THEORY AND HISTORY OF CULTURE

Gerhard Budin
University of Vienna, Austria

Keywords: 'culture' as a concept, epistemology, culture as text, theory of culture, history of culture, methodology, relativism, universalism, cultural studies, cultural sciences, anthropology, sociology, literary criticism, cultural translation, trans-disciplinarity, trans-culturality

Contents

1. Introduction
2. Culture - phenomena, objects of investigation, and concepts
3. Cultural theories
4. Disciplinary views
5. Conclusions: towards a trans-disciplinary concept and theory of culture?
Glossary
Bibliography
Biographical Sketch

Summary

In this chapter I try to provide a systematic overview of various aspects of cultural theories – as they have developed in different disciplines and cultures. A variety of cultural theories have dealt with the phenomenon of culture from different epistemological and historical perspectives. The article discusses definitions of concepts of culture in a comparative analysis, as they have developed in different disciplines, in the context of divergent cultural theories.

The scientific investigation of culture is discussed, how it led to the so-called cultural turn in science, how culturalism developed, and what are the basic assumptions of Cultural Studies and other approaches of cultural sciences as they have developed over a long time in different national and cultural contexts. The subject field is analyzed in its development in different language communities and cultures and the differences that emerged. Seminal theories of culture are presented in comparison and in their historical developments.

Based on this account, trends toward trans-disciplinary and trans-cultural theories of culture are presented and discussed. For this purpose a meta-theoretical position is necessary, discussing the epistemological foundations and problems of Cultural Studies. A methodological discussion follows suit.

1. Introduction

A dynamic, complex, and multi-faceted phenomenon such as 'culture' requires process-oriented, complex and multi-faceted descriptions and reflections. The difficulty that lies in the task of trying to understand and describe cultural processes is due to the

axiomatic nature of the concept of culture to many scientific disciplines as well as to the self-understanding of people in society in general. The inflationary use of the term {culture} and its (near) equivalents in other languages makes it even more necessary to investigate the development of cultural theory from historical as well as comparative perspectives.

2. Culture - phenomena, objects of investigation, and concepts

For the purposes of scientific inquiry, researchers traditionally identify objects of investigation. [Culture] as a phenomenon on the object level is construed in the discursive process of science by forming various concepts of <culture> that are then lexicalized in different languages as {culture} in English, {Kultur} in German, etc. This triadic relationship between an object, a concept and terms in one or more languages is not as simple as it seems at first sight. When we study cultural phenomena such as the use of television at home, a religious ritual, an opera performance, shopping activities in a super market, a conversation between parents and children at home, etc., we would not always name such phenomena explicitly as 'cultural'. It is on the cognitive level of conceptual thinking and scientific reasoning where we decide that any processes in the world around each of us are worthy of being identified as objects of investigation and that these objects are then studied from a 'cultural point of view'. Yet in order to be able to do this, and in particular in order to agree on such identifications of cultural phenomena in the research community, we have to agree in this community on what we mean by the term {culture} when we speak or write in English about the topic. This agreement can only be reached by defining a term, by giving a definition, a written or spoken statement, describing the concept in natural language. Such definitions should indicate what the concept is about and what is its 'nature' (called the intention of the concept), how it relates to other concepts, and which phenomena fall under it (the extension of the concept). So when we decide on the conceptual level that the phenomena listed above fall under the concept of <culture>, then the extension of this concept includes the phenomena identified. This does not exclude that a certain phenomenon is also identified as being a social, psychological, cognitive, linguistic, historical phenomenon, covered by corresponding concepts in neighboring scientific disciplines.

In addition to the need to decide on what falls under a certain concept and thus under a certain term, we are always obliged to negotiate with our colleagues in the research community, and to an increasing extent with colleagues from other research communities dealing with the 'same' phenomena from their point of view, as well as with the general public, on what such a term as {culture} actually means to us. This is necessary because all persons participating in discourse processes in a certain language use words and domain specific terms in slightly different manners, thus contributing to changes in meaning and to conceptual development.

In discourse, words are always used in a specific context. A context is determined by a multitude of factors that altogether would usually be considered a situation. The shared meanings of words may vary from one situation to the other, depending on the interpretations by the participants of a discourse action. It is this 'situatedness' of shared meanings that also governs scientific discourse, although we try to 'define' terms and

hope that such definitions will continue to be stable independently of situations and contexts of interpretations. But scientific discourse is not that different from everyday discourse and scientific terms may well vary their meanings depending on specific situations and contexts of use.

The problem is that Cultural Studies as well as any other kind of cultural science have developed in very different ways; therefore their terminologies are just as diverse. The concept of cultural diversity is essentially self-referential, because it is based on diverse concepts of culture. Culture is a multi-faceted concept, with literally hundreds of definitions that we find in the research literature. A simplistic and reductionist approach to terminology would require a single, standardized definition of a concept. But cultural studies, like other humanities or social sciences, seem to be elusive when it comes to the standardization of scientific terms. The methodology of descriptive terminology management, as it has been developed in the social sciences over recent decades, suggests that transparence and clarity can be reached in social science discourse by systematically displaying and explicating one's own terminology. By mutually comparing such discourse-related glossaries, it is possible to reach mutual understanding and to enter a true dialogue. But in order to reach understanding, people have to listen to each other, they have to enter a dialogue. Therefore, a dialogical theory is needed in order to mediate between different ideologies and theories, as they are incommensurable (in the Kuhnian sense) and inter-translatable only to a limited degree (unlike natural languages). Because scientific concepts are to a higher or lower degree theory-laden, we can interpret the multitude of diverse definitions of ‚culture‘ as a manifestation of the existence of many different cultural theories. But such theories do not necessarily compete with each other, very often they are quite compatible and complement each other when each approach focuses on a different aspect of culture. When we try to investigate the *phenomenon* of culture as part of all spheres of society, with an infinite variety of individual, concrete and unique manifestations of ‚culture‘, we might want to take an encyclopedic approach by listing the different dimensions of the concept of culture as a modest attempt to ‚capture‘ the complexity and dynamics of such an omnipresent phenomenon and of our constant re-conceptualizations of it.

Most concepts of culture have been developed within the traditional limits of individual scientific disciplines. Cultural philosophy, as developed in particular by Cassirer (e.g. 1942/1961), conceptualized culture as symbolic activities that include all spheres of life and human action and are based on his typology of symbolic forms. For Cassirer, philosophy is essentially cultural philosophy. Cultural anthropology is another discipline that has produced numerous concepts of culture. Recent reviews of the current status of anthropology have repeatedly suggested that anthropology should re-define itself as a branch of cultural studies. In fact, cultural studies could not have developed without the firm conceptual, theoretical and empirical basis that anthropology has been providing over decades. Similarly, cultural sociology has been focusing on social structures as important elements of cultural processes, while political science has been focusing on developmental aspects as well as the implications of globalization on cultural diversity.

One of the methodological problems has been that research designs have usually been contrastive and relativistic, and that the "iceberg" problem has not been solved

satisfactorily so far: most cultural traits of behavior are implicit, not linguistic and subconscious, but we do not yet have sound methods for investigating them. This is also a criticism that is often voiced against various scientific studies: linguists do not have the methodological instruments to investigate into *culturemes* that do not manifest themselves on the linguistic level. Culturemes are the smallest identifiable units of investigation in cultural sciences.

This leads us to the semiotic and linguistic aspects of culture. On the one hand language is a prima facie representation of culture, but at the same time it is itself a product of cultural activities and one of their major results and achievements. This multiple role of language refers to the problem of self-referentiality that all social sciences and humanities, all cultural sciences, share: we use language to investigate language. Our conceptual tools hardly reflect this complex situation.

Closely associated to the linguistic level, literature (fiction) has always been considered to be one of the primary forms of cultural manifestation. The artistic aspect is also of prime importance: studies of different forms of art, theatre, music (art is not to be equated with culture!), as well as the historical aspect, focusing on cultural heritage and cultural history, and finally the media studies aspect: media culture in the age of television, video and the Internet.

Most cultural theories, and the concepts of culture they rely on, embrace more than one of these aspects. This necessitates the elaboration of interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary approaches and theories, and cultural concepts also should reflect this situation.

Despite divergent historical meanings of terms such as culture, their current meanings are converging across languages as a result of international scientific contacts, cultural exchange and other information processes. Schools of thought, scientific paradigms, etc., are increasingly not subject to or limited to either territorial or linguistic borders. Yet, at the same time, we also observe diverging trends of specialization in discourses about cultural configurations. What we increasingly need is competence in all members of a cultural community to translate between heterogeneous discourses and cultural communication patterns.

When we want to analyze the use of the term {culture} in the English language, we have to take a look at the conceptual level, at the concepts of [culture]. In 2.1 we do that from a historical perspective, in 2.2 from a comparative point of view.

2.1 Histories of concepts of culture

Concepts of culture have long histories, and the way a society interpreted the terms representing these concepts has always mirrored their own culture. Culture is not an abstract whole, it is always a multitude of cultures that co-exist, influence each other, and constantly change.

When we want to know more about the history of a concept, we look at the etymological development of the term and the history of its meanings. The term

{culture} is based on the Latin verb {colere; colo; colui; cultus} and the noun {cultura}. Concepts never exist in isolation, but always in a complex network of conceptual relationships. The terms representing these concepts are defined - {definere} meaning to draw borderlines - in relationship to the meanings of other terms. Quite often we form dichotomies or antonyms: cold - warm, dark - light, etc. The concept of culture has long been defined in opposition to nature; the artificial and factitious has been put in opposition to the natural, that is, independent of man. One of the most - or even *the* most important landmark in the history of human civilization(s) has been the 'invention' of agri-*culture*. This term represents the early (about 10 000 years ago) interaction of man with nature, taming it, breeding new crops, raising domestic animals. In classical antiquity the term {cultura} is already used metaphorically, e.g. by Cicero, who in turn has taken over the idea from Greek philosophy, to talk about a {cultura animi}, a cultivation of mind and soul, the cultivation of the inner nature as opposed to outer nature (as in agriculture), an idea taken up again hundreds of years later by Bacon. The modern term {cult} emerged from the same root, stressing one of the semantic components of the original term, i.e. to adore something or somebody in a ritualized manner.

Traditional (modern) science based on Aristotelian logic, Cartesian rigor of discourse, and Popperian rationalism asks for definitions of the terms used in a scientific text, in order to ensure a shared understanding of this text by a group of people. Cultural sciences have asked very often for definitions of {culture}, and hundreds of definitions have been given. This definitional diversity automatically leads us to the question of why there is no agreement, no shared understanding of what culture is and thus of how to define it. [Culture] is not the only concept where we are confronted with this situation. Other concepts such as language, information, and knowledge have also been defined many times in many different ways. The more fundamental a concept is for mankind, the less restricted a concept is to scientific discipline, the more difficult it becomes to define it at all. And in everyday language we can hardly define any word in a strict sense according to the principles of Aristotelian conceptual logic. That was the main reason for Jerry Fodor to proclaim that there are no definitions at all, we just use the words in language, therefore we know what they mean. His atomistic concept theory fits well to the linguistic pragmatism of the late Wittgenstein (using words in discourse tells us their meanings) but contradicts most other concept theories that at least assume the more scientific and technical concepts to be definable. And we do in fact have a lot of definitions of such concepts (or actually of terms) that are shared by people belonging to a certain professional community of engineers or researchers. What seems to be valid for *any* definition is that it is always part of a certain system of knowledge, no definition exists in isolation, as no concept, no word, no term exists in isolation. It is always a multidimensional web of terms and concepts, of words and meanings that constitute a particular knowledge context where such definitions can be created and understood. Since the concept of culture is so fundamental to many different scientific disciplines, it is of course not surprising to find so many different definitions, as we find mono-disciplinary cultural theories. The open question from a terminological point of view is whether it would be possible to create a truly encyclopedic, trans-disciplinary, and inter-theoretical definition of culture, summarizing and integrating all disciplinary and intra-theoretical definitions into a single one. We will come back to this interesting question at the end of this article, in chapter 5.

When defining terms there is always the question of the material basis or the ontological referens of the definiendum, of the term to be defined. The 'objects' that fall under the concept of culture can be distinguished as material objects in the strict sense, i.e. a church building, a painting, a book, ancient manuscripts, etc., and immaterial objects in the sense of cognitive, epistemic achievements, such as a certain behavioral pattern in a group of people, meanings of linguistic and para-linguistic expressions in a certain language, the metaphors used in a poem to invoke certain feelings in the reader or listener, the 'content' of a drama, etc.

A genealogy of the concepts of culture and civilization shows manifold tensions between the two terms, their usage over the last 200 years in philosophy, history, and anthropology. The term {civilization} has mostly been used to denote the emergence, stabilization, (and maybe fall) of a power arrangement, such as an empire, like the Sumerian civilization, the Greek civilization, etc. From the perspective of the observer, though, it took a long time to assign the property of 'having a culture' to such 'civilizations', because for the longest time in the Western history of ideas 'culture' was 'high culture' and therefore reserved to themselves and not to 'barbarians'. It is claimed that the concept of civilization has a longer history of continuous use than that of culture. Kant, Nietzsche, and Norbert Elias in the German intellectual tradition, and Toqueville, Braudel, Lévi-Strauss, and others in the French tradition, were the key figures in shaping the concept of civilization in German and French discourses. (see *Characteristics of Culture*)

-
-
-

TO ACCESS ALL THE **21 PAGES** OF THIS CHAPTER,
Visit: http://www.eolss.net/Eolss-sampleAllChapter.aspx

Bibliography

BÖHME, HARTMUT/MATUSSEK, PETER/MÜLLER, LOTHAR (2000). *Cultural Studies. An Orientation* [in German]. Reinbek bei Hamburg: rowohlts enzyklopädie [gives an overview of the historical development of the German research traditions in cultural sciences and of their objects of investigation]

BROMLEY, ROGER/GÖTTLICH, UDO/WINTER, CARSTEN (eds.) (2000). *Cultural Studies. Seminal texts* [in German]. Lüneburg: zu Klampen [includes articles that investigate the development of Cultural Studies in Great Britain and comment on seminal texts by key representatives of this research tradition such as Stuart Hall, Lawrence Grossberg, Richard Hoggart, Richard Johnson, Douglas Kellner, Raymond Williams, and others]

CASSIRER, ERNST (1942/1961). *Zur Logik der Kulturwissenschaften. Fünf Studien*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft [Philosophical and epistemological analysis of cultural science based on his philosophy of forms]

CLIFFORD, JAMES/MARCUS, GEORGE (eds.) (1986). *Writing Culture. The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press. [provides an excellent overview by a group of ethnographers on the textual and interpretive paradigm of anthropology, including post-modern aspects]

CUPER, ADAM (1999). *Culture. The Anthropological Account*. Cambridge, Mass./London, Engl.: Harvard University Press [gives a historical account of the development of cultural studies from anthropology's point of view, discusses epistemological problems involved]

DURING, SIMON (2000/1993). *The Cultural Studies Reader*. 2nd ed. London/New York, Routledge [is the most comprehensive collection of seminal texts of Cultural Studies (Adorno/Horkheimer, Barthes, Clifford, St. Hall, Foucault, Appadurai, Bourdieu, and many others), reconstructing the development of the paradigm, core positions held by key researchers of the field]

GEERTZ, CLIFFORD (1973/2000). *The Interpretation of Cultures*. London: Basic Books [A collection of essays on what culture is, what role it plays in social life and how it ought to be studied. The result is an interpretive cultural theory]

HANSEN, KLAUS (1995). *Kultur und Kulturwissenschaft*. Tübingen/Basel: Francke [A systematic introduction into cultural science, focusing on linguistic aspects]

HOFSTEDE, GEERT (1991). *Cultures and Organizations: Software in the Mind. Inter-cultural Cooperation and its Importance for Survival*. London: McGraw Hill [A classic empirical study of corporate cultures in an international company and the resulting theoretical model of cultures]

HERDER, JOHANN GOTTFRIED (1772/1989). *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache*. Stuttgart [Seminal work in historical anthropology, starting with cultural science in modern times]

LACKNER, MICHAEL/WERNER, MICHAEL (1999). *Der cultural turn in den Humanwissenschaften. Area Studies im Auf- oder Abwind des Kulturalismus?* Bad Homburg: Werner Reimers Stiftung [discusses the origins of the cultural turn in various disciplines of the human sciences and it s implications for research activities and academic research organization]

RUNDELL, JOHN; MENNELL, STEPHEN (1998) (eds.). *Classical Readings in Culture and Civilization*. London/New York, Routledge [the editors provide an excellent introduction to classical texts (from Kant to Elias) and give an insight into the conceptual development of the field]

SPERBER, DAN (1996). *Explaining Culture. A Naturalistic Approach*. London/New York, Routledge. [Presents a representational cultural theory with a focus on cognitive and semiotic aspects of culture]

TYLOR, EDWARD B. (1871/1994). *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom*. London [seminal and highly influential book in historical anthropology, including a definition of culture that is still widely used, not only in anthropology]

Biographical Sketch

Gerhard Budin is an associate professor at the University of Vienna. He teaches and carries out cross-disciplinary research at the Department of Philosophy of Science and the Department of Translation and Interpretation in the fields of computational philosophy of science, terminology studies, translation technologies, technical communication, information science, and cultural studies. He is vice-president of the International Institute for Terminology Research and coordinates and participates in several R&D projects funded by the European Commission.