

ESSAYS

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WHEN: A Conversation about Culture

For decades now culture has been a topic anthropologists argue about: WHAT it does or does not mean, IF it should or should not constitute a central concept of the discipline. This essay steps outside these arguments to rephrase the issue and our approach to it. It explores WHEN it makes sense to use the cultural concept: Should we proceed inductively or deductively in constructing connections between the concept and our data? And instead of assertions by one author, it utilizes a debate format to collectively raise possibilities to ponder. [*culture, induction, deduction, anthropological analysis*]

Introduction

Robert Borofsky

How does one get one's hands, conceptually speaking, around the cultural concept? It seems so definite—a term referred to again and again in both the anthropological and popular literature. And yet, as one examines the concept, it appears increasingly illusive. Different people perceive it in different ways, and, perhaps not unexpected given its popularity, the concept often carries—in its different renditions—various political overtones.

With culture, the devil often appears in the details. Many people embrace the concept in the abstract. But they argue, sometimes heatedly, over what the term actually means.

As Hatch writes: “Even though the term has been discussed in countless books and articles, there is still a large degree of uncertainty in its use—anthropologists employ the notion in fundamentally different ways” (1973:1).

Take for example Kroeber and Kluckhohn's famous *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions* (1952). Most readers will recall Kroeber and Kluckhohn discovering more than 150 definitions for the concept. (Playing on Johnst's famous phrase—often attributed to Hermann Goering—Appiah writes, “when you hear the word ‘culture,’ you reach for your dictionary.”) And many may approvingly nod at Kroeber and Kluckhohn's contention that “culture is the central concept of anthropology”

(1952:36). But few will remember the definition the two senior figures offered for the concept. (It is quoted in full by Shweder below for interested readers.) Their definition never really caught on within the discipline.

Looking closer at Kroeber and Kluckhohn's work, we perceive a political agenda of sorts. The volume, with its historical breadth and depth, became the definitive study of the subject. It remained so for years. In offering a definition for culture, Kroeber and Kluckhohn were doing more than simply adding another to the pile produced by their predecessors. Their definition, they suggested, involved how the concept "is now formulated by most social scientists" (1952:181)—a rather debatable assertion. But there was an important implication here: The two authorities, having conducted authoritative research, were trying to claim the authoritative definition. As noted, it did not work.

Broadening these points, we see parallel dynamics involved in various popular and disciplinary usages of the cultural concept. Let me offer three examples.

One sense of culture, repeatedly referred to, implies cumulative development. Beliefs, behaviors and/or artifacts are portrayed as developing through time, often toward some progressive, positive end. One might cite Matthew Arnold in this regard: culture, he suggests, is "a pursuit of our total perfection . . . the best which has been thought and said in the world" (1950:viii). E. B. Tylor (as paraphrased by Stocking 1968:79) wrote: "the phenomena of culture . . . were the products of progressive development." Building on this, culture is sometimes portrayed as the evolutionary product that makes humans, broadly speaking, human (see, e.g., Geertz 1973:33–54; White 1949:33; cf. Hallowell 1955:2–13). But what is progress? The definer often frames the answer in terms of a hierarchy with, to no one's surprise, his or her perspective on top.

A second usage views culture as antagonistic to certain historical developments centered in Europe. Christopher Herbert notes: "the idea of culture appears on the scene as the central element of a long, closely knit English tradition of social criticism directed against the disintegrating and debasing effects of industrialization" (1991:22). Culture (or cultures), in this sense, involves styles of life and learning that run counter to the negative effects of modernization. This perspective remains common among anthropologists: culture is often portrayed as the beliefs and/or behaviors people retain despite interaction with the "West." Sahlins, for example, refers to "culturalism" as "the claim to one's own mode of existence . . . in opposition to a foreign-imperial presence" (1994:379). Culture, in this sense, conveys resistance to alien or alienating life-ways. Or as he famously phrases it: "local people integrate the World System into something even more inclusive: their system of the world" (1994:384).

A third sense of culture (or cultures) is still more political and is often associated with German nationalism. Norbert Elias writes, "the German concept of *Kultur* places

special stress on national differences and the particular identity of groups. . . . [It] mirrors the self-consciousness of a nation which had constantly to seek out and constitute its boundaries anew, in a political as well as a spiritual sense" (1994:5). Anthropologists often draw on this tradition to emphasize a people's shared beliefs and behaviors that distinguish them from others and, at the same time, offer them a sense of shared meaning. Many modern nation-states draw on this sense of culture in seeking some form of collective coherence (see Anderson 1983). But as recent news stories make clear, the communion produced by such a national "culture" often seems illusive if not illusionary.

Culture, then, is not a set term—some natural phenomena that one can consensually describe (as tends to happen with hydrogen atoms, hamsters, and humans). Culture is what various people conceive it to be, and, as these definitions make clear, different people perceive it in different ways for different ends. This point leads to another: The cultural concept has probably never been defined in terms that all anthropologists, now and/or in the past, concur on (see, e.g., Brightman 1995:541; Ortner 1984:126; as well as Hatch [1973:1] above). This disjunction of meanings might be said to be the concept's most enduring disciplinary characteristic. Nor, as we saw, does the concept fly free from political overtones. The concept takes up so much intellectual and historical space that it almost seems inevitable that the concept's various usages will be framed by politics and politics by it.

Which leads to another point: Rather than seeking the concepts's underlying essence or reality, we should view it as a conceptual tool that can be applied in different ways for different ends with different effectiveness. I would suggest two ways anthropologists generally apply the concept today.

The first involves an affirmation of discipline solidarity. Defining anthropology as the study of culture, as occurs in various introductory textbooks, says less about what anthropologists do than about the politics of inclusion whereby an author seeks to find a common underlying theme for a plethora of disciplinary projects. It is usually a stretch.

In a related and more effective sense, culture has served anthropology for many decades as a code word—within a broader disciplinary pidgin—that allows American anthropologists to speak to one another across their fragmented and fragmenting specializations. The conversations often are limited; each party does not necessarily embrace, or even fully grasp, another's research agenda. Nonetheless, they have been able to carry on some semblance of conversation regarding issues and information, however restricted, through such shared code words that imply that the parties involved possess, in some vague manner, a shared project. Galison notes that physicists possess similar code words; "electron" would be one example. He writes: "Fragments of theories and bits of language connect disparate

groups of practitioners even when these practitioners disagree about their global significance" (1997:54). Or again: "Far from melting into a homogeneous entity, the different groups often maintain their distinctness, whether they are electrical engineers and mechanical engineers, or theorists and engineers, or theorists and experimenters. The point is that these distinct groups, with their different approaches to instruments and their characteristic forms of argumentation, can nonetheless coordinate their approaches around specific practices" and, I would add for anthropologists, specific conceptual affirmations (1997:805–806). It allows them—however temporarily, however imperfectly—to communicate across their differences.

We might look at various arguments regarding the cultural concept—such as Kroeber's difference of opinion with Sapir (regarding the superorganic character of culture) or Goodenough's difference of opinion with Geertz (regarding the locus of culture)—in this light. They affirm—above the fray—a sense that anthropologists share certain common concerns. Even if they find it hard to articulate them, they can at least argue over what they are.

Since the late 1960s—for a variety of intellectual, historical, and demographic reasons—cultural anthropologists gradually have turned away from culture as a central code word and begun emphasizing alternative words. The dominant code words from the 1970s through 1990s—to the degree we can perceive a pattern—tend to draw on European theorists beyond the discipline. Once anthropologists spoke of culture and readers across a range of specialties and perspectives perceived a vaguely defined set of issues. More recently cultural anthropologists write of Marx, Foucault, and Bourdieu with a similar result.

A second disciplinary application besides disciplinary solidarity invokes culture as a tool of analysis, as a way to make sense of certain data. This seems an obvious, self-evident usage. And, indeed, it is a widely affirmed position within the discipline. But there are two important cautions.

First, as we have seen, the concept contains considerable intellectual baggage, so individuals are not free to use it when and how they wish. Recent critiques of the cultural concept emphasize such baggage: Critics, Fox writes (1999), have gone "so far as to say that the culture concept at present . . . [is] neither useful for scholarship nor politically progressive . . . some of the reasons being that it dehumanized (Abu-Lughod 1991), that the shrink-wrapped packages of tradition it theorized needed to be 'dis-integrated' (Fox 1995), and that it silenced subaltern histories (Trouillot 1995, Wolf 1982)."

A second caution: With different people using the term in a host of different ways that may or may not overlap, we might reasonably ask what is gained by using an anthropological concept when an indigenous one might serve as well or, even perhaps, better. Does calling something "culture" really facilitate communication today? (Williams

refers to culture as "one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language" [1976:76].)

The following papers come at the use (and abuse) of the cultural concept from a different direction than usual. Instead of beginning with *if* one should apply the concept or *what* form of the concept one might best apply—the two ways the issue tends to be generally phrased—it begins with *when* to apply the concept. Assuming that the concept has value, and few disagree that it has value in certain contexts for certain purposes, we explore *when* one might best draw the concept—as an intellectual abstraction—into an analysis. Does one lean more toward *induction* or *deduction* in applying the cultural concept?

This is the tension between Barth and Shweder. Barth suggests holding off on applying it. Collect the data, he asserts. Examine how people act. Discover the interconnections; determine the constraints in how they behave, what they believe. *Then*, and only then, consider the value of using the cultural concept to frame the analysis. *Then*, and only then, ask what this model adds or subtracts from the analysis. "Our primary empirical data need to be located as much as possible outside or before our major abstractions, analytical transformations, and interpretations," he writes, "so as to give us that crucial chance to transcend our established ways of understanding and test the powers and limits of our concepts." Shweder, given what he deems the successful application of the term by scores of anthropologists, prefers to begin with the cultural concept. "Bottom up induction," he asserts, at times "can be an overwhelming task." Culture directs our attention to certain ideas, certain behaviors, certain points we need consider. "There are times," he writes, "when complex and contingent behavioral systems are best understood by an appeal to a simple model of 'historically derived and selected' ideas." Or again: "The idea of culture . . . directs our attention to those ideas about what is true, good, beautiful and efficient that are acquired by virtue of membership in some group." The cultural concept orients us, he asserts, toward investigating the questions with which anthropologists centrally engage.

Rodseth and Stolzenberg second Barth's and Shweder's positions respectively. Rodseth emphasizes such concepts as agency and variation often get lost in the rush to label something as culture—especially if one leans toward cultural determinism or cultural holism. Despite present proclamations to the contrary, Rodseth observes, this is exactly what has happened in anthropology. Simply stated: If one focuses on culture—without first taking into account an action-oriented approach to knowledge and human experience—important dynamics tend to get shunted to the side. Stolzenberg,¹ a legal scholar, suggests Barth is seeking precision when he should be accepting ambiguity: The cultural concept's vagueness fosters a range of stimulating questions if not necessarily definitive answers. For her, culture constitutes a productive placeholder for a set of inquiries that raise the central questions we need all address.

Why not start, then, with culture as a governing concept for framing our analyses?

The other area in which the papers break new ground is in encouraging a sustained discussion on a central anthropological issue—by different scholars with different perspectives—within a single *American Anthropologist* article. Normally, intellectual responses follow months (if not years) after in the journal's "Commentaries" section. Sustained engagements in which writers directly address each other's positions—in the same article—are relatively rare. *Current Anthropology* offers one format for engagement. Here we explore another. The pieces are presented as a debate, with Barth and Shweder offering the primary positions that are then respectively seconded by Rodseth and Stolzenberg (following the model of Ingold's *Key Debates in Anthropology*, 1996). Any form of exchange has its limitations. As with most anthropological discussions, each side in this piece prefers to draw the other into its own frame of reference rather than engage directly on the other's terms. (It is how anthropologists generally argue about big issues.) Still, the debate format ensures that the discussion remains focused on a particular concern, allowing readers to make their own assessments of which position they prefer. Drawing seconds into the discussion—rather than limiting it to two senior scholars—emphasizes another point: We hope readers will add their own comments either in the *Anthropology News* (if one wishes a quick turn around time) or the *American Anthropologist* itself (if one does not mind the longer delay). In brief, we collectively offer these pieces as a forum and form for thinking about a central anthropological concern. Please join in!

Rethinking the Object of Anthropology

Fredrik Barth

Any careful reading of the anthropological literature of the last hundred years suggests that social and cultural anthropologists have expended much effort rediscovering old insights and repeating old mistakes. I think this tendency to stubbornly return to square one springs from obstacles that may be deeply lodged in some of our central words and usages. If so, we need to critique our theories on the metalevel of the words and concepts we most take for granted and the kinds of unfounded assumptions they allow, or even encourage. A greater willingness to abandon a few ill chosen symbolic causes might also be helpful.

Our most important obstacle in my view is the widespread and persistent idea that the *object* of our discipline is "culture."² Yes, the idea of culture provides a powerful concept with which to understand features of human existence (Geertz 1973:33–54). But culture is an abstraction from innumerable occurrences where people act in complex social and physical contexts. These actions are furthermore always associated with cognition, and with will

and purpose. In view of the complex and poorly understood interplay of these many aspects, it must surely be unwise to concentrate our attention on that one abstraction, culture, and elevate it to a position as the defining object of our inquiry, thereby taking a very restrictive position on what needs to come under our intensive scrutiny. No doubt, an analogous restriction has long been successful in defining the object of linguistics. But that comparison merely suggests that the idea of a code of communication may happen to define an object more readily and systematically separable from the rest of life than does the nebulous range of ideas evoked by the word *culture*.

Attempts to resolve this by clarifying and sharpening our definition of culture have repeatedly failed and can serve as just one more example of our tendency to return endlessly to old perplexities. Our ethnographic experience should make us acknowledge that what we abstract by *any* definition of culture is only manifest in empirical events composed of many, various, and variable other aspects besides the cultural. A decontextualized account of the cultural aspect will then capture only fragments of events,³ with a questionable potential for systemic modeling. As an empirical discipline, anthropology needs, on the contrary, to have a robust observational base in phenomena that are simply identified, sufficiently separable, and internally connected in order to be felicitous for the discovery of interconnections and determined constraints. Culture detached from the contexts of human action in which it is embedded cannot satisfy this requirement.

We need data that can offer resistance to our deepest assumptions and conventions. If we think of the object of anthropology as acting subjects, or in a simpler language, "people," we better secure the benefits of an empirical study—that we shall be able to critique theoretical assertions by confronting them with the simple objection: "But look what these people *do*." Our primary empirical data need to be located as much as possible outside or before we perform our major abstractions, analytical transformations, and interpretations so as to give us that crucial chance to transcend our established ways of understanding and test the powers and limits of our concepts. It seems to me that too much preparatory abstraction has been invested in what we call "culture" for it to serve these needs.

Our second major requirement is that the definition of our object of study should be fruitfully linked to a practicable epistemology. Here any study of human phenomena with rigorous and objective ambitions meets its greatest challenge. The objectivity of positivist science—i.e., describing only those features that can be directly established by replicable observations—does not provide the methodology we need, given the very constitution of human lives. Since people interpret the world and act on those interpretations, we need to access their interpretations in the sense of their subjectively experienced world—the meanings they ascribe, the purposes they embrace—to know even

the simplest facts of what is happening between them. But these facts cannot be established by transparently objective, replicable observations.

Yet at least since Weber and Malinowski we have known a solution. As ethnographers we can attain a degree of access to the world of others through the humble apprenticeship of becoming a participant-observer of sorts in those other people's lives. Because it is time-consuming, and frustrating, anthropologists are perennially looking for ways to bypass this imperfect art—as it turns out, always with flawed results. There seems to be no alternative for us but to depend heavily on our personal, social capacity, so as to achieve that degree of resonance (Wikan 1992) and intersubjectivity that gives access to our primary, empirical data on what people are indeed doing—that is, their subjectively purposeful and meaningful acts.⁴

These two major considerations—the first ontological, the second epistemological—come together. The very process by which we obtain our data turns out to be one which engages the broader situation of people acting in the world—in which case we can hardly defend a theoretical program to attend only to one aspect of these events. Even for those who see culture alone as the focus of their interest, their purpose is poorly served by endless efforts to construct concepts to describe the patterns of an ideational world in isolation from practice. The study of culture requires a robust way of ascertaining meaning, and it is by locating our observations back in the context where culture is made manifest that we secure the opportunity to triangulate our readings of meaning from the multiple components and connections of meaningful acts.⁵

But a much broader theoretical agenda is served by this view of our object of study, one that, it seems to me, can encompass our diverse interests ranging from political economy and human ecology to the anthropology of knowledge and the study of cognition and emotion. In focusing on action, we focus on the locus where people deploy cultural materials to interpret the situation in which they act and design their action to have an effect on the world; where they interpret the meaning of each other's acts in terms of purpose, task, context, and expected effect; and where cultural materials will be reproduced or modified through experience and learning.⁶ These processes are connected in the fulcrum of social action: that moment when the various aspects represented by culture, social relations, cognition, meaning, purpose, and material context become manifest together and combine to affect each other and shape outcome. It is here that we can find those interconnections that we most need to study to expand anthropological theory.

This image of a fulcrum also offers the advantage that it defines our object by means of a prototype or schema, not an objectivist enumeration of supposedly necessary and sufficient features (Lakoff 1987). That makes it more readily applicable as a resource for thought and gives it a wider

latitude of relevance for our variously situated studies and practices.

Proceeding from there, we need to sharpen our discipline by recognizing our fundamental dependence on being able to provide accurate, rich, and systematic empirical descriptions. An empirical discipline that cannot present specimens, cadavers, or texts as objects for inspection must rely on description for the presentation of its evidence. In such disciplines, a good description is one that allows the object described to be reconstructed, within agreed parameters, from the description given. Anything that is not retrieved in this way is lost as data. In our longing for subtler accounts of human lives and thoughts, anthropologists repeatedly trespass this boundary and emulate the methodologies of the humanities by adapting a language of commentary, allusion, and evocation. This is inadequate for many of our purposes, since it was designed for readers who are already familiar with the objects in question and so do not need to be systematically informed of the empirical features of those objects to be able to reflect on them.

When anthropologists so often have battled to produce descriptions that abstract cultural materials from their social embeddedness, they may have been driven by a felt need to simplify so as to be able to give a holistic account of culture. But this misdirected ideal of holism, besides serving as an obstacle to our exploration of crucial interconnections, encourages the idea that we should strive to be comprehensive and encompassing, and results in models depicting pattern and structure. Instead, we should favor partial and open models, which can depict significant connections embedded in a context of circumstances *outside* the model. Thereby, we are enabled to shift our focus to the cross-connections between the different aspects of action. Indeed, I know of no other design that can provide the required naturalism and make room for the pluralism needed in a world where all knowledge must be perspectival.

Because our descriptions and subsequent modeling so swiftly eclipse our empirical object, it is furthermore urgent that we give proper attention to the ubiquity of *variation* in all our materials. Current conventions, on the contrary, pretty much obliterate most forms of variation by a mindless use of typological representations. Perhaps in anticipation of the conventionally conceived task of providing comparisons “between” cultures or societies to depict one perceived level of human variation, each unit of such comparisons is schematized down to a single-form, holistic representation. On this point also, our discourse has proved remarkably stubborn in its return to the practices of essentializing and homogenizing, despite compelling criticisms (Vayda 1994). Promising efforts to take on this crucial charge currently seek to develop “distributive” models of culture (Rodseth 1998; Schwartz 1978a, 1978b). This converges with the broader awareness in contemporary anthropology of the importance of social positioning, which

opens for a constructive way of linking cultural variation directly to a model of social relations. Efforts to refine these forms of description seem to me to have great potential.

Critical and constructive rethinking of the nature of anthropology's object along such lines holds a promise of greater effectiveness and direction for our disciplinary efforts.

Rethinking the Object of Anthropology and Ending Up Where Kroeber and Kluckhohn Began

Richard A. Shweder

There are only two differences between Fredrik Barth's views of the aims, methods, and object of anthropology and my own. Fredrik Barth seems to believe that his desired ends and means for our discipline (develop a robust observational base; pay attention to agency, to contested meanings, to the way people interpret their world, to non-cultural as well as cultural constraints; and do not conflate commentary with description, or place taboos on the study of economy, ecology, emotion, and cognition) are somehow incompatible with the aims of cultural analysis as articulated, for example, by several generations of American cultural anthropologists. And he is dubious about the role and importance of analytic or abstract models for helping us understand what people "actually do." My aim here is to try to convince Fredrik Barth that he can have his cake without being anticultural—the many "sins" attributed to the idea of "culture" by "post-cultural" theorists are not inherent in the concept of culture. And I want to suggest that the analytic modeling of the cultural component of behavior can be a good thing too. There is no essential opposition between the study of culture and the study of what people feel, think, and do.

Most definitions of "culture" in the history of American anthropology can be sorted into two kinds. Some definitions are behavioral in emphasis (for example, "behavior patterns that are learned and passed on from generation to generation"), and others are symbolic in emphasis (for example, "the beliefs and doctrines that make it possible for members of a group to make sense of and rationalize the life they lead"). Of course any genuine cultural community is the beneficiary of both behavioral and symbolic inheritances, and the challenge for theorists in anthropology has been to formulate a definition of culture that draws our attention to that fact. That challenge was successfully met by Robert Redfield in 1941 when he conceptualized "culture" as "shared understandings made manifest in act and artifact." It was successfully met again in 1952 when Kroeber and Kluckhohn unified various definitions of culture into a single formulation focused on both the symbolic and the behavioral inheritances of a cultural community: "Culture," they wrote, "consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by

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

Clifford Geertz (1973) famously carried forward this Kroeber and Kluckhohn "symbols and meanings" or interpretive approach to the understanding and explanation of behavior. Many others have formulated cognate conceptualizations of "culture," which are just variations on the Redfield/Kroeber and Kluckhohn theme. In my own variation (1991, 1996, 1999, 2000; also see D'Andrade 1984; Shore 1996) I have defined the intellectual object called "culture" more or less this way: By "culture" I mean community-specific ideas about what is true, good, beautiful, and efficient. To be "cultural," those ideas about truth, goodness, beauty, and efficiency must be socially inherited and customary, and they must actually be constitutive of different ways of life. Alternatively stated, "culture" refers to what Isaiah Berlin (1976) called "goals, values and pictures of the world" that are made manifest in the speech, laws, and routine practices of some self-monitoring group. That is what I shall mean by "culture" in this response to Fredrik Barth's essay, and that is what I think several generations of American anthropologists have meant by it as well.

Fredrik Barth is characteristically gracious, careful, and qualified as he warms up to his anticultural stance. "Yes," he says, politely nodding in the direction of Clifford Geertz, "the idea of culture provides a powerful concept with which to understand features of human existence." He then moves on to what he sees as the real task at hand, to suggest that the very idea of culture and the very attempt to abstract out that component of behavior that is attributable to the "cultural system" have been hazardous to the health of our discipline. As one might expect from one of the greatest luminaries of our discipline (Barth is both a brilliant theorist and a very experienced ethnographer), his argument, although compressed, is lucid, thoughtful, and in many ways convincing. In my humble view, however, the most impeccably sensible points in the essay have no necessary link to a critique of the idea of "culture."

As a prelude to my response, I think it is worth noting that there are many anthropologists these days who either want to disown the concept of culture or do not want anyone, including themselves, to do anything with it (see, for example, Abu-Lughod 1991; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Kuper 1999; Wikan 1996). This emergence from within anthropology of an "anticulture" or "postcultural" position is a rather ironic twist in the fate of the culture concept, because outside the discipline of anthropology—among political scientists, psychologists, sociologists, legal scholars, public policy analysts, and even economists—"culture"

has become an increasingly legitimate and popular topic of investigation.

There are many reasons, some good and some bad, that the idea of culture is in the air outside anthropology. In psychology, where there has been a resurgence of interest in "cultural psychology" and "indigenous psychology" (see, e.g., Kitayama and Markus 1994; Markus, Kitayama, and Heiman 1996; Prentice and Miller 1999; Yang 1997), the reasons are mostly good, and there have been some noteworthy discoveries of population level diversity in emotional functioning, self-organization, modes of thought, et cetera.

In economics the reasons are more complex and potentially in conflict. For example, one sign of the times was the recent (October 4–7, 1999) World Bank conference, held in Florence, entitled "Culture Counts." At that meeting, which featured keynote addresses by the president of the World Bank, by several economists and economic historians, by ministers of culture and finance from around the world, and, ultimately, by Hillary Clinton, there was a split between two kinds of voices. There was the voice of those who believe that globalization means "Westernization," which (it is believed) is a necessary condition for economic growth. Those who adopt this position seem to like the idea that "culture counts" in part because it is a discrete way of telling "underdeveloped" nations that they must either "Westernize or remain poor."

There was also the voice of those who like the idea that "culture counts" because they believe that social and economic problems can only be solved within the framework of local traditions of practice, meaning, and value. Happily there are more than a few economists these days who are turning to anthropologists to learn about ethnography and "thick description." They are eager to figure out why some behaviors seem "sticky" or "inelastic" or resistant to incentives. They want to learn more about how to estimate the value of things in more than or other than economic terms. So they want to talk to anthropologists. Imagine their surprise when they learn that many anthropologists think ethnography is impossible and that others are in the process of renouncing a major part of their intellectual inheritance (the concept of "culture"). "Isn't anthropology shooting itself in the foot?" they ask.

Of course there are reasons for the recent emergence of various "anticultural" or "postcultural" critiques within anthropology. But are they good reasons? For the most part I think not. Why? Because the Redfield/Kroeber and Kluckhohn conceptualization of "culture" does not carry any of the implications that are the supposed grounds for various anticultural critiques, including Fredrik Barth's.

For example, the idea of "culture" does not imply that "whatever is, is okay." There are plenty of anthropologists these days who want to promote political agendas of one sort or another: Western egalitarian agendas, cosmopolitan liberal agendas, free market libertarian agendas. The slo-

gan "It's not 'cultural' it's [fill in the blank: criminal, oppressive, barbaric, inefficient]" has become a rallying cry for global moral interventionists of all kinds, including some schools of cultural anthropology. Indeed, there are anthropologists who seem to take an interest in other cultures (especially their family-life customs, gender ideals, and reproductive practices) mainly as objects of scorn. They argue that the idea of "culture" reinforces authoritarian power relationships and permits local despots to deflect criticism of restrictive or repressive systems of control by saying "that is our custom" or "that is the way we have always done things in our culture." According to these advocates the idea of culture is a conservative force that stands in the way of their political goals.

It is not my aim to comment on specific political goals or moral crusades. It is important to recognize, however, that valid social criticism and questions of moral justification are not ruled out by the idea of "culture." Nothing in the Redfield/Kroeber and Kluckhohn formulation suggests that the things that other peoples desire are in fact truly desirable or that the things that other peoples think are of value are actually of value. Consensus does not add up to moral truth. The concept of culture per se is not a theory of the "good," although cultural analysis is probably not possible without reliance on some kind of moral stance, even (in the limiting case) if that moral stance is the stance of the emotivist or subjectivist who believes there are no such things as objective values and that only might (power) makes right. In other words, even from a moral point of view we need not throw out the concept of culture just because some tyrant puts the word "culture" to some nefarious (mis-)use.

The idea of culture also does not imply passive acceptance of received practice and doctrine or that human beings are robots or putty or blank slates. Fredrik Barth rightly makes much of cognition, emotion, purpose, and will in accounting for human behavior. I myself have argued that rationality (reasoning about means and ends, reasoning about the appropriateness of ends, reasoning about the categorical and causal structure of experience, as carried out in particular communities) and intentionality are essential elements in cultural analysis. Culture theorists ought to analyze behavior much the way sensible economists do, as the joint product of "preferences" (including goals, values, and ends of various sorts) and "constraints" (including "means" of various sorts such as causal beliefs, information, skills, and material and nonmaterial resources), all mediated by the purposive strivings of human agents (see Shweder 1995). Some social scientists tend to privilege "preferences" and others tend to privilege "constraints" in their explanations of behavior. Nevertheless there is much that is "cultural" on both sides of the equation (for example, causal beliefs are a type of "constraint," and in substantial measure they are "cultural"). It is truly bizarre to see the concepts of "agency" or "intentionality"

used as synonyms for “resistance to culture” in the discourse of “anticulture” theorists. Even fully rational, fully empowered, fully “agentic” human beings discover that membership in some particular tradition of meanings and values is an essential condition for personal identity and individual happiness. Human beings who are “liberationists” are no more agentic than human beings who are “fundamentalists,” and neither stands outside some tradition of meaning and value.

It is precisely because behavior is the joint product of preferences and constraints that abstract hypothetical models are important. The case for modeling is not a case for focusing only on culture; it is a case for distinguishing between sources of variation so that a complex behavioral system can be better understood. It is not surprising that meteorologists, geologists, and economists are model builders; bottom up induction of the behavior of a storm or a volcano can be an overwhelming task. Simple models can be helpful in this regard. It is an open question whether predicting human behavior in context is more complicated or less complicated than predicting the behavior of a storm or a volcano.

Moreover, in building a model of human behavior, the construction of the cultural part of the model often goes hand in hand with the identification of noncultural constraints. Cultural analysis is not the only game in town, and it is probably played best (and is most convincing) when it is not played only on its own terms. For example, most cultural analyses of “who sleeps by whom” in the family (e.g., Caudill and Plath 1966) recognize that sleeping patterns might be caused by physical space constraints (a fact of ecology). The cultural part of the analysis involves the identification and validation of “traditional (i.e., historically derived and selected) ideas” (in this instance an ordered list of value preferences and associated causal beliefs about the consequences of, for example, requiring a child to sleep alone or permitting or requiring husband and wife to exclude all children from their bed). But this type of cultural analysis only makes sense after the “limitations of space” explanation for sleeping patterns has been ruled out. Usually it can be ruled out.

For example, in our own research on sleeping arrangements in the temple town community of Bhubaneswar, Orissa, India (Shweder, Balle-Jensen, and Goldstein 1995), we began with observations and descriptions of behavior in context, and we collected a sample of one-night sleeping patterns in 160 families. Yet these data were quite complex. Families varied in size and in the age, sex, and generation distributions of family members. Moreover there was no single, uniform, or fixed sleeping pattern in the community. In one family (on that one night) the father co-slept with his six-year-old daughter while the mother slept with her four-year-old son and three-year-old daughter. In another family (on that one night) the father slept alone, and the mother slept with her fourteen-year-old daughter,

eight-year-old daughter, and three-year-old son. Nevertheless, despite all the variety of “on the ground” behavior across 160 cases, it was possible to build a simple model of local ideas about what is good and efficient (ideas about incest, protection of the vulnerable, the importance of female chastity, and respect for the status of superiors) that accounted for most of the choices that cultural agents made in deciding where to sleep at night. There are times—not all times but many times—when complex and contingent behavioral systems are best understood by an appeal to a simple model of “historically derived and selected” ideas.

The idea of culture also does not imply the absence of debate, contestation, or dispute among members of a group. Nor does it necessarily imply the existence of within-group homogeneity in knowledge, belief, or practice. Every cultural system has experts and novices; one does not stop being a member of a common culture just because cultural knowledge is distributed and someone knows much more than you do about how to conduct a funeral or apply for a mortgage. One does not stop being a member of a common culture just because there are factions in the community or because there are two opposed wings (a left-wing and a right-wing) whose disputes with each other help define your way of life. It usually takes two wings to build something that can fly. The claim of between-group cultural differences never has implied the absence of within group differentiation. There is a difference between the variance of a distribution and its mean or mode. The basic point is that the idea of “culture” does not imply that every item of culture is in the possession or consciousness of every member of that culture. The idea of culture merely directs our attention to those ideas about what is true, good, beautiful, and efficient that are acquired by virtue of membership in some group. Not everything has to be shared for a “culture” to exist. Only enough has to be shared for a people to recognize itself as a cultural community of a certain kind and for members of that community to be able to recognize each other as recipients and custodians of some imagined tradition of meaning and value. Members of a cultural community do not always agree about this or that, but they do take an interest in each other’s ideas about what is true, good, beautiful, and efficient because those ideas (and related practices) have a bearing on the perpetuation of their way of life. The critique of the concept of “culture” that starts with the observation of internal variation and ends “therefore there is no cultural system” should have been a nonstarter.

The idea of culture also does not imply that other kinds of peoples are aliens or less than human. We live in a multicultural world consisting (as Joseph Raz has put it) “of groups and communities with diverse practices and beliefs, including groups whose beliefs are inconsistent with one another.” The aspirations (1) not to lose your cultural identity, (2) not to assimilate to mainstream pressures, (3) not to be scattered throughout the city, country, or world,

(4) not to glorify the diaspora, and (5) not to join the highly individualistic and migratory multinational, multiracial but (in many ways) monocultural cosmopolitan elite are real and legitimate aspirations, and those aspirations cannot be properly understood by treating them as illusions. They are certainly not the only legitimate aspirations in a multicultural world; there is much that can be said in favor of a liberal cosmopolitan life. Nevertheless, life in the diaspora takes on meaning in part because not every member of the ancestral culture is wandering here and there.

Of course multicultural life can be hazardous, especially for immigrant or minority groups and for members of different cultures who are in geopolitical conflict. And it is a truism that without the existence of cultural and ethnic groups there would be no cultural conflict and no ethnic hatreds, which does not necessarily mean that the world would be at peace. Nevertheless, despite the hopes of some migratory "enlightened" hyper-individualists, cultural communities and ethnic groups are not going to disappear. One looks to anthropology for a useful concept of "culture" (one that increases the chances for mutual understanding and tolerance in a multicultural world), not for no concept of culture at all (see Shweder, Minow, and Markus 2000).

Of course, Fredrik Barth is far more evenhanded and less extreme than many other critics of the culture concept. Nevertheless, as far as I can judge there is nothing in the Redfield/Kroeber and Kluckhohn idea of culture that should lead him to be anticultural at all. Indeed, one of the ironic features of Fredrik Barth's essay is that it expresses views that are not totally unlike those of Clifford Geertz. Be interpretive, not positivistic in your understanding of behavior. Do not study ideas in isolation from practice. Place a premium on "accurate, rich, and systematic empirical descriptions" (Barth p. 436). Be sensitive to context. The essay could easily be read as a call for "thick description."

That is not to deny that there have been some notorious cultural anthropologists who have either treated "culture" as everything or have placed a taboo on the study of anything that is not "cultural," or have failed to understand that the study of culture is compatible with the study of human agency. Yet why should we conflate their misappropriation, misunderstandings, and exaggerations of the culture concept with the idea of culture itself? There is more than enough that is "cultural" to go around and to supply anthropology with a worthy and distinctive object of study. If I was a cynic I might suggest that with enemies like Fredrik Barth, the culture concept does not need friends. Instead allow me to conclude more enthusiastically, with a hopeful eye on the future. The time is right, I believe, for anthropologists to stop beating up on the culture concept. Perhaps it is even high time for us to make use of (some of) Fredrik Barth's suggestions to put the idea of culture to the good uses she deserves.

Another Passage to Pragmatism⁷

Lars Rodseth

Is Fredrik Barth "beating up on the culture concept"? Most of Richard Shweder's critique seems to be directed not at Barth's position but at the anticulturalist arguments of Abu-Lughod, Clifford, Marcus, and others. Yet the flaws (or the merits) of these anticulturalist arguments need not detain us here. What Barth is arguing for is human action in all its dimensions, including the cultural, as the object of our discipline. In action is culture put to the test, used, rejected, reproduced, or modified, yet this is the case precisely because action involves much more than culture. In action, cultural understandings combine with social organization, cognitive processes, emotional experience, material conditions, and power relations, among many other analytically separable phenomena, "to affect each other and shape outcome" (Barth p. 436). Why should anthropologists fix upon culture, close it off from these other phenomena, and attempt to model it solely in its own terms? What Barth urges instead is the development of "partial and open models, which can depict significant connections embedded in a context of circumstances *outside* the model" (p. 436). This ought to have convinced Shweder that Barth is opposed neither to the culture concept nor to the building of models but only to the extraction of culture from the wider context of human action in which we find it.

Shweder also contends that "several generations" of American anthropologists have followed a mode of cultural analysis already in line with Barth's suggestions. A successful formulation of the culture concept, in Shweder's view, was provided by Redfield (1941) and Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952). The Kroeber and Kluckhohn approach was "famously carried forward" by Clifford Geertz, while "many others" have developed "variations on the Redfield/Kroeber and Kluckhohn theme" (Shweder p. 437). With the exception, then, of "some notorious cultural anthropologists" who have misappropriated and exaggerated the culture concept (Shweder p. 440), the rest have apparently been doing (or at least saying) all along what is now advocated by Barth and other "anticulturalists." From Shweder's account, it would seem that for 50 or 60 years most anthropologists have been paying close attention to agency and contested meanings, to the way specific, socially positioned actors interpret their world, and to "non-cultural as well as cultural constraints" (Shweder p. 437).

If this seems a novel and extremely selective reading of anthropology's history, Shweder's account is not alone in this regard. Marshall Sahlins, in his recent Huxley Lecture (1999:404-405), similarly claims that the "codgers" or "old-timers" of American anthropology were well aware that cultures are not rigidly bounded, are constantly changing, are less than perfectly integrated, and are often replete with individual variation. Like Shweder, Sahlins acknowledges the excesses of a few "vulgar cultural determinists"

—Leslie White in particular (Sahlins 1999:409–410)—yet these are cast as exceptions. The mainstream of 50 or 60 years ago would seem to have been dominated, according to this account, by sensible Boasians, including Goldenweiser, Herskovits, Radin, and Sapir, all of whom stressed the opposition of individual and society and thus avoided any notion of people as cultural automatons or of cultures as highly integrated wholes.

For both Shweder and Sahlins, then, American anthropologists of the past have gotten a bad rap and, with surprisingly few exceptions, deserve to be cleared of the charges leveled by the anticulturalists. In response, let it be noted first that Boasian anthropology was obviously a very diverse tradition or cluster of traditions (e.g., Fox 1991; Stocking 1992). There were Boasians, such as Radin and Sapir, who tended to emphasize individual agency and variation within any human population. There were also Boasians, such as Kroeber (early on) and Benedict (later on), who tended to downplay such agency and variation in favor of cultural determinism and holism. Merely noting such a diversity of approaches, however, does not tell us which of these came to dominate in American anthropology.

On both sides of the Atlantic, as it turns out, the 1940s and '50s saw cultural determinism and holism prevail over earlier approaches that would have kept agency and variation at the center of the analysis. Thus, in the United States, Benedict's style of culture and personality theory came to eclipse the Sapirian alternative emphasizing the individual as the carrier of culture (Darnell 1986). Around the same time, Radcliffe-Brown replaced Malinowski as the leading figure in British social anthropology (Kuper 1996:64). Despite the obvious differences between their approaches, Benedict and Radcliffe-Brown shared an emphasis on macrolevel integration and the subordination of the individual to the whole. The same emphasis could be found in other schools of thought. Even White's neo-evolutionism, which in some ways represented a decisive shift away from earlier Boasian themes, retained and elaborated Kroeber's (and Durkheim's, and Herbert Spencer's) notion of the superorganic. In the 1950s, Fortes and Parsons were there to pick up the cudgels of structural-functionalism, while Lévi-Strauss set out to replace one hypercoherent model (the social organism) with another (the grammatical mind). However significant all of these theorists may have been in other ways, they did little to restore a sense of individual agency and variation to the anthropological concept of culture.

At the same time, of course, there were dissenting voices. These included the "new" culture and personality theorists, Melford Spiro (1951) and Anthony F. C. Wallace (1952, 1961), and the neo-Malinowskians, Raymond Firth (1951, 1954) and Edmund Leach (1954, 1961). The budding of Marxian anthropology at Columbia and Manchester helped enhance awareness of conflict and anti-structure

in the early works of Mintz, Wolf, Bailey, and Turner (reviewed in Vincent 1990: chap. 5). Yet these anthropologists were staking out their own "anti-structural" positions in the discipline, and they knew it.

In the 1960s, it was Fredrik Barth who took the lead in developing an action-oriented anthropology that promised for a while to restore agency to the theoretical agenda (Barth 1966, 1967, 1969). Yet Barth's approach achieved at best a subaltern status, helping to establish what Ortner (1984:144) called a "minority wing" in a field still dominated by systems-and-structures approaches (see also Vincent 1990:357–362). Throughout the 1970s, the lingering influence of Parsonian sociology and French structuralism ensured that there would be no Barthian revolution, at least not within the anthropological mainstream. In Wolf's (1982) assessment, anthropology in the early 1980s was still haunted by the myth of the primitive isolate, the idea of non-Western cultures as neatly bounded units, internally coherent and historically inert. By the time Ortner (1984) drew attention to the growing influence of "practice theory," an action-oriented approach could be depicted as a radically new departure for anthropologists—and one that was initiated, according to Ortner's account, almost entirely by poststructuralist theorists such as Bourdieu, Giddens, and Foucault.

What I have sketched is, of necessity, an oversimplified version of anthropological history, yet it is much closer to reality, I would argue, than the revisionist accounts provided by Shweder and Sahlins. The point is that anthropology was dominated for a very long time—from about 1940 to about 1980—by a cluster of traditions emphasizing cultural determinism and holism to the neglect of agency and variation (cf. Lewis 1998). From this perspective, there are good reasons for Fredrik Barth and others to criticize the way culture has been conceptualized and studied, and it will not do simply to cite a few past anthropologists, or past definitions of culture, that seem to have bucked what was the prevailing trend in the field for nearly a half century. Even today, though most ethnographers are likely to recognize individual agency and variation among the people they study, the idea of each culture as a bounded, integrated whole, perhaps with its own special *Volksgeist*, has hardly been eliminated from anthropology—or from the minds of the public, where several generations of American anthropologists helped to plant and nurture it.

This kind of cultural essentialism does indeed have deep roots in American thought, but so does the Sapirian alternative advocated by Barth (1992, 1993, 1994) and a number of other recent culture theorists (e.g., Borofsky 1994; Hannerz 1992; Mannheim and Tedlock 1995; Rodseth 1998). Beyond Sapir—in fact, beyond anthropology altogether—Barth's approach finds a still deeper source in American pragmatism, the philosophical movement that influenced the social sciences of the early twentieth century in much the way that postmodernism does today.

Stressing the provisional nature of knowledge, the pluralistic nature of reality, and the capacity of human beings to construct their own social orders and histories, the classical pragmatists at the same time did not succumb to nihilism or extreme relativism but embraced naturalistic inquiry in the broadest sense as our most reliable method of knowing and engaging the world. Thus, what Fredrik Barth is urging among anthropologists today is not unlike what William James and John Dewey were urging among philosophers almost a century ago. A pragmatist, wrote James in 1907,

turns away from abstraction and insufficiency, from verbal solutions, from bad a priori reasons, from fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins. He turns towards concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action and towards power. [James 1975:31]

This action-oriented approach to knowledge and human experience, having undergone an impressive revival throughout the 1980s and '90s, now seems as vital and as promising as ever (e.g., Dickstein 1998; Hollinger and Depew 1995; Rorty 1999; Rosenthal, Hausman, and Anderson 1999). Perhaps anthropologists, rather than “ending up where Kroeber and Kluckhohn began,” should begin again where James and Dewey left off.

What We Talk about When We Talk about Culture *Nomi Maya Stolzenberg*

What do we mean by “culture”? A myriad of things. Fredrik Barth limits his consideration to “the anthropological literature of the last hundred years,” and the history of the subject does not extend so very far beyond that. Although we can trace its intellectual roots back to Herder, Vico (Williams [1981]1982:15), Montesquieu, and even Herodotus (Clifford and Marcus 1986:2), the academic discipline of cultural and social anthropology, as we know it, does not really begin until the end of the eighteenth century and does not fully emerge until the nineteenth century (Clifford 1988:26–28). Practitioners of the discipline have been arguing about the meaning of culture and its utility as a concept for just about as long. Indeed, as Raymond Williams showed more than four decades ago, the modern usage of the term *culture* and the focus on different cultures as the object of scholarly study emerged *together* in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Williams [1958]1983:ix–xvi). Before that time, according to Williams, culture “meant, primarily, the ‘tending of natural growth,’ and then, by analogy, a process of human training”; it was only in the nineteenth century that linguistic usage shifted from the idea of a culture *of* something (as in, the culture of crops) to the idea of a culture “as a thing in itself” (Williams [1958]1983:xvi, [1981]1982:10). Among the meanings attached to this newly discovered “thing in itself” were (1) “a general state or habit of mind,” (2) “the general state of intellectual development, in the society as a

whole,” (3) “the general body of the arts,” and (4) “a whole way of life” (Williams [1958]1983:xvi). It is the latter concept of a “whole way of life” that became the object of the anthropological discipline to which Fredrik Barth now objects.

Fredrik Barth’s objection stems from the very “range of ideas evoked by the word” analyzed by Williams. In Barth’s view, the wide range of meanings attached to the word makes the concept “nebulous.” But Barth’s complaint is not confined to the nebulousness of the word *per se*; he is chiefly concerned about the consequences for the practice of anthropology that, he believes, result from this nebulousness. According to Barth, the lack of “sharpness” in the definition of culture lends itself to abuse. It permits anthropologists to commit the sins of “essentializing and homogenizing” in the form of “a mindless use of typological representations.” It leads anthropologists to eschew “accurate, rich, and systematic empirical descriptions” for the type of abstract model-building that fails to “provide the required naturalism.” By reifying an abstraction, the culture concept reinforces our assumptions rather than confronting them with the convention-defying actions of real people. It simultaneously denies the existence of real “noncultural” (i.e., physical) constraints on human action and the agency of individual human beings. And by promoting the simplifying strategies of modeling, the culture concept replaces “the pluralism needed in a world where all knowledge must be perspectival” with false generalizations. “Stop the vagueness” could be Fredrik Barth’s rallying cry.

Richard Shweder’s response to this battle cry is, essentially, “don’t throw out the baby with the bath water.” Agreeing with Barth that anthropologists are vulnerable to making overgeneralizations, oversimplifications, and denials both of individual agency and of noncultural environmental constraints—and further agreeing with Barth that these are intellectual positions to be avoided—Shweder insists that the cause of these errors does not emanate from the linguistic usage of the concept of culture. He rightly points out that the prevailing “conceptualization of ‘culture’ does not carry any of the implications that are supposed grounds for various anticultural critiques, including Fredrik Barth’s”—that the concept implies neither “that human beings are robots or putty or blank slates,” lacking will and intentionality, nor that cultural action is free from physical constraints. “Nor does it necessarily imply the existence of within group homogeneity” or “the absence of debate, contestation or dispute among members of a subgroup.” Drawing the basic and important distinction between the use and abuse of a concept, Shweder argues, *contra* Barth, that we should not “conflate the misappropriation and exaggerations of the culture concept with the idea of culture itself.”

I agree with Richard Shweder’s argument, and I would like to take it a step further. Shweder speculates that academics

outside the field of anthropology would be surprised to learn about the proposal to renounce “culture” as an object of study at a time when they are making more and more use of the concept. As an outsider [i.e., legal scholar] looking in, I can confirm that the proposed project of renunciation does seem like “anthropology shooting itself in the foot.” It is not that I am *surprised* by the desire to eliminate a word lacking in precision. As a legal scholar, I am well acquainted with efforts to rid our vocabulary of vague and ambiguous terms. Consider, for example, the widespread criticism of the Supreme Court’s definition of—or rather refusal to define—obscenity in terms of “I know it when I see it.”⁸ Similar criticisms abound concerning such notoriously vague legal terms as “privacy,” “sovereignty,” and “religion.”⁹ The frequent crusades to rid legal vocabulary of such terms are reminiscent of the early-twentieth-century movement in Anglo-American philosophy to replace “unanswerable” metaphysical inquiries with the linguistic analyses of logical positivism, and the general turn in academia toward positivistic science and the delimitation of the objects of scholarly study to empirically falsifiable questions.

There are good reasons, in law as well as in philosophy and other realms of scholarly inquiry, to worry about concepts, like “culture” (or “obscenity” or “soul”), that resist all efforts at clear definition. It would seem to be a “no-brainer” that clarity and precision are to be desired in our analytical frameworks and, accordingly, that obscurity and ambiguity are to be reprobated. No one could seriously deny that “culture” is an exceedingly vague and ambiguous term. (Even Richard Shweder, who recommends the widely accepted formulations of the definition of culture offered by, *inter alia*, Redfield, and Kroeber and Kluckhohn, would, I imagine, agree that these “successful” formulations are nonetheless vague.) Why, then, retain the concept of culture? Why not, as Fredrik Barth recommends, abandon the term in favor of the study of “social action,” “meaning,” and “people,” as he variously suggests? Why hang onto any concept which is, admittedly, hazy, fuzzy, blurry, and vague?

I want to suggest that it is precisely because of its lack of precision that culture remains a useful concept, for both anthropologists and those outside the field. It is worth noting that the many efforts to combat vague terminology in law (e.g., obscenity, privacy, etc.) have failed more often than they have succeeded. The record of success for the project of clarification in the realm of academia is more mixed. Analytic philosophy largely succeeded (in the Anglo-American realm) in displacing “mushy” “metaphysical” philosophical inquiries and remains entrenched as the prevailing mode of philosophy. In other academic disciplines, however, an initial enthusiasm for positivist science has given way to a curious admixture of positivist and antipositivist approaches. Such a combination is perfectly illustrated by Frederick Barth’s plea that “anthropology needs . . .

a robust observational base in phenomena that are simply identified and sufficiently separable and internally connected to be felicitous for the discovery of interconnections and determined constraints” and his simultaneous insistence that “the objectivity of positivist science—that is, describing only those features that can be directly established by replicable observations—does not provide the methodology we need.” The backlash against positivism indicates that, while we may have good reasons to avoid vague concepts, we have at least as strong—perhaps even stronger—reasons to accept them.

As the parallel example of retaining vague legal terms suggests, it appears that there are some undefinable terms that we simply cannot do without. When I mentioned the subject of this present debate to a legal academic colleague, his immediate response was “Don’t they know you can’t legislate language by fiat?” I take this as a reminder that people use words to serve needs—regardless of their susceptibility to crisp definitions. In this respect, I take it that anthropologists, and other scholars who avail of themselves of the culture concept, are no different from other people. Academics are, after all, people, and, notwithstanding their rarified vocabulary, they use words in more or less the same way that other people do. If we are serious about focusing on “what people do,” we should bear this in mind.

“Culture” serves a need notwithstanding the difficulty we have in supplying it with a sharp definition. In fact, over the last two and a half centuries it has served a variety of different needs. Williams contends that the term emerged initially as a foil to the Industrial Revolution. In this capacity, it served to name “a mode of human experience and activity which the progress of society seemed increasingly to deny” (Williams [1958]1983:39). The idea of culture represented the last line of defense against the idea that society consists of nothing more than mechanistic, market-based transactions, “with ‘cash payment as the sole nexus’ ” (Williams [1958]1983:83). In the context of the revolt against industrialization, culture referred variously to the organic “spirit” of a people (consider the German *Geisteswissenschaften*), to the spirit (or “genius”) of an artist, and to art itself.

These Romanticist resonances have not been entirely lost. “Culture” continues to stand as an alternative to strictly mechanistic and behaviorist accounts, on one hand, and to overly individualistic and volitionalist accounts on the other. Likewise, it continues to play its traditional role as an antidote to the self-interested economic actor of the marketplace, carrying the concept’s historic associations with the “higher” and “inner” realms of values, feelings, meanings, and, dare we say it today, “spirit.”

Of course, not everyone uses the term *culture* in these senses. Scholars of culture divide over the perennial issues of idealism versus materialism, altruism versus self-interest, individualism versus collectivism, and free will versus

determinism. The beauty (and the attraction) of the concept of culture is that it transcends—or better, embraces—all of these hotly contested positions. Some cultural analysts favor a symbolic approach, while others favor a behaviorist one; some stress the agency, or free will, of the individual, while others deny it. Culture is a valuable concept because it permits all of these various metaphysical views. Adopting “culture” as a governing concept does not commit us to any particular one. By contrast, accepting Fredrik Barth’s recommendation would precommit us to a nondeterministic account of human “action” and thereby preclude alternative views. While there may be much to commend this particular view,¹⁰ there is surely no warrant for legislating it as an anthropological practice.

Even if we were to attempt to do so, the rival philosophical positions would no doubt creep back into the newly minted vocabulary. Fredrik Barth favors retaining the concept of “meaning” to signify the interpretive aspect of human experience that cannot be captured by positivist accounts. But there is every reason to expect that the range of meanings currently attached to the culture concept, rather than vanishing, will simply transpose itself to accepted terms such as *meaning*.¹¹

The concept of culture serves the basic need of naming such ineffable and inexplicable features of human existence as “meaning” and “spirit” and living together with others. Perhaps we may become more comfortable with the intractable ambiguity of “culture” if we cease to think of it as the name for a thing and come to view it instead as a placeholder for a set of inquiries—inquiries which may be destined never to be resolved. If, as the saying goes, there are two kinds of people in the world, there are surely two kinds of academics: those who think the only questions worth asking are the answerable (i.e., empirically verifiable) ones and those who think the questions most worth asking are the ones for which we have no final answers. If, like me, you belong to the latter persuasion, you should celebrate the continued usage of a term—“culture”—that reminds us of the mysteries of human existence and the wide range of controversial solutions that are subject to that quintessentially cultural institution: *endless debate*.

Notes

1. In an effort to enlarge the conversation—reaching out to the borderlands anthropology shares with other disciplines (cf. Keesing 1994:307–310; Shore 1996:311–373)—I purposely included Stolzenberg, who specializes in legal studies rather than anthropology.

2. Or in some schools of anthropology, “Society.” This alternative usage makes surprisingly little difference and can be criticized in very similar ways.

3. And indeed, probably only a disordered assembly of modalities of cultures, cf. Barth 1995.

4. Wikan cites the urging of Balinese acquaintances during fieldwork and emphasizes the need for the person to *create*

resonance within herself by opening up for the other’s situation, intentions, thoughts, and feelings and going “beyond” the other’s words. We seem indeed to be dealing with the other side of the same dynamics that G. H. Mead identified as the way a person’s own awareness of self is produced.

5. Compare Paul, who draws a clear distinction between information and semiotic systems, on the one hand, and meaning and purposive action, on the other: “Agency, the initiation and execution of goals and purposes, which is the basis of motivation *and hence of meaning*, is something that can be attributed only to persons. It cannot be in culture, or symbols, or society or history, since these are not open, self-governing feedback systems with goal-setting abilities and the skills to act on them and monitor the results” (Paul 1990:445, emphasis added).

6. I set out some of these substantive and ontological arguments at greater length in Barth 1993, especially chapter 10.

7. I’d like to thank Herbert S. Lewis of the University of Wisconsin, Madison, for (re-)introducing me to American pragmatism.

8. *Jacobellis v. Ohio*, 378 U.S. 184, 197 (1964) (Justice Potter Stewart’s concurring opinion). For analysis, see David Cole, “Playing By Pornography’s Rules: The Regulation of Sexual Expression,” 143 *U. Penn. Law Rev.* 111 (1994); James Lindgren, “Defining Pornography,” 141 *U. Penn. Law Rev.* 1153 (1993).

9. On privacy, see Ruth Gavison, “Feminism and the Public/Private Distinction,” 45 *Stanford Law Rev.* 1 (1992).

10. I confess I have more doubts than Richard Shweder does about adopting an “agency”-centered view.

11. Compare Williams’s analysis of how the meanings historically associated with “culture” were transferred to “ideology” (Williams [1981]1982:26–30).

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