilemma as lots of concepts within human sciences are characterized by a condition that Anthony Giddens calls 'dual hermeneutics' (Giddens 1976). They enter scientific discourse from non-scientific discourse, but later they often find their way back into non-scientific, general discourse. Each of these steps implies a certain change in the meaning of the concept in question. Such concepts are not solely understood and interpreted, discussed and defined by cultural scientists but also by the media and public in general. Consequently cultural sciences do not really possess the power to define these concepts but have to share that competence with everyday discourses. As a result, cultural sciences cannot take for granted that any concepts are employed in a way that has been agreed upon as 'correct' by cultural scientists (if such an agreement is ever reached).

The abovementioned topics jointly contribute to the intricacy of operating with a single concept of culture. However the interpretation is of course closely linked to the optics engaged in the investigation in question. In the following paragraphs I will present and discuss some of the recent contributions to the scientific field of anthropology that all employ a concept of culture and therefore necessarily have suggest ways to deal with it.

Lila Abu-Lughod – *ethnography of the particular*

“If “culture”, shadowed by coherence, timelessness, and discreteness, is the prime anthropological tool for making “other”, and difference, as feminists and halfies reveal, tends to be a relationship of power, then perhaps anthropologists should consider strategies for writing against culture.”

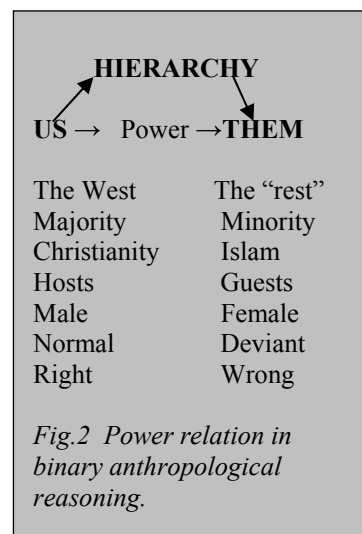
(Abu-Lughod p. 147)

These lines somewhat sum up the position of Abu-Lughod (1991), who, as a representative of both feminists and halfies, finds herself in a privileged position to challenge the most basic premises of cultural anthropology. Taking its departure in the trend of “writing culture” as proposed by Clifford & Marcus (1986), Abu-Lughod slightly shifts perspective and takes the special dilemmas faced by feminists and halfies (a term referring to people whose national or cultural identity is mixed by virtue of migration) as the impetus of her critique. In her own words she explores how this perspective “unsettles the boundary between self and other”, which eventually leads to a reconsideration of the concept of culture, which, as it is most often defined in anthropological discourse, enforces a rigid division into ‘us’ and ‘them’ accompanied by a sense of hierarchy.

‘Us and them’

Though disguised, pretended or actually believed to have another goal, the old heritage of dividing the world into the West and the non-West still pervades anthropological discourses. As already mentioned this view is problematic. Due to western hegemony in academia the relationship between the West and “the rest” is basically constituted on the basis of a western notion of ‘superiority’. Furthermore crude simplification invites a binary way of reasoning along with it, which presupposes the analytical ‘self’ to be in possession of unquestionable truth. ‘We’ have no need to explain ourselves as ‘we’ constitute a concept of normality and ‘they’ exemplify deviance and thereby abnormality. Focus, in applying this view is inevitably directed towards differences at the expense of (a majority of) similarities.

Abu-Lughod emphasizes that anthropology “as a professional discourse that elaborates on the meaning of culture in order to account for, explain, and understand cultural difference, (...) also helps construct, produce and maintain it.” (p. 143). Being split between (or member of both) parties she constantly finds herself in the dilemma of speaking “for” and speaking “from” different positions and with reference to gender studies (feminist studies)³ she argues that dividing practices fundamentally are methods of enforcing inequality. What needs to be acknowledged is that any representation of the other is always a positioned truth.



Writing against culture

Abu-Lughod employs a bigger scope than the dilemma of feminists and halfies that she is caught in herself. She calls on her fellow anthropologists to “pursue, without exaggerated hopes for the power of their texts to change the world” (p. 138) and suggests three interrelated theoretical strategies, which have the power to overcome the shortcoming of former theories; the essentialization that is at the heart of the concepts of ‘culture’ and ‘society’. Here’s what she suggests:

- a focus on practice and discourse.
- a focus on the historical, political, and economic relationship of the anthropologist and the people amongst whom he or she works.

³ Whether labelled ‘gender studies’ or ‘feminist studies’ this scientific field struggles with connotations that inevitably equals gender issues with women’s issues. This inherent bias of ‘women’ being the ‘marked form’ is mirrored on another level in cultural studies namely the western bias within anthropology.

- the writing of detailed "ethnographies of the particular" (pp. 149-157).

The first suggestion is more or less derivatives of what is represented in the contributions by Bourdieu (e.g.1990)(Practice) and Foucault (e.g.1982) (Discourse) and other related schools. The post-modern turn in cultural studies has in response to its received critique somewhat focused on relationship (2) but not as much on the historical, political and economic relationship as on the subjective (solipsistic) part.

The third option is the one Abu-Lughod herself advocates. "Ethnography of the particular" implies that the traditional inductive reasoning from a specific case to a generally approved fact is no longer desirable, let alone functional. Describing the complexity of individual behaviour by applying categories as class, habits and other kinds of formal labelling facilitates unwanted abstraction and reification. The scientist virtually constructs the object in question in order to make it fit the framework. The logical conclusion and the major flaw of this approach is that the theory itself easily attains an ontological level – in this way epistemological matters transform into ontological matters and are in this manner ascribed inherent properties.

This is one reason to be wary of the commonplace tendency generalize and homogenize. Abu-Lughod furthermore stresses that because cultural studies is "part of a professional discourse of "objectivity" and expertise, it is inevitably a language of power. (...) it is the language of those who seem to stand apart from and outside of what they are describing." (p.150). Within this power relation the hierarchy is automatically determined in favour of the academic viewpoints and against everyday life conversations. This relation facilitates a gap between the writers and the people written about. In fact Abu-Lughod, in a different context though, accentuates the work of untrained anthropologists as their approaches often show refreshingly unconventional methods including the ideals that she advocates: more openness concerning position, more focus on the individuals still making less assertion – in other words ordinary experience.

To invert the search for homogeneity, coherence and timelessness, Abu-Lughod proposes experimentation with fieldwork-based narratives that by textual means emphasizes the particularity. The life of individuals is a complex process, which is not accountable for by bounded and demarcated entities. Anthropology needs a new paradigm where the ongoing depiction of 'otherness' is replaced by a more dynamic concept of culture. Though being 'European' the life of a particular European is simply too complex to be encapsulated within this single term. Furthermore narratives offer a notion of time that is important in describing relations and the elaborations of these. And foremost narratives brilliantly illustrate the unpredictability of the course of a day or a life and at the same time reveal the similarities that lie under the surface of specific labels. According to Abu-Lughod "the ethnography of the particular" can provide a new vocabulary of familiarity into the discourse, a familiarity that is defined by human convention instead of professional labels.

"To say that we all live in the particular is not to say that for any of us the particulars are the same"

(p.157)

Frederik Barth

If any of the three scholars I present in this paper, Barth explicitly renounce allegiance to the essentialist position that he associates with reducing complex phenomena to "a homogenized unitary "Culture" by distilling and generalizing whatever regularities one can discern in

institutionalised expressions.”(Barth, 1989 p. 130) He severely condemns the self-induced impasse of contemporary anthropology – the grounds of which he finds in a widespread tendency of using too narrow focus and imposing coherence unto essentially discrete phenomena. In his own words the contents of anthropological journals have reached a deadlock where “They silently reaffirm the assumption of pervasive logical coherence in culture without exploring its extent and character; and they leave the axioms of received wisdom on “culture” undisturbed by any number of such reports from the field.” (p.122)

It is needless to say, that Barth, apart from his pronounced critique, also provides means to a reconceptualization of culture. Based on his extensive Balinese studies, Barth, in “The Analysis of Culture in Complex⁴ Societies”, thoroughly supplies empirical evidence of the fallacies of traditional approaches and at the same time exemplifies how to get hold of the articulate features observed. In his strive to purify the concept of culture he puts forward a set of assertions that when combined serve an effective anthropological tool:

Meaning is a relationship: Meaning can never be captured without reference to the parties involved. In this view Barth challenges the structuralist dogma of establishing meaning relations between objects of study without attention to frame and context. Barth directs attention to the sign vehicle and the person that interacts with it. Based on his fieldwork in North Bali he elaborates on the plurality of signs engaged in complex societies and how they are not necessarily interrelated if focus is put on their inherent properties instead of an intermediary interpreter.

Culture is distributive: This assertion once and for all replaces the idea of labelling individuals according to geographical, religious or ethnic membership. Within a society people engage in a multitude of activities. Generalization by applying explanatory labels is simply not sufficient to account for people’s acts and relations.

Actors are positioned: Thus in addition to consider the connections of the anthropologist in relation to the people under study – the interrelatedness of the people and their mutual dialogues constitute a considerable insight. As there is no ‘divine’ interpretation to checkmark that the empirical data hold true, the investigator is free to establish and interpret the object of study. Openness about position justifies this approach in order not to jeopardize anthropology as an empirical science.

Material causality and social interaction shape events: Barth describes how material concerns play a very salient role in the life of city living Balinese. In spite of Hinduism being the religion of the majority of the population, the religious denial of material possessions and pursuit of wealth is pretty much the exception to the rule. Religious and material interests seem to co-exist and thrive though apparently inconsistent. In human life such paradoxes are commonplace, which calls for a dynamic view of creativity, as an equation between purpose, function and effect is not productive.

Barth doesn’t claim to hold the key to reformulation of the entire practise of anthropology but feels content that paying attention to his assertions will guide investigators in direction of “building a theory about the realm to which words like ‘culture’ and ‘society’ were intended to refer.” (p.122) Seeking to avoid the commonplace pitfalls of ‘holism’ on one side and ‘ad-hoc’ theorizing on the other Barth introduces the notion of ‘cultural streams’ to illustrate “an empirical clustering of

⁴ Barth uses this term teasingly in referring to the perplexing terminology that infests contemporary anthropology, where generally accepted definitions and usage of expressions as ‘culture’ and ‘society’ are hardly attainable. ‘Complex’ recollects of a time where different degrees of complexity equalled the cultural stage of the society under study.

certain elements in syndromes that tend to persist over time”. Whether he succeeds in not getting caught or actually manages to plant a foot in each trap I’m somewhat in doubt – I will elaborate on this further on.

Gerd Bauman - multiculturalism as a new understanding of ‘culture’

In relation to ‘multiculturalism’, a term most often associated with the rights of minority groups in political debates, simplistic interpretations tend to prevail, namely those of essentializing the idea of culture as the property of an ethnic group or race, or reifying cultures as primarily consisting of nationality or religious beliefs.

In “The Multicultural Riddle” (1999) Gerd Bauman brings forward one of the most recent contributions to an operational concept of culture, his aim being to solve this riddle. With insights gained from fieldwork in a London suburb⁵ inhabited by people representing a wide range of ethnic groups, Bauman advocates for dissolving the traditional dichotomy “essential/processual” and argues that though apparently inconsistent these two terms can actually be seen as complementary instead of contradictory. To reach this conclusion Bauman constructs (and deconstructs) what he calls ‘the multicultural triangle’ (fig.?.?) and accordingly offers arguments why neither of the three corners of the triangle does particularly well in substituting the notion of ‘culture’ as such. In the following I will sum up his main points concerning **the nation state**, **ethnicity** and **religion** as culture.

The nation state

As is true for most fields within academia, a strong western hegemony, with its starting point in ancient Greece, has dictated both content and terminology within human studies. And indeed operating with a notion of a nation state is also closely related to the history and formation of independent European nations. Bauman notes that taking its impetus in territorial fights leading back to 1400 and culminating in World War II, a new cult of sovereignty has led to an understanding of the nation as a unified whole.

Among other things this means making territorial claims by legitimate use of physical force and using monopoly to establish and preserve the nation as an ultimate entity. A metonymic projection has transformed the ‘state’ into an intentional agent with ability to declare war, make peace and control, protect and serve. Alongside with this understanding of a nation-state is another source contributing to the notion of state; namely a romantic vision of an interconnectedness between ethnicity and the struggle for liberty of a nation.

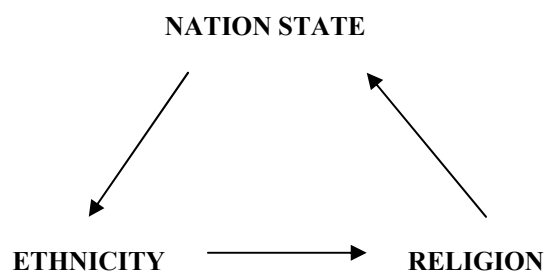


Fig.3 THE MULTICULTURAL TRIANGLE

Ethnicity ≠ culture

To equate ethnicity and cultural character is surprisingly straightforward. Time and again culture and ethnicity are used as interchangeable terms in newspaper debates and as a means to justify actions with simple reference to genetic heritage. Underneath this seemingly unproblematic equation lies a bundle of reasons as to why this link is unfortunate and by no means sound if applied in a scientific framework. As Bauman points out ethnic identity as an absolute is problematic because it, in the strict sense, boils down to a rigid division of either sharing or not sharing blood.

⁵ Southhall, situated in the near of Heathrow Airport, has due to its multitude of immigrants with different origins often been under study by anthropologists dealing with issues of ‘multiculturalism’.

And contrary to making pedigrees of domesticated animals, bloodline in relation to human ancestry is far more complex and entails some common fallacies. Bauman rectifies some of these:

- Genealogical bookkeeping is problematic if even possible at all.
- Ancestry does not determine patterns of behaviour or preferences.
- The attributes people ascribe to ethnicity are not absolute but highly dependent on context.
- ‘Ethnicity’ in its biological sense bears strong resemblance to its nineteenth-century fiction [sic] counterpart ‘race’.

Religion as culture

Religion represents the third angle in the multicultural triangle. Defining religious matters tends to be as difficult as defining the concept of culture itself as the core of religion show similar intangibility. Religion manifests itself in ceremonies and practises that are products of but not religion itself. Besides these physical manifestations streams of morals, ethics and doctrines of how to be a righteous believer bring about a deterministic spirit, which in a radical interpretation, seems to eliminate the free will of the individual. Hereby religion achieves the role of an absolute ruler, the power of which lies beyond the reach of reason and rationality. Bauman calls for caution in using this interpretation, as the absolute notion of religion is often exploited as justification for conflicts originally rooted in other aspects of social life; ethnic, national or migratory issues. As he emphasizes, “the very idea of calling some things religious and other things not, is a result of very particular historical processes” (Bauman p. 22) Or as formulated by Talal Asad: “there cannot be a universal definition of religion ... because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes” (Asad in Bauman p. 22). If accepting this viewpoint a notion of religion as a pure entity cannot exist. The boundary between religion and politics becomes a matter of interpretation - religion becomes a source of stock arguments and beliefs that are moulded to fit a given contexts.

Culture – the centre of the triangle

Having pinpointed the poles of his multicultural framework Bauman directs attention to the centre of the triangle. He defines the locus of culture (if ‘pinpointable’ at all) as the magnetic field in the middle of the triangle - surrounded by nation-state, ethnicity and religion. Whereas protagonists of the essentialist belief of self-contained entities recruit their arguments from the corners of the triangle Bauman advocates for dissolving the elements into a flux of discursive positions. As people apply different strategies in choice of linguistic register when situated in different linguistic communities, one could also argue for the existence of different cultural registers when addressing cultural issues.

Though being appropriate under certain circumstances, speaking of cultures as being specifically “Danish”, “Christian”, “Muslim” or “Asian” is a crude simplification. Although the concept of essentialized culture is a key term in any debate on multicultural issues most often it leads to polarized positions that get stuck in a rigid classification into “us” and “them”. More fruitful, Bauman argues, is the processual view in which culture is performed and comes to life in

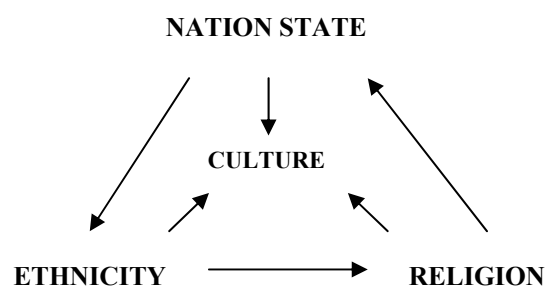


Fig.4 CULTURE AS THE MAGNETIC CENTER OF THE MULTICULTURAL TRIANGLE

social interaction. But melting these two viewpoints into one would be even more rewarding – and necessary in order to actually solve the multicultural riddle.

Loosening the straightjacket

In order to bridge the gap between the essentialist and the processual approach, ‘identity’ (whether national, religious or ethnic) has to be considered as discourse – either academic or popular. This moves the viewpoint from ‘identity’ as an absolute to ‘identification’ as a negotiated element that is highly flexible by definition. Making the fusion complete Bauman furthermore underlines that as essentialist viewpoints are always put forward in a context they inevitably transform into processual viewpoints. Hereby a distinction between essentialist/processual is no longer needed in relation to ‘identification’ as practiced in discourse. And finally ‘identity’ no longer resembles the concept of culture but is reified in verbal expressions that reveal the choice of ‘identification’ made by the person in question.

Bauman's empirical work in Southhall supports this position. Living in a multicultural reality simply requires people to operate with a flexible concept of identity as different identities to choose between gives an elastic mixture of possible practices. Here's how he puts it:” ...it is a matter of context and situation whether people engage the reifying discourse of absolute differences or the processual discourse of relational differentiations” (Bauman p.132)

Seen in perspective of the preceding paragraphs a fairly accurate rewording of the multicultural riddle according to Bauman must be “how is it possible to establish a community, state or world of justice and equality when these notions no longer can be certified within absolute entities but rather through interpretation of individuals in social interaction? Whether he solves this riddle I'm not quite sure – although adapting Bauman's equalitarian viewpoint with focus on the relational/situational identification seems to be a plausible step in order to solve it. However, terms of negotiating seldom offer equal conditions to both (all) parties, neither are they reset every time new encounters take place. On the contrary hegemony in favour of some positions are, internalised and reproduced - and reshaped at most, but hardly reset. I will continue the discussion in the next paragraph.

Discussion and conclusion

Among other things ‘globalisation’, understood as a process of time and space compression has through the last decades twisted the worldview of most people – at least in what is often labelled ‘the western world’. Increased migration in countries traditionally thought of as homogeneous has created a new multicultural reality which yields new means of conception such as ‘assimilation’, ‘integration’, ‘hybridisation’ and ‘creolization’ in order to account for this new situation and (all the same) forgetting that such processes are by no means exotic, but has actually taken place for centuries. But in the present situation mixed societies of people with different national, ethnic and religious backgrounds (what we most often label as ‘cultural differences’) has shed light on the core meaning of ‘culture’ and how the concept of culture should be handled within a scientific discourse. Not restricted to the situation in the western world but as a means to explain culture in general – what it means, where it is located and how it becomes available for anthropological observation.

When focusing on the contributions made by the scholars included in this paper it becomes obvious that they put considerable effort into rectifying what they believe to be conservative and unfruitful approaches - approaches that have had their time in power within anthropology and still sends ramifications in the way of reasoning within the field. Clearly no scholar today would engage a strict essentialist concept of culture that regard culture as a mosaic of neatly ordered entities. Neither would anyone reduce culture to become synonymous with

nationality, ethnicity or religion, the problem being that such simplistic views are often found in public discourse and accordingly “contaminating” the scientific concept of culture. This calls for caution. As stressed by Abu-Lughod the inherent power-relation between public and academic discourse is inevitably in favour of science, but as expressions as “clash of culture” and reified notions of culture as represented in “they bring their own culture here” persistently draws in direction of an essentialist perspective ‘folk notion’ cannot be abandoned. As everyday discourses form part of the subject matter of cultural sciences, these disciplines always have to take the non-scientific use and understanding of concepts into account. This condition of course applies also to the concept of culture. One could appropriately refer to the classical formulation of the Thomas theorem: “A situation defined as real is real in its consequences.”⁶

As touched upon in the opening paragraph a widespread discontent has developed with the use of ‘culture’, as it like most words of fashion has become an all-embracing term that pleads immunity to doubt. Due to precaution a majority of investigators has obliged ‘culture’ to live a dubious life constantly surrounded by inverted commas in order not to pretend to be able to provide the definitive meaning of the term⁷. It has been suggested (Hylland Eriksen, Barth among others) that perhaps one way to avoid the negative repercussions is to change our conceptual apparatus from nouns to verbs, a procedure that has received positive attention in gender studies (cf. “Doing Gender”, West & Zimmermann, 1987) and harkens back in anthropology to Benjamin Lee Whorf’s seminal study of Hopi in comparison to Indo-European languages (Whorf, 1956). Culture then becomes ‘culturing’ and when reconstructed as a verb rather than noun, it is no longer discrete or stable and hence cannot be captured within the traditional anthropological framework. Thus to talk of culturing reflects the notion of culture as fluid which goes beyond the static bounded units of traditional anthropology, and instead recognises the negotiated, performed, and contested elements of doing culture. This adds yet another dimension to the evolution of the concept of culture, the course of which could be represented in this way:

Culture(noun - singular) → **Cultures**(noun - plural) → **Cultural**(adjective) → **Culture** (verb)

Indeed the implications that permeate the approaches presented in this paper suggest that they direct themselves towards a dynamic notion of culture, whether implicitly or explicitly expressed in the writings.

Essentially, when **Bauman** gives an account of the inherently processual nature of culture, it bears a strong resemblance to the basic ideas within the field of discourse theory. In his framework the different discourses applied each represent a specific way of relating to cultural identity by means of using whatever strategy is appropriate in the given context. Discourses are by no means definite entities but battle to gain power. Different strategies are suitable for solving different cultural riddles – hereby he takes an important conceptual step from a monophonic to a polyphonic voice.

Barth has, for most of his career, disparaged the notions of ‘society’ and ‘culture’, a dissatisfaction, which has led to his theoretical innovations. His contention is that these concepts are “fundamentally stamped with the questionable assertions of holism and integration”(1989, p. 120) since, among other things, they “celebrate the connectedness of disparate institutions” and the “sharing of premises, values and experiences within a community” (1989, p.120), assertions of

⁶ The Thomas Theorem is found in W.I. Thomas (1923), “*The Unadjusted Girl with cases and standpoint for behaviour analysis*” Boston: Little Brown and Company.

⁷ My humble contribution is no exception.

dubious veracity. As a remedy he proposes seeing “major patterns of culture” as being the “results of particular *social* processes” (ibid, p.123). Here the “multiplicity, inconsistency and contentiousness” that constitutes a culture, which manifests itself in a “multiplicity of partial and interfering patterns, asserting themselves to varying degrees in various fields and localities”, should be the focus of analysis (ibid, p.128).

However, demonstrating the difficulty in discarding deeply entrenched anthropological ontologies, in effect Barth’s ‘culture’ (which in this specific study is based on fieldwork in Bali) is divided up into “streams’ of cultural traditions each exhibiting an empirical clustering of certain elements” which endure over time and can be expected to “mingle in the life of the local and regional populations” (ibid, p.130).

As the argument unfolds it is clear that these ‘streams’ are in effect shadowy stand-ins for a more traditional notion of ‘process’, since each stream can be thought to engage in boundary maintenance, effecting coherence and closure making strong resemblance to the notion of culture as pathwork of bounded entities – but on another level though. Still this indicates that he is somewhat working within a semi-holistic paradigm reifying the individual belonging to a society in which an adequate conceptualisation of social practice has no place, since it stands logically opposed to doctrines espousing holism and individualism.

Lila Abu-Lughod explores a phenomenon most probably a fundamental property of human cognition – a division of the perceived surroundings into known and unknown. In an anthropological context this means narrowing the focus to explaining and describing ‘others’ and taking the undefined ‘selves’ as an unquestionable basis of comparison. Bearing on the findings of other feminist theorist Abu-Lughod stresses the problematic issue of speaking with a uniform voice on behalf of women in general. This insight is further developed in her proposal of writing ‘ethnographies of the particular’ – a tool for “unsettling the culture concept and subverting the process of ‘othering’”. By emphasizing the particularity of cases by use of “participants’ discussion, recollections, disagreements and action”, Abu-Lughod (p. 153) hopes to contribute to a change of methodological approach that at least brings bias and relational positions of the ethnographer and the subject to the surface.

Acknowledgement of the complexity of human life seems to be the foundational premises for contemporary anthropology in dealing with a concept of culture. Though serving immediately intelligible explanations of how ‘culture’ works and manifests itself, generalizations on cultural issues bring about an unfortunate reductionistic interpretation. Within a couple of decades anthropological practice has turned in favour of a dynamic perception in which people are regarded as active culture-makers manoeuvring in a cultural complex world⁸. Culture can no longer be limited to consist of entrenched confined units because intentions, attitudes and tools for creating an identity cannot be calculated or part of any sort of cultural equation.

If cultural streams, as Barth suggests, are depictable at all within the life an individual, the methodological framework has to be equipped with means to capture tributaries of each stream as well as the unpredictability of human nature, that results in ‘upstream’ excursions as well as ‘mainstream’ activities - otherwise it fails its purpose.

⁸ This position is supported in the publications of Karen Fog Olwig and Kirsten Hastrup under the headings “cultural complexity” and “dynamic social fields” (e.g. 1997)

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